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# ART CRITICISM

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## Another Way Out of the Cage: an Anti-theory for Epistemology and Art in the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of John Cage

Joseph Cunningham

The *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* delivered by John Cage at Harvard in 1989 are among the most enigmatic of all of his writings. Written in the mesostic style<sup>1</sup> and based on "Source Texts" ranging from quotations from Henry David Thoreau and Marshall McLuhan to selections from the *New York Times* and from Cage's own books, and dominated by excerpts from Ludwig Wittgenstein's writing, the *Lectures*, which baffled listeners at the time of their delivery, remain largely uninterpreted. The mysterious if not downright impenetrable mesostic form, in which they were originally delivered, demands an alternative method for examination, namely, analysis of the Source Text. These quoted sections suggest perhaps the central, if not the only, path for tracing out any meaningful interpretation of the philosophical content and significance of Cage's *Lectures*.

The extent to which Cage's *Norton Lectures* and related expressions of his philosophical viewpoint are influenced by Wittgenstein's writings on the philosophy of language, mathematics and psychology and aesthetics, is not entirely clear, despite Wittgenstein's preeminence in the quoted material of Source Text. Because this supply of quotations is saturated with passages from many of Wittgenstein's various philosophical texts, investigation of the exact compatibility of these statements with the views presented by other quoted materials (especially those quoting McLuhan), and more importantly with various expressions of Cage's own views, provides a useful backdrop for tracing out a meaning in these dense and complex lectures. Likewise, careful analysis of the Cage's quotations from Wittgenstein's writings elucidates Cage's own philosophical views, especially with respect to topics like language, mind and art.

The general affinities between the approaches of Wittgenstein and Cage seem clear enough. Cage's preoccupation with removing the ego from

the creative process and emphasis on art *experience* can be connected to Wittgenstein's subjugation of personal first-person mental state attributions in favor of *external* criteria for evidence of, for example, meaning and other intentional states. Cage's celebration of chance operations in his compositional methods as well as in the performance of his pieces can be correlated to Wittgenstein's reinterpretation of the actual *use* of language in terms of family resemblance and language-games. They both reject a universally justified intention-based semantics in favor of a more decentralized community-view theory of meaning and signification. They also share a more general anti-essentialist inclination: Cage in his willingness to leave so much of performance practice up to individual musicians and his commitment, in many cases, of part or all of the practice of composition to chance operations, and Wittgenstein in his assertion that (as Cage knowingly paraphrased Wittgenstein's famous formulation) "the meaning of something is in its use, not in itself [essentially]," and his extreme suspicion of reductive theories claiming to get at the essences of things.<sup>2</sup>

While these resemblances between the work of the two suggest a path for looking at intertextuality between the two, the goal of this paper is to trace out, among other conceptual links, the similarities and differences in Wittgenstein's and Cage's respective pronouncements on anti-essentialist and indeed anti-theoretical stance, their respective views of knowledge and mind, and finally concepts related to the theory of art. Emphasis will be placed on the significance of their anti-theoretic stance toward epistemological, aesthetic, as well as more general philosophical issues. Finally, a framework for grasping the implications of Wittgenstein's and Cage's associated formulations regarding intention, mental states and knowledge will be explored with a view to locating to their foundational status within a new concept of art.

### **An Anti-theory**

There are quite a variety of ways in which connections between Cage's and Wittgenstein's similar views on language and mathematics,<sup>3</sup> suggest a path toward a more general understanding of an anti-theoretic approach they share:

Nonintention (the acceptance of silence) leading to nature; renunciation of control: let sounds be sounds. Each activity is centered in itself, i.e., composition, performance, and listening are different activities. (Music is) instantaneous and unpredictable; nothing is accomplished by writing, hearing, or playing a piece of music; our ears are now in excellent condition. A need for poetry. Joyce: "Comedy is the greatest of arts because the joy of comedy is freest from desire and loathing." Affirmation of life. Purposeful purposelessness.<sup>4</sup>

The freedom engendered by Cage's approach ("renunciation of control," "purposeful purposelessness") as outlined here connects beautifully to Wittgenstein's anti-theoretic formulation; philosophical clarification of ordinary language by means of another language does not add to the sense present in a word or sentence of ordinary language. And theoretical speculation about or explanation of a piece of music does not add to the sense present in a performance of it. For Cage, intention, control, composition cannot clarify sounds or silence – they cannot add to it.

The principle underlying all of the solutions acts in the question that is asked. As a composer, I should give up making choices, devote myself to asking questions. Chance-determined answers'll open my mind to world around, at the same time changing my music. Self-alteration, not self-expression. Thoreau said the same thing over a hundred years ago. I want my writing to be as clear as water I can see through so that what I experienced is told without my being in any way in the way.<sup>5</sup>

Art is indeed not discovery ("giving answers"), but paying attention ("open[ing] my mind to world around"). Questions are at the center of philosophical inquiry and aesthetic analysis – not answers – something that is true for Cage and Wittgenstein alike. As Cage writes in the Source Text for the *Norton Lectures*:

In philosophy it's always a matter of the application of a series of utterly simple basic principles that any child knows, and the – enormous – difficulty is only one of applying these in the confusion our language creates. It's never a question of the latest results of experiments with exotic fish or the most recent developments in mathematics. But the difficulty in applying the simple basic principle shakes our confidence in the principles themselves.<sup>6</sup>

It is wrong to say that in philosophy we consider an ideal language as opposed to our ordinary one. For this makes it appear as though we thought we could improve on ordinary languages. But ordinary language is all right. Whenever we make up 'ideal language' it is not in order to replace our ordinary by them but just to remove some trouble caused in someone's mind by thinking that he has got hold of the exact use of a common word.<sup>7</sup>

The "latest results," or "most recent developments," cannot get us anywhere either in understanding the fundamental nature of our world or in the making of art. Nor can comparison to an "ideal." As Wittgenstein puts it



...everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden is of no interest to us.<sup>8</sup>

The philosophical clarification of ordinary language without recourse to any other language than itself cannot be a further regularization of our ordinary language. And this is interestingly connected to Cage's anti-interventionist, non-comparativist view of music and art:

To sober and quiet the mind, so that it is in accord with what happens, the world around it open rather than closed . . . the structure of the mind, passes from the absolute to the world of relativity.<sup>9</sup>

Replacing an ideal comparative is simply "what happens," and philosophy and music are resituated within the ordinary, everyday "world of relativity." For Wittgenstein, philosophical clarification comes only from a *description* of the actual workings of ordinary language. This is comparable to Cage's view that sound is music and his command to simply "let sounds be sounds."<sup>10</sup> In order for one to be able to *explain* language one would need to assume a standpoint located outside the boundaries of language. And in order for one to explain art, one would need to assume a standpoint outside of art (and language).

In either case, such a transcendental standpoint must turn out to be nonlinguistic and unexplainable because "I cannot use language to get outside language"<sup>11</sup> and the transcendental lies outside what can be said. And this realm of insincere objectivity is precisely what is of no interest to either Cage or Wittgenstein. In other words, explanation is only made possible under the assumption of a metalinguistic standpoint from which to measure and represent language, art or the world. Wittgenstein hence points out the patent misunderstanding involved in saying that such explanation *reveals* the nature of language, just as Cage holds that no explanation could reveal the nature of a work of art. It is utterly an illusion caused by our overlooking the fact that the explanation must presuppose a transcendental frame of reference. Wittgenstein says:

"The general form of proposition is: This is how things are." – That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.<sup>12</sup>

This kind of point is surely what led Cage to "let sounds be sounds" by opening his mind to the world around. Wittgenstein is insistent that "there must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away

with explanation, and description takes its place.”<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, Wittgenstein goes as far as to characterize philosophy in these words (which sound notably like Cage’s commentary on the nature of music):

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either.<sup>14</sup>

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden is of no interest to us.<sup>15</sup>

I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or explain anything. Philosophy really *is* purely descriptive.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, Cage raises Wittgenstein’s related commentary on the illusion of surprise in philosophy when he writes:

What is the nature of an experimental action? It is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen.<sup>17</sup>

Wittgenstein has written similarly that we can never be surprised when doing philosophy because, as the quotes above suggest, it is we who create systems of logic and reasoning and language and mathematics and, therefore, cannot be surprised by results of those very conventions that we put in place.

Upon describing the conventions by which we use language or methods of musical composition, we take note of a new *form of life* in existence, the raw materials of which are words and sounds respectively.

And what is the purpose of writing music? One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play.<sup>18</sup>

Artistic creation, like any other form of life, cannot be regarded as logically necessary, for we have no means of coming into contact with its *a priori* foundation. As Cage is well aware, art, like philosophy and mathematics, is groundless, indeed. Since all forms of life are logically groundless, there is no language of transcendental logic that could explicate relations among forms of life or any similarly foundational language of art. We simply cannot know why this, not that, form of life has come into existence. Description of language or art helps us elucidate the form of life but offers no explanation of it at all.

Nonetheless, a new form of life proves that we are *free* no matter how much we are conditioned by the given, limited number of forms of life that have been of service in the past. As Cage perceptively writes:

The past must be invented. The future must be revised. Doing both makes what the present is. Discovery never stops.<sup>19</sup>

### **More than Mere Sum**

So we are potentially, one could say, more than the mere sum of conventional forms of life because we are always open to new ones even though we could not prescribe them in advance. Likewise, art for Cage was certainly more than the mere sum of conventional forms of composition as he was always open to new ones, even though he could not prescribe them in advance:

Free the mind from its desire to concentrate, remaining open to what you can't predict.<sup>20</sup>

We, within our context of language users, are theoretically free to continue or discontinue the practice of a given form of life (for example, a language-game or method of musical composition) or to acknowledge or refuse to admit a new form of life, for there is no inner necessity in any and every form of life but the one derived from our groundless uses of it. This conviction is yet in the end a matter of persuasion because there cannot be *the* logical reason why one prefers a form of life to another. This is worth connecting via two of Cage's favorite thinkers, Wittgenstein and McLuhan, as he quotes them, to the pragmatist concept of fallibility:

Discovery comes from dialogue that starts with the sharing of ignorance.<sup>21</sup>

All that we see could also be otherwise. All that we can describe at all could also be otherwise.<sup>22</sup>

One's belief can be changed easily as a result of persuasion – certainly belief is supported nowhere between heaven and earth, and there is no internal reason why one discards one belief and adopts another. This is probably what underlies Cage's notion of freedom – in a phrase, freedom of belief. Cage's understanding of music may be in a certain sense about freedom of listening – his view of art, in turn may be called, "freedom of attention":

New music: new listening. Not an attempt to understand something that is being said, for, if something were being said, the sounds would be given the shapes of words. Just an attention to the

activity of sounds.<sup>23</sup>

With this new "frame" in place, Cage begins to define "our goal" more and more precisely. "We," the reader/listeners, are supposed to join in the invention of the tradition by adopting the beliefs or doctrines that Cage begins to put forth.<sup>24</sup>

The 'anti-communicative' chord is sounded here against "an attempt to understand something that is being said." What Cage calls for is nothing short of a rotation of our whole examination and understanding of music. As Wittgenstein suggested about philosophy:

One might say: the axis of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore obvious that philosophy, the task of which is to describe a form of life as reflected in the workings of language, has no business in throwing light on the foundation of belief. And for Cage, music ought to present sounds without any attempt to reveal or discover any foundations thereof. As Wittgenstein has insisted, philosophy neither explains nor deduces a form of life:

"It leaves everything as it is."<sup>26</sup>

This is implied also in Cage's quotation of an unidentified critic writing:

He [Cage] has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to *accepting* [my emphasis].<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, as Cage suggests of his study of Zen Buddhism in the Source Text:

After studying Zen, men are men; mountains are mountains. What is the difference between before and after? No difference.<sup>28</sup>

And the same is true for Cage with respect to art:

Daniel Charles: . . . the property of all poetry was neither to obtain nor to accomplish anything . . .<sup>29</sup>

### **Certainty and Doubt**

With Wittgenstein, the Cartesian concept of doubt as a necessary cognitive implement in quest of sure knowledge drops out of consideration. As I will argue here, this rejection of Cartesian doubt relates closely to Cage's

preoccupation with removing the ego from the creative process and his emphasis on art as experience. This pragmatic approach to knowledge and belief can, in turn, be connected to Wittgenstein's subjugation of personal first-person mental state attributions in favor of external criteria for evidence in cases of intentional states. Employing an example on memory imagery and doubt, Cage effectively quotes Wittgenstein on this point:

Structure and feeling in music. Feelings accompany our apprehension of a piece of music in the way they accompany the events of our life.<sup>30</sup> But isn't there also a peculiar feeling of pastness characteristic of images as memory images? There certainly are experiences which I should be inclined to call feelings of pastness, although not always when I remember something is one of these feelings present.<sup>31</sup>

Descartes' epistemology is committed, however obliquely, to the presupposition that certainty is in fact self-evident at the end of a doubt. The impossibility of doubt presupposes the eventual impossibility of any further doubt. Doubting about sensations, ideas, etc. would all make sense insofar as such doubting is at all possible on the basis of the certainty that it is obviously impossible to doubt an act of doubting itself. Although Descartes believes that this certainty is residual since everything else has already been subject to doubt, Wittgenstein sharply points out a difficulty. He says,

if you tried to doubt everything you could not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.<sup>32</sup>

A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt.<sup>33</sup>

The pragmatic, practical nature of these comments sounds a chord with Cage and suggests that for a doubt to be "reasonable" it must hinge upon something other than itself. Certainly, in order to approach Cage's music, one must trust in something. Wittgenstein continues:

One doubts on specific grounds . . .<sup>34</sup>

Doubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt.<sup>35</sup>

And likewise as Cage quotes:

...one thinks that the words "I know that..." are always in place where there is no doubt, and hence even where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible.<sup>36</sup>

As Cage points out here, the game of doubting only makes sense on the basis that one is already familiar with the meaning of the word in question; otherwise, one apparently could not even doubt the existence of what the word signifies:

If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why.<sup>37</sup>

Cage and Wittgenstein seem to agree that the relation of doubt to certainty is not so necessary as Descartes would like to think. And thus Cage's epistemological approach informs his understanding of the relation of his organization of sound to any other possible one. There is no necessity attached to any composition or performance thereof, as opposed to any other.

### **Language and Belief**

Wittgenstein's and Cage's objection to Cartesianism raises grammatical and practical issues regarding such terms as 'doubt' and 'certainty', especially in view of the diverse stage-settings for our ordinary use of language, i.e., the variety of language-games. The assessment that "absence of doubt belongs to the essence of a language-game" (OC 370) shows that the language-game is the basis or ground for doubting, in which the apodictic certainty of meaning stands fast. This is analogous to the peculiar sureness with which musical convention is implemented – not because of some foundationalized necessity, but because of the mere formalism of composition and performance practice.

This observation connects Cage's thought to Wittgenstein's challenge to the belief of essentialism that certainty pertains to the essence of a structure hidden behind the opaque screen of ordinary language. A similar challenge is laid by Cage in his assertion that behind the screen of music composition and traditions of performance practice, there is merely convention – precisely the conventions he is out to undermine in order to show their groundlessness. Here Wittgenstein and Cage forcefully contend that the certainty or clarity of the meaning of a word or significance of a segment of sound lies not in any supposed essence of the word or the organization of sound as music, but above all in its ordinary use. As Cage writes:

People use words in different ways, and I'm not a scholar. I know what I mean when I say something or when I write something. But sooner or later I happen to forget what I had in mind. In general I

find what others say or write to be poetic. In order to avoid misunderstanding, we begin our conversation with definitions. So tell me, what was your question?<sup>38</sup>

Thus, for Wittgenstein, and apparently for Cage, who quotes as follows, certainty is meant to be neither perfect certitude of the unconditional truth nor an absolute foundation for all knowledge:

Suppose that in a certain language there were no word corresponding to our "know". – Thus people simply make assertions . . . How do you know what you would do if the crotchet was differently placed?<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, certainty resides not in a set of sentences, but in practice; in the foundation of the language-game. And the significance of musical composition lies not in a theoretical explanation or reduction, but in the relation of compositions to their performances. Works of art are no more reducible or explainable. What Wittgenstein understands by 'certainty' has something to do with "an unmoving foundation" of the language-game.<sup>40</sup> This foundation is constitutive of some propositions that "are exempt from doubt."<sup>41</sup> As Cage seems to be pointing out analogously with music, it is not that one cannot doubt them at all but that their conviction "is anchored in all my questions and answers, so anchored that I cannot touch it."<sup>42</sup> Cage quotes further on this topic:

Knowing the alphabet, or the rules of chess, or the use of a word, is not a state of consciousness. To see that it is not, ask yourself what it is like to know the alphabet all the time.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, elsewhere Cage points out that:

One learns the word "think" i.e., its use, under certain circumstances, which, however, one does not learn to describe. But I can teach a person the use of the word! For a description of those circumstances is not needed for that. I just teach him the word under particular circumstances. We learn to say it perhaps only of human beings; we learn to assert or deny it of them. The question "Do fishes think?" does not exist among our applications of language, it is not raised. (What can be more natural than such a set-up, such a use of language?)<sup>44</sup>

As soon as one begins to call the foundation into doubt, the language-game comes to an end. As soon as one calls into question the founda-

tion or essential nature of sound, one fails to hear the music. Wittgenstein argues in this way:

Something must be taught us as a foundation.<sup>45</sup>

I really want to say that language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say "can trust something").<sup>46</sup>

Performing, hearing and appreciating the music of John Cage certainly requires one to "trust something." The possibility of a language-game or sensible use of language very much depends upon our unconditional acknowledgement of some propositions. And this is a distinctly pragmatic result stemming from Cage's and Wittgenstein's rejection of an intention-based semantics or essentialist theory of knowledge.

### **Acknowledgement**

Suppose I had written my intention down on a slip of paper, then someone else could have read it there. And can I imagine that he might in some way have found it out more surely than that? Certainly not.<sup>47</sup>

In what circumstances does one say "This appliance is a brake, but it doesn't work?" That surely means: it does not fulfill its purpose. What is it for it to have this purpose? It might also be said: "It was the intention that this should work as a brake." Whose intention? Here intention as a state of mind entirely disappears from view. Might it not even be imagined that several people had carried out an intention without any one of them having it?<sup>48</sup>

The wholistic pragmatist flavor of the foregoing discussion, whether in the words of Wittgenstein or Cage, circles us back to the concept of language-games, of course, a central topic in the philosophy of language of Wittgenstein.<sup>49</sup> As Cage quotes in a couple of places on this relation between mind and language:

No supposition seems to me more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with associating or thinking; so that it would be impossible to read off thought-processes from brain-processes. I mean this: if I talk or write there is, I assume, a system of impulses going out from my brain and correlated with my spoken or written thoughts. But why should the system continue further in the direction of the centre? Why should this order not proceed, so to speak, out of chaos? . . . So an organism might come into being even out of something quite amorphous, as it were



causelessly; and there is no reason why this should not really hold for our thoughts and hence for our talking and writing.<sup>50</sup>

The acknowledgement associated with the connection of language users to the language-game is neither reasonable nor unreasonable; it is, instead, totally groundless. It is not that certain propositions are true on their own but that their validity entirely depends on our acceptance or conviction. "The difficulty," which plagues us especially when doing philosophy, "is to realize the groundlessness of our believing."<sup>51</sup> Again, recall Cage's "purposeful purposelessness." Conviction is therefore not justifiable nor is it logical; it is, however, the state in which you are practically exempt from doubt. And this is the state in which to appreciate art. As I have suggested, one must trust something. For this reason, doubt is not capable of penetrating and laying bare the hidden essence of some such acknowledged propositions. Nor, according to Cage, does musical composition or performance or any art accomplish anything.

Propositions' forced subjection to doubt, in an attempt to secure the ground of all grounds for acknowledgement, would end up with the practical impossibility of language-games or meaningful language in general. With such a doubt, language becomes estranged from its own ordinary, everyday contexts, and the doubt itself loses its sense – in the language of the *Philosophical Investigations*, with an absurd doubt "language goes on holiday."<sup>52</sup> For the perspicuity of the meaning of a word, which provokes no doubt whatsoever on our side, is indeed laid out in an ordinary use of the word. And the significance of music is laid out in the simple appreciation of sound.

### Freedom

Propositions that are immune from doubt in turn function as what Wittgenstein variously calls the "frame of reference,"<sup>53</sup> "axis,"<sup>54</sup> "riverbed,"<sup>55</sup> "scaffolding,"<sup>56</sup> or "hinges."<sup>57</sup> Reminiscent as they seem to the "atomic facts" of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, they are not a picture of reality. Neither are they a metaphysical reality imposed upon the world of ordinary life. In view of the foundational role of such propositions, Wittgenstein draws attention to their "character of a rule," instead of misleadingly naming them as facts.

"I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgement." But what sort of proposition is that? (It is reminiscent of what Frege said about the law of identity.) It is certainly no empirical proposition. It does not belong to psychology. It has rather the character of a rule.<sup>58</sup>

This is interestingly related to the "character of a rule" that Cage

requires for appreciation of music – the rule of ‘freedom of listening’ – which likewise is not to be understood as prescriptively as a “picture” of how or what to hear, but a call to openness. Admittedly self-evident propositions are, in a word, grammatical inasmuch as they serve as *rules* of sorts for ordinary use of language. This, however, does not mean that ordinary language would not make sense without the explicit statement of the propositions. And this is analogous to the freedom entailed by Cage’s program. The ordinary use of our language, as long as it makes sense at all, is certainly not strictly formal and regimental in its application of a rule – any more than Cage’s employment of sounds is restricted by his systems of listening and paying attention. In tune with Cage’s later formulation of art as paying attention, Wittgenstein does not forget to add:

Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself.<sup>59</sup>

...and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules.<sup>60</sup>

Oddly enough, according to Wittgenstein, a system of knowledge or science in general is instituted on the unconditional but groundless conviction of what we believe in the first place. Wittgenstein goes so far as to say that “Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement.”<sup>61</sup> This may seem to imply that the certainty of knowledge is eventually reduced to truth being as *subjective* as unshakeable conviction. “It would be correct to say: ‘I believe...’ has subjective truth; but ‘I know...’ not”<sup>62</sup> Wittgenstein repeatedly returns to this point:

There is no subjective sureness that I know something. The certainty is subjective, but not the knowledge.<sup>63</sup>

“Knowledge” and “certainty” belong to different categories.<sup>64</sup>  
In contradistinction to knowledge, certainty is regarded on the one hand as purely subjective:

With the word “certain” we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt, and thereby we seek to convince other people. That is subjective certainty.<sup>65</sup>

I want to say: it’s not that on some points men know the truth with perfect certainty. No: perfect certainty is only a matter of their attitude.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the tone here, which is strongly reminiscent of our discussion of Cage and Wittgenstein's fallibilism earlier, it should be made clear that certainty is decisively practical – "that we go by in acting surely, without any doubt."<sup>67</sup> At the bottom of every deed lies certainty – at the bottom of every composition lies certainty. Wittgenstein succinctly puts this two-fold character of certainty in the following words: "I act with complete certainty. But this certainty is my own."<sup>68</sup> As such, certainty itself is neither theoretical (nor logical) nor reflective; that is, there is no legitimate justification or explanation for the subjective and practical certainty embedded in our believing or our listening. For belief is that in which justification comes to an end. A justification only makes sense as long as a doubt of some sort is actually present. Again, the kind of pragmatics characteristic of Cage's approach is based in these concepts. There is no justification in believing or acknowledging some propositions as exempt from doubt, for certainty is coupled with the absence of doubt. Instead, Wittgenstein pays heed to practice as the material "justification" of our belief or conviction, for belief is in the foreground of practice as attitude. Wittgenstein argues:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.<sup>69</sup>

"Acting, which lies at the bottom," for Cage, is composing and hearing the music around us – not a foundation "striking us immediately as true," but an openness to sound, a freedom of listening.

## Art

My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them.<sup>70</sup>

What Cage would accomplish in art, Wittgenstein sought in philosophy:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden is of no interest to us.<sup>71</sup>

Cage's art "puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything." As with Marcel Duchamp before him, drawing our attention to the simple, the everyday, Cage demonstrates that "what is hidden is of no interest to us."

If structure, rhythmic structure. Boredom plus attention = becoming interested. Principle underlying all of the solutions = question

we ask.<sup>72</sup>

Seeing Cage's thought and Wittgenstein's grammar of language together in this essay also allows for the discovery of the self and the artist in a new light. It goes without saying that the psychologically oriented Cartesian ego seems, in light of the foregoing discussion, just as absurd as the concept of being in itself. As we have indicated elsewhere, Wittgenstein argues strongly against the possibility of mentalistic, incommunicable self-knowledge, which is analogous to Cage's rejection of the tyranny of the self in composing. For the obvious reason that there is no language expressing the pregiven fact of the self without any trace of self-righteous dogmatism, one cannot naively believe that the privately evident self is itself the criterion of meaning, especially not in art. Hence, this insightful but mute self, whether metaphysically or psychologically deduced, is apparently no concern of philosophy – and for Cage, no concern of art. Instead, more crucial is the question whether or not the self is ever representable.

### **The Self and Art**

Challenging both dogmatism and skepticism, Wittgenstein and Cage both believe that we can legitimately speak of the self as it *appears*. Says Wittgenstein: "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria."<sup>73</sup> And for Cage utilizing the right "questions we ask," and a "purposeful purposelessness," we can express the "passions . . . without meddling with them." Without much ado, one may note, the use of language or for Cage, listening to sound, is such a criterion of outward expression, in that the inner life of the self is manifestly expressed. The point of extreme importance here is that the self is indeed represented as a matter of fact in the very use of language and for Cage the self and its will is enacted, even in the sometimes elaborate process of trying to subjugate the ego. Thus, there are as many facts representing the self (or a phenomenon of representing it) as there are various ways of speaking a language or of creating an artwork. But we have to be reminded that we can nowhere speak of the self beyond its facts, its outward criterion of language-usage or the composition of works of art.

Although composition, like language itself, is no more than an instrument,<sup>74</sup> our use of it is thought to plainly represent a situation or a setting of activity as well as the self. The self as it is represented describes completely the use of language and art, for such description in the end displays a form of life in which the situation and the self are brought forth together. Here, Cage quotes his own interest in the stage setting of his artistic creation:

The principle underlying all of the solutions acts in the question that is asked. As a composer, I should give up making choices,

devote myself to asking questions. Chance-determined answers'll open my mind to world around, at the same time changing my music. Self-alteration, not self-expression. Thoreau said the same thing over a hundred years ago. I want my writing to be as clear as water I can see through so that what I experienced is told without my being in any way in the way.<sup>75</sup>

On this point, one may go so far as to suggest that the relation between the composition situation and the self is dialectical in that they (as representations) are mutually conditioned by one another. On one hand, the self represents itself by embodying a form of life; on the other, this form of life is not entirely arbitrarily picked up but is embedded in a situation, and this situation itself is an actual embodiment of the form of life.

The fact that a man as well as a world comes on the scene as a phenomenon is in large part indebted to the mediation of such forms of life as expecting, intending, playing a game of chess, listening to sounds and so on. Sharply opposed to the "pure" intermediary of logical forms in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the forms of life for language and art are not transcendental but, first and foremost, empirically anthropological in that their validity is rooted in our consensus and common application (or practice) of them. The sense of necessity accrues nowhere from within themselves and for this reason, one could say, they, in precisely the same way as art, are incipiently arbitrary or groundless. Otherwise stated, an inquiry into why such groundless forms of life came into existence transcends the limits of philosophical clarification or artistic analysis. Art, like language, is just something that we do:

Nonintention (the acceptance of silence) leading to nature; renunciation of control: let sounds be sounds. Each activity is centered in itself, i.e., composition, performance, and listening are different activities. (Music is) instantaneous and unpredictable; nothing is accomplished by writing, hearing, or playing a piece of music; our ears are now in excellent condition. A need for poetry. Joyce: "Comedy is the greatest of arts because the joy of comedy is freest from desire and loathing." Affirmation of life. Purposeful purposelessness.<sup>76</sup>

### **Art and Life**

As formalized and systematized in customs and institutions, forms of life are indeed the given – and as such, conventional ways of hearing sounds are intentionally undermined in Cage's music in order to expose them and challenge listeners to a new kind of attention. Notwithstanding the fact that they are relative to a community and historical time, works of art must be

accepted and learned regardless of one's will (in fact, the exercise of one's will does presuppose the mastery of a form of life, i.e., the form of willing). And I would argue that one of the central features of Cage's art is not to destroy, indeed he couldn't destroy, the presence of these forms of life in the making of art, but to use his interrogative method as a means to draw attention to and subvert the strength of them. Unless forms of life are acknowledged as such, our lives would be without outward expression and hence would become totally vague and meaningless. Likewise, without coming to see the underlying structures below the function of musical composition and performance, we cannot come to acknowledge them as groundless, yet foundational. This is one of the unusually mutual responsibilities of art and language. No matter how arbitrary and relativistic in origin they are, the continued acknowledgement of forms of life and practice by us warrants them as necessary, and in turn the practice itself becomes meaningful.

Forms of life are the presupposition for the use of language, or they are thought to be methods or rules by means of which the self and its situations alike are represented. Yet, as has been pointed out above, the forms of life are the given, that which must be accepted and learned. Of course, one has to be reminded that their givenness takes place through the medium of language – as language-games and in music through the medium of compositional convention – and in art through the medium of artistic creation and criticism. And the givenness of traditional musical forms too has been present throughout the history of art creation. This is to say that the acknowledgement and understanding of a form of life in the process of learning becomes outwardly manifested by the correct use of language or the lawful practice of a language-game in a variety of contexts. The possibility of meaningful discourse is largely dependent on the availability and mastery of forms of life. And the understanding of art is dependent upon the availability and mastery of ways in which art is made and understood as concrete objects existent in the real world – our world. Cage quotes Thoreau on this point:

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do.<sup>77</sup>

In so far as they are given, forms of life condition and underpin our life, at least provisionally, as much as they do our language or our art, for we grow up and learn to lead our life in accord with familiar forms of life. Since these forms are only rendered intelligible in terms of the use of language – as language-games – one might say that degree of maturation is generally in proportion to mastery of a language. Nevertheless, we do not mean to say that we are determined

once and for all by a set of existing forms of life.

This is just the freedom that Cage has been getting at all along. It would be appropriate to say that acknowledged forms of life set up the limits of one's present life, while one is still liable to alter one's limits by adding new forms of life or dropping old ones, adding ways of listening or paying attention, dropping old ones. It is just a matter of fact that new forms of art come into being, whereas some old ones become obsolete and pass into oblivion.<sup>78</sup> Strongly tempted as we may be to raise the question, why and how a new form of life is brought into existence, or why and how an old one goes extinct, in the last analysis, we enjoy no privilege of meta-language by which such questions might be probed. Such questions would mistakenly call forth speculations and explanations, all of which are firmly rested upon assumptions and hypothesis of all sorts. It is, in a word, taking a wrong-headed course back to dogmatism. And dogmatism is always antithetical to art.

### **Conclusion: Freedom Again**

We are not unconditionally condemned to fixed frames of representation. On the contrary, we are theoretically free to believe the foundation of any system of knowledge, granted that any and every proposition formulated in an attempt to explain and justify that foundation is bound to be nonsensical. Relatedly, Cage quotes himself on the topic of beauty:

The beautiful is only what clicks for you. Keep a clicker in your pocket (Wittgenstein) just in case you encounter ugliness that needs transformation – ugliness that after one click you accept as beautiful. Transformation. Sudden change of mind.<sup>79</sup>

Wittgenstein states: "Justification by experience comes to an end."<sup>80</sup> Thus, this freedom is the very condition of our language and art and experience alike: the language-game. For this reason, Wittgenstein adds, "You must bear in mind that the language-game is, so to say, something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life."<sup>81</sup>

Philosophy nor art can penetrate the phenomena of freedom, nor can either directly influence or alter the way in which freedom is put into practice.

My composing is actually unnecessary. Music never stops. It is we who turn away. Again the world around. Silence. Sounds are only bubbles on its surface. They burst to disappear (Thoreau). When we make music, we merely make something that can more naturally be heard than seen or touched, that makes it possible to pay attention to daily work or play as being not what we think it is about our goal. All that's needed is a frame, a change of mental

attitude, amplification. Waiting for a bus, we're present at a concert.<sup>82</sup>

Neither philosophy nor art are apparently some act of persuasion, such as rhetoric, in the domain of belief. Their business is no more and no less than clarification of forms of life as evident in the workings of language and artistic composition. As soon as they are brought to light in complete clarity, problems are dissolved as a matter of practical choice (e.g., which form of life is preferably put into practice) and philosophy and art fulfill their own tasks.

With a view to this restorative role of philosophy and art, Wittgenstein states (and Cage would agree about art): "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy [art for Cage] when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy [art for Cage] peace, so that is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question . . ." <sup>83</sup> Upon such a discovery the problem of language, art and life are nothing but existential executions of freedom to be persuaded by one principle over another.

*I wish to thank Dr. Bruce Barnes, for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.*

## Notes

- 1 The mesostic style is a compositional technique utilized by Cage in a variety of texts, about which he has written: "Like acrostics, mesostics are written in the conventional way horizontally, but at the same time they follow a vertical rule, down the middle not down the edge as in an acrostic, a string which spells a word or name, not necessarily connected with what is being written, though it may be." *The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1988-89: I-VI*, (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1990), p. 1.
- 2 John Cage, *An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), p. 191.
- 3 For a complete discussion of these connections, see my paper, "A way out of the Cage: meaning, language and mathematics in the *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* of John Cage."
- 4 Cage, "Introduction to *Themes and Variations*," *The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1988-89: I-VI*. (Source Text [ST] for the lectures is found on pages 421 – 452.), p. 423.
- 5 Cage, *John Cage: Composition in Retrospect*, 1982 in *Ibid.*, p.428.
- 6 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, p. 154 quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 438. As per convention in Wittgenstein scholarship, all of the author's citations from *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty* refer to section numbers, those



from *Philosophical Remarks* refer to Section and paragraph number, while all other writings by Wittgenstein are referred to by page number. When Wittgenstein's works are quoted from the Source Text, the citations retain Cage's formatting.

- 7 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 1958, (New York: Harper, 1969), p. 28.
- 8 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953, Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. (New York: MacMillan, 1968), p. 126.
- 9 Cage in *John Cage: Composition in Retrospect*, 1982, in ST p. 427.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 11 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, I-6.
- 12 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 114.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 16 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 18.
- 17 Cage, *Silence*. (Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 69.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 12. This should be compared with Wittgenstein as just quoted:  
"Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either" (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 124). "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden is of no interest to us" (*Ibid.*, p. 126).
- 19 Cage in *John Cage: Composition in Retrospect*, 1982, in ST p. 435.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 440.
- 21 Marshall McLuhan, cited in *Marshall McLuhan: Media in America*, p. 44., in ST p. 425.
- 22 The full title of this volume is Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, p. 80, in ST p. 442.
- 23 Cage, *Silence*, p. 10.
- 24 Jann Pasler, "Inventing a Tradition," *John Cage: Composed in America*, eds. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 137.
- 25 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 108.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 27 Cage, *Silence*, p. 129.
- 28 Suzuki, ST, p. 433.
- 29 Cage, *For the Birds*. In conversation with Daniel Charles. (Boston: Marian Boyars, 1976), p. 153.
- 30 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 10.
- 31 Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 184.
- 32 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. 1969. ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. (New York: Harper, 1972), p. 115.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 450.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 458.

- 35 Ibid., p. 519.
- 36 Ibid., p. 3 in ST, p. 445.
- 37 Ibid., p. 34, in ST, p. 451.
- 38 Cage, *For the Birds*, p. 23.
- 39 Wittgenstein, *Lectures 1930-1932*, p. 91, in ST p. 429.
- 40 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 430.
- 41 Ibid., p. 403.
- 42 Ibid., p. 103.
- 43 Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p. 49-50, in ST p. 421. One should remember also that elsewhere Cage quotes the corroborating theory of meaning component to these claims about knowledge: "It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash." Like what e.g.? – Can't the use – in a certain sense – be grasped in a flash? And in what sense can it not? – The point is, that it is as if we could 'grasp it in a flash' in yet another and much more direct sense than that. – But have you a model for this? No. It is just that this expression suggests itself to us. It is what emerges from crossing different pictures. (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 77, ST p. 434.)
- 44 Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, p. 22, in ST 434.
- 45 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 449.
- 46 Ibid., p. 509.
- 47 Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, p. 8, ST p. 426.
- 48 Ibid., p. 10, ST p. 426.
- 49 For a complete treatment of the role of language-games in Cage's Wittgensteinian thought, see my "A Way Out of the Cage: Meaning, Language and Mathematics in the *Charles Eliot Norton Lectures of John Cage*."
- 50 Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, p. 106, in ST p. 432.
- 51 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 166.
- 52 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 38.
- 53 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 83.
- 54 Ibid., p. 152.
- 55 Ibid., p. 197.
- 56 Ibid., p. 211.
- 57 Ibid., p. 341.
- 58 Ibid., p. 494.
- 59 Ibid., p. 139.
- 60 Ibid., p. 95.
- 61 Ibid., p. 378.
- 62 Ibid., p. 197.
- 63 Ibid., p. 245.
- 64 Ibid., p. 308.
- 65 Ibid., p. 194.
- 66 Ibid., p. 404.
- 67 Ibid., p. 196.
- 68 Ibid., p. 174.
- 69 Ibid., p. 204.
- 70 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 2, in ST p. 422.
- 71 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 126.

- 72 Cage, *Introduction to Themes and Variations*, ST p. 433.
- 73 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 580.
- 74 Ibid., p. 569.
- 75 Cage, in *John Cage: Composition in Retrospect*, 1982, ST p. 428. We can recall Cage's quotation of Wittgenstein's similar view: My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them. (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 2, ST p. 422.)
- 76 Cage, "Introduction to *Themes and Variations*," ST p. 423.
- 77 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 65, in ST p. 422.
- 78 Wittgenstein demonstrates with a reference to alteration of language-games. (cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 23)
- 79 Cage, April 1988, ST pp. 448-449.
- 80 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 485.
- 81 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 559.
- 82 Cage, in *John Cage: Composition in Retrospect*, 1982, ST p. 431.
- 83 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 133.

## **“image and word, object and idea, inside and outside”: Excavating Robert Smithson’s Art from under His Writings**

Joseph Cunningham

Robert Smithson was a great artist. He was not a great thinker. Smithson’s art is clear, articulate, incisive and moving. His writing is not. Heralded as preeminent among the post-war conceptual art, his sculptures and earth works present a seminal inquiry into the relationships between art and nature, art and thought, and art and the artists who make it. A resentful product of the 1960s minimalist-conceptual milieu, Smithson rose above many of his contemporaries in achieving an extraordinary level of respect among critics, historians and fellow artists during the period as well as in the half-century since his earliest efforts. The greatest of his art works are a standard by which to judge, not only the efforts of other art in the conceptual vein, but also the potential of this post-war genre altogether. His art, however, is not the topic of this paper. Rather than examining the justifiably much-lauded genius of his art, this paper will scrutinize Robert Smithson’s writings, revealing his fundamentally unsound attempts to describe the meaning and significance of his own work and the work of his contemporaries, as well as his misguided and incoherent more general theories of language, art and art criticism.

Given the conceptual foci of his own art, as well as related works by other great artists of his time including Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Frank Stella, it is not surprising that Smithson, like all four of these colleagues, wrote extensively during the period of his art production. In fact, with minimalist and conceptual art, for the first time ever, the art history of a period – the development of conceptualism and minimalism – was defined as much by the writings of its leading artists as it was by their art or what critics wrote about it. Critics and artists alike have placed enormous emphasis on Smithson’s writings, in particular, in interpreting the development of conceptual, minimalist

and earth art. That is why careful and rigorous analysis of his thought is so essential to understanding the growth and critical views of American minimalism and conceptual art. My examination of his profound misunderstandings of concepts central to his own art, as well as to his understanding of art more generally, will reveal as one of the great ironies of post-war art that Smithson, whose sublimely effective art depended on these notions, failed miserably in articulating his grasp of artistic materiality and form as well as logic, language, rules, systems and perhaps even art.

### **Language and Art: The World of Robert Smithson**

The particular interdependency between the art and thought of Robert Smithson is stronger than in the works of any of the post-war masters (excepting perhaps Sol LeWitt). During the period of their production and in subsequent criticism, much has been made of the connections between Smithson's artworks and his writing about them and related topics, yielding a tight bond uniting the corpus of his writing and artworks. A great deal of the explication of Smithson's writing and its relation to his art has been nicely distilled in Jack Flam's introduction to Smithson's *Collected Writings*. Flam even claims that Smithson's writings perhaps supercede the importance of his art:<sup>2</sup>

Smithson's beliefs articulated not only by the objects and images that he created but also, and especially, through his written texts, which occupy a unique place among artists' writings generally. His art and his writings are so closely related that they can be understood to be very much part of the same undertaking, which involved an reciprocal interaction between word and image. Many of his published articles integrate visual images with their very structure, and sometimes he literally incorporated written texts, such as those that accompany what he called Non-Sites, into individual works of art. The act of writing – like the activities of drawing, mapping, mirroring, digging, diagramming, and photographing – was an integral part of Smithson's overall practice as an artist.<sup>3</sup>

Smithson is one of the first artists in the history of art to be regarded so highly for his forays in art criticism and theoretical writing that they would be referred to as "integral part of [his] overall practice as an artist."<sup>4</sup>

It has been claimed that Smithson's particular way of thinking about art and life informs his entire world view: "In a way, Smithson saw and treated the world as an enormous text . . ." <sup>5</sup> Notably, while this may well reflect something close to Smithson's view, the world is not an enormous text, nor is it even much like one. Whether you take the language-game approach of Ludwig Wittgenstein, to which Smithson himself was attracted,<sup>6</sup> or one of the

holistic approaches, or even the widely rejected picture theory of meaning as given in Gottlob Frege, or any of the many other theories of meaning and language, no one posits that the world itself is like a text, even if some may go so far as to attempt to forge strong correspondences between language and the world. Smithson's comment should be taken as, at best, a metaphor, stripping it of any critical or theoretical force.

Likewise, a metaphoric approach must be taken in order to make sense of Flam's citation of Smithson's poetic, but wrong-headed, paraphrase of Pascal:

Significantly, in a 1968 citation of Pascal's statement, Smithson added "or language becomes an infinite museum whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere."

Indeed, Smithson treated written texts as if they too – like his plastic works – were made of solid materials; as if words were not only abstract signs for things and concepts, but also a form of matter.<sup>7</sup>

There is a relation posited here between language and an "infinite museum," but nowhere is the connection explicated. While certainly a poetic turn-of-phrase, it doesn't seem to have a clear meaning. Language becomes a poly-centered 'museum' without limits entirely without explanation – as if none was required. In fact, to the contrary, it is a tenet of almost no organized theory of meaning that words are to be thought of as discrete "pictures" hanging on a "gallery wall" of syntax or semantics (which may be something like what Smithson is suggesting).<sup>8</sup> Metaphor of this poetic sort certainly passes as gallery talk and museum chitchat, but doesn't reveal anything but confusion regarding the actual nature of language or art.

While there is a long tradition of language-poetry, stemming from Arthur Rimbaud and Gertrude Stein through Ezra Pound and Jackson MacLow, if Smithson really is using language "as if words were made of solid materials; as if words were not only abstract signs for things and concepts, but also a form of matter," then certainly his writing should not be taken as art theory or criticism, but perhaps as poetry.<sup>9</sup> But wait, I thought Smithson was an artist, critic and theorist – not a poet. With that said regarding the form of this statement, it must be more technically noted that, on any of the currently prevailing theories of meaning, words are not "abstract signs for things and concepts." Nor is it explained how words could "be also a form of matter," other than as poetry (especially as in Stein and Pound). There is no foundation for the claim that these comments should be taken seriously as a part of Smithson's art or, external to it, as serious art criticism or theory.

It is likely that Smithson himself is to blame for a significant portion of

the confusion that has festered around his ideas. In the following passage, Flam quotes Smithson to greatly puzzling effect:

Asked in 1972 if his writing affected the development of the things he made, Smithson answered that "language tended to inform my structures. In other words, I guess if there was any kind of notation it was a kind of linguistic notation . . . . But I was interested in language as a material entity, as something that wasn't involved in ideational values."<sup>10</sup>

It is again likely that metaphorical interpretation qua poetry is the only framework that can preserve any sense of meaning. This, however, strips the commentary of any meaningful critical or theoretical value as is evident in the following further quotation of Smithson:

*Smithson:* My attitude toward Conceptual Art is that essentially that term was first used by Sol LeWitt in a personal way and then it sort of established a certain kind of context, and out of it seems to have developed this whole neoidealism, kind of an escape from physicality . . . . I'm concerned with the physical properties of both language and material, and I don't think that they are discrete. They are both physical entities, but they have different properties, and within these properties you have these mental experiences, and it's not simply empirical facts. There are lots of things, there are lots of designations that are rather explicit, but these explicit designations tend to efface themselves and that's what gives you the abstraction, like in a non-site/site situation there is no evasion from physical limits . . . . It's an exploration in terms of my individual perception, and the perceptual material is always putting the concepts in jeopardy . . . .<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, he has perhaps avoided involvement with "ideational values," whatever those are, but at the expense of meaningful contribution to understanding his own artworks, language or art in general.

The interpretation of the manifestly material character of some of Smithson's writings is echoed in the following notably contrarian assertion of his autonomy from the methods and aims of conceptual art (a topic I will treat at length later in the essay):

This materiality, he felt, distinguished his work from conceptual art, which he characterized as "essentially ideational." When asked what he meant by the "material" quality of language, Smithson elaborated: "Well, just as printed matter – information which has a kind of physical presence for me. I would construct my articles

the way I would construct a work."<sup>12</sup>

Here, the need for metaphorical and poetic interpretations may be trumped by Smithson's own move toward thinking of his writing entirely *as art* ("I would construct my articles the way I would construct a work"). If his writing is art, then it certainly is not as effective an art form as his sculpture or earthworks, which are indeed, not only sublimely beautiful, but also conceptually arresting. In this way, the conceptual significance of his art and writing seems severed by his desire to remain distinguished from the conceptual artists. I find neither of these results satisfying. On the one hand, it seems that meaning may be gleaned from among the writings of Smithson only if they are expository, critical or theoretical, and not mere language-poetry. On the other hand, the art of Robert Smithson, while profoundly visually moving, is frequently as stimulating conceptually as it is aesthetically.

### **Language as Raw Material and the Materiality of Language**

It is important to return for a moment to the notion of materiality of language and Smithson's claim that it can be thought of as a raw material for the development not only of his art, but of his writing too.

Asked in 1972 if his writing affected the development of the things he made, Smithson answered that "language tended to inform my structures. In other words, I guess if there was any kind of notation it was a kind of linguistic notation . . . . But I was interested in language as a material entity, as something that wasn't involved in ideational values."<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the fundamental problem with language-art in the tradition of language-poetry is that, while there is a temptation for artists and critics to want to let artists off the hook by referring to their use of language as merely visual, both camps still expect to get a great deal of mileage out of the conceptual content of those same pieces of art. Certainly the language-based works of Mel Bochner, Joseph Kosuth and Christopher Wool – all in the tradition of Robert Smithson – are not taken to function merely as using language as a visual raw material. Instead, critics take very seriously the communicative, didactic and conceptual aspects of these works. Therefore, while it is entertaining to think of words, phrases, grammatical devices, etc., as merely visual elements of artistic works, this is not a satisfying reading of either Smithson or any of the others working in his tradition.

On the other hand, consider the tradition of the language poets, stemming from Rimbaud and Stein: it is precisely because of the straightforward relationships that the words and signs used in composing language-poetry



bear to traditional methods of writing and communication that their irony and subversion functions. Not even the most progressive post-modern critic sees, for example, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, as completely devoid of meaning, though admittedly it is so highly hermetic and complex in structure that enormous creativity and effort is required to get close to it. Likewise, no conceptual art in the tradition of Smithson should be taken to be completely outside of referential meaning or at least common connotation. Language cannot be, for anyone, merely a raw material. As Wittgenstein suggested, "you cannot use language to get outside of language,"<sup>14</sup> and, to such an extent as Smithson's art and writing both depend on language for a portion of their meaning and significance, he cannot use language or even art to get outside of language.<sup>15</sup>

### **Language, Thought and the World**

Having drawn attention to a variety of disjoints among aspects of Smithson's thought, it is worth taking a moment to suggest some ways in which his world might be reunited with language, thought and art. Smithson has suggested a path for just this sort of reunion in his assertion that his "work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter."

This kind of byplay between thing and idea lies at the core of Smithson's whole undertaking as a writer and as an artist. "My work is impure," he asserted in 1969, "it is clogged with matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course. You might say that my work is like an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter."<sup>16</sup>

Here, Smithson seems further conflicted on the issue of matter and materiality. Having invested rather a bit of energy in distinguishing his use of language both in his art and in his writing as material (in ways in which I have suggested it really cannot be), here he seems to object to his work being "clogged with matter." This characterization of his work seems to collapse into a statement, which seems really rather un insightful, of the mere fact that our minds interact with one another and with the world. Smithson's ambiguous employment of materiality and abstraction, not surprisingly, infects interpretation of his work as well. As Mr. Flam relates:

He saw that activity as going beyond the creation of objects, as an ongoing process that involved an engagement with both abstract ideas and specific material presences, and that asserted the artist's freedom to act, unconstrained by the material results of his action.<sup>17</sup>

But what is the relation between the abstract and the concrete and how does it function in Smithson's work and writing? This allegedly important distinction in Smithson's work is repeatedly invoked, but nowhere is explanation forthcoming, either from Smithson himself or his critics. Because of the particular strength with which Smithson describes the relation between the world and thought, the world and language, we might wonder if he didn't fall prey to the famously flawed "picture-theory" of meaning, which, aside from being an internally inconsistent (if not false) theory, is also contradictory to a variety of other of Smithson's views.

*Smithson:* Like a stereopticon kind of situation – artificial eyes – that in a sense establishes a certain kind of point of departure not so much toward the idealistic notion of perception, but all the different breakdowns within perception. So that's what I'm interested in. I'm interested in zeroing in on those aspects of mental experience that somehow coincide with the physical world.<sup>18</sup>

While Smithson sensitively avoids the pitfalls of idealism, essentialism and the universals debate, he becomes mired in a related misunderstanding stemming from his own mistaken assumption of an external standpoint – "artificial eyes" – through which to note "all the different breakdowns within perception." As Richard Rorty has argued, "there are no windows on the world," points of privileged access, through which to "purely" experience aspects of the world.<sup>19</sup> On Smithson's own Wittgensteinian philosophical plan, philosophical and aesthetic clarification is nothing but a *description* of the actual workings of ordinary language and *presentation* of material objects. In order for one to be able to *explain* language or *interpret* art, one must assume a standpoint located outside the boundaries of language, but here we see another of Smithson's brushes with internal inconsistency. Such a transcendental standpoint must turn out to be nonlinguistic and unexplainable because "I cannot use language to get outside language"<sup>20</sup> and the transcendental lies outside what can be said. To put it otherwise, explanation or interpretation is only made possible under the assumption of a meta-linguistic or meta-aesthetic standpoint from which to measure and represent the world. Wittgenstein and Smithson seem to agree that there is patent misunderstanding involved in saying that such explanation reveals the nature of language or of art. But Smithson slips up at just the point where this insight could save him from the illusion caused by overlooking the fact that explanation must presuppose a transcendental frame of reference. Wittgenstein writes:

"The general form of proposition is: This is how things are."—  
That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself count-

less times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.<sup>21</sup>

Smithson thinks he is tracing the outline of the nature of the material world, but he is merely tracing round the frame through which he looks at it. The confusion only grows when he tries to connect the material objects in his "privileged" view to their substrate in "mentality:"

*Wheeler:* Can you make out a distinction as to where the differentiation of the object and the concept occur?

*Smithson:* Well, I mistrust the whole notion of concept. I think that basically implies an ideal situation, a kind of closure . . . . And the mediums, in art . . . the maps relating to the piece are like drawing, and they relate to the piece in the same way like a study for a painting would refer to the painting. They are not the same thing but they all refer. It's like a kind of ensemble of different mediums that are all discrete . . .

*Wheeler:* Functions.

*Smithson:* Functions, right, different mediums, but different degrees of abstraction . . . some are painted steel containers, and others are maps, others are photographs. And these are all different kinds of mental and physical abstractions.<sup>22</sup>

One can interrogate the ways in which concepts play a limiting role in our lives. As I have written elsewhere about Agnes Martin:

Throughout her career, the grid and related line-and-cell pictures have served as the perfect object of scrutiny enabling Martin's interrogation of the conventional structures that we use to conceptualize our experiences, thus limiting our thought.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, one cannot, at least without some intelligible elaboration, "mistrust the whole notion of a concept."<sup>24</sup> What exactly is Smithson questioning? Does he not believe that concepts are at work in the ways in which we all use language and understand the world? Does he mistrust their effectiveness in helping us to communicate and interpret the world appropriately? Does he question their relevance to art or art criticism? If there is an answer in what follows in the quotation, it leads straight down the road to essentialism – a dogma that Smithson implicitly and explicitly<sup>25</sup> denies throughout his art and writing.<sup>26</sup>

Here, despite himself, he commits another classic philosophical fallacy, pointed out by Wittgenstein. Smithson believes that use of concepts demands "an ideal situation" because of his preconceived idea that language

must have a unity. According to Wittgenstein, this is a typically philosophical puzzlement caused by the “tendency to look for something common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term.”<sup>27</sup> The uniform appearance of a concept word or sentence (e.g., in speaking, spelling, etc.), assures us of no uniformity or generality pervading many and various ways of using it. To clear away potential confusions and misunderstandings, Wittgenstein draws attention to contextual and social phenomena of language such as our peculiar use of words in various contexts in just the way in which Smithson’s *art* draws attention to the contextual and social phenomena of objects as he employs them. Such phenomena are indeed so diverse that they exhibit merely Wittgenstein’s “family resemblances” among them. Wittgenstein thus adds:

We see that what we call “sentence” and “language” has not the formal unity that I imagined, but is the family of the structures more or less related to one another.<sup>28</sup>

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, with simple ordinary language analysis, exactly compatible with Smithson’s own approach to the making of art, we have defeated what he saw as the “idealist” monster. This attention to Smithson’s objects of creation themselves and their careful description, rather than explanation, can bring us full circle back toward unlocking a method for grasping Smithson’s sublime art:

*Wheeler:* I feel the best way to describe what’s going on in your art is to use a vocabulary other than an art historical, a critical, or perceptual rhetoric, to use something that has simply to do with the experience of how the thing was.<sup>30</sup>

### **Mentality and Reality**

Smithson’s particular aversion to being associated with the conceptual artists may stem from his fear of not being taken seriously as a maker of objects of extraordinary beauty. He contradictorily claimed that focusing on the “art object” itself would “deprive the artists of an existence in the world of both mind and matter.”

“Critics,” he wrote in 1968, “by focusing on the ‘art object’ de-

prive the artists of any existence in the world of both mind and matter. The mental process of the artist which takes place in time is disowned, so that a commodity value can be maintained a constant tension between a number of polar oppositions: image and word, object and idea, inside and outside.<sup>31</sup>

He even invokes the antiquated and bourgeois notion that "the mental process of the artist" is relevant to its interpretation. Oddly, the very oppositions that Smithson resents – "image and word, object and idea, inside and outside" – are just those tensions that make his work so riveting, both visually and conceptually.

Bizarrely, Smithson elsewhere made precisely the opposite claim that such mental processes of the artist would "reduce art to hermeticism and fatuous metaphysics:"

Occult notions of "concept" are in retreat from the physical world. Heaps of private information reduce art to hermeticism and fatuous metaphysics. Language should find itself in the physical world, and not end up locked in an idea in somebody's head. Language should be an ever developing procedure and not an isolated occurrence. Art shows that have beginning and ends are confined and unnecessary modes or representation both "abstract" and "realistic." A face or a grid on a canvas is still a representation. Reducing representation to writing does not bring one closer to the physical world. Writing should generate ideas into matter and not the other way around. Art's development should be dialectical and not metaphysical.<sup>32</sup>

Here, the "idea in somebody's head" stems from just the peculiarly essentialist view of language he rejected earlier. Language, on Wittgenstein's view, has indeed found "itself in the world, and not . . . locked up in somebody's head." If Smithson had more rigorously avoided some of the conceptual pitfalls mentioned before, he might very well have understood much more deeply how "language should be an ever developing procedure and not an isolated occurrence."

This characterization of language is precisely analogous to Wittgenstein's concept of use of the language in the context of specific language-games. Language-games are primarily a *methodological* concept, which is meant to help us to "remove the prejudice which keeps one from looking at the use of words"<sup>33</sup> and "look how the words in question are actually used in our language."<sup>34</sup> Use, as seen against the backdrop of the language-game, is precisely what Smithson refers to as "an ever developing procedure and not an isolated occurrence." Language-games are not themselves facts; neither are

they hypothetical models of reality to which the world is supposed to correspond. They are rather preconditions of facts "set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities."<sup>35</sup> In other words, they provide us with a new way of looking at language, that is, "a clear view of the use of our words,"<sup>36</sup> which in turn enables us to see the relations of one particular use of a word to others of the same word. According to Wittgenstein, language-games are so fundamental in our considerations of the workings of language that they are neither explained nor justified. To put the matter more clearly, Wittgenstein says that they are "just there – like our life."<sup>37</sup> But is this not related to the context and materiality of Smithson's sculpture: is this not, by design, "just there – like our life"?

### **The World and Language**

The earthworks of Robert Smithson provide one of the most complex of his forays into the relation of language to the world, thought and reality. He suggests metaphorically that the sites can be taken to form a language.

"To understand this language of sites is to appreciate the metaphor between the syntactical construct and the complex of ideas, letting the former function as a three dimensional picture which doesn't look like a picture . . . ."<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, it seems true that Smithson's earthworks form something like a syntax of insight about the relation of concepts and materials. And this suggests, that the relation between his art and the conceptual works of Andre, Flavin, Judd and LeWitt may be much stronger than he ever would have admitted. As I have related, Jack Flam goes so far as to claim Smithson "saw the world as a text," presumably with concepts underpinning our understanding of everything we perceive:

If Smithson saw the world as a text, he conceived of his own vocation as an artist not to interpret or explain it, but rather to reveal it – to himself and to us, his readers.<sup>39</sup>

While Smithson's grasp of the tight connections between language and the world could have helped him embrace the relation of his art to other conceptual art, it also got him into further confusion regarding the nature of language itself.

Bell's awareness of the physical properties of language, by way of the telephone, kept him from misunderstanding language and object relationships. Language was transformed by Bell into linguis-

tic objects. In this way he avoided the rational categories of art. The impact of "telephone language" on physical structure remains to be studied. A visual language of modules seems to have emerged from Bell's investigations. Point, lines, areas, or volumes establish the syntax of sites.<sup>40</sup>

While I consider such commentary virtually unintelligible, from what I can understand the confusion seems to relate somehow to technical facts about Bell's insight with respect to communication. The fact that Bell enabled human voices to be carried over wires in no way implies that he somehow "transformed language into linguistic objects." Further from explanation is how "in this way he avoided the rational categories of art." A very similar misunderstanding is at the root of Smithson's complete confusion regarding the nature of natural kinds:

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the materials and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfoting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle. Poetry being forever lost must submit to its own vacuity; it is somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation. Poetry is always a dying language but never a dead language.<sup>41</sup>

It is simply wrong to claim that "names of minerals and they themselves do not differ from each other," because to put it brutally plainly, minerals are kinds of things and names of minerals are words. While natural kinds do, as Saul Kripke has effectively argued, submit to analysis as "rigid designators," picking out the very same substance in any possible world, this certainly cannot unite the fundamental natures of words and kinds.<sup>42</sup> The poetic turn, "because at the bottom of both the materials and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures," does not save Smithson from philosophical rigor because the severity of a category error of this magnitude cannot be excused by metaphorical reading. This sentiment is shared by Alan Kaprow who called Smithson on just this type of philosophical error and his tendency to dabble in philosophical concepts that he just did not take the time and effort to rigorously understand:

*Kaprow:* How can your position then be anything but ironic,

forcing upon you at least a skepticism. How can you become anything except a kind of sly philosopher – a man with a smile of amusement on your face, whose every act is italicized?<sup>43</sup>

## Meaning

Smithson's juvenile understanding of language is perhaps most flawed in his approach to meaning.

The meaning of airflight has for the most part been conditioned by a rationalism that supposes truths – such as nature, progress, and speed. Such meanings are merely “categorical” and have no basis in actual fact. The same condition exists in art, if one sees the art through the rational categories of “painting, sculpture and architecture.” The rationalists see only the details and never the whole. The categories that proceed from rational logic inflate a linguistic detail into a dated system of meaning, so that we cannot see the aircraft through the “speed.” Language problems are often at the bottom of most rationalistic “objectivity.” One must be conscious of the changes in language, before one attempts to discover the form of an object or fact.

Let us now try to delimit some new meanings in terms of the actual facts of today's new aircraft. By extracting morphologies from existing aircraft, the same way an artists extracts meanings from a given “art object,” we should find a whole new set of values.<sup>44</sup>

Here Smithson's almost plaintive phrases “rationalism supposes truth,” and “meanings are merely ‘categorical’” sound disturbingly like chat among freshman philosophy students, misunderstanding everything from Jean-Paul Sartre to Wittgenstein. While it is true that Rene Descartes (“the rationalists”) famously assumed that truth is self-evident at the bottom of his attempt to doubt everything, the truths taken as bedrock for rationalists and their opponents alike are certainly not things like “nature, progress and speed.” These, of course, are concepts, not propositions the former of which are meaningful or meaningless, the later of which are true or untrue. Again, a classic philosophical category error sends Smithson attacking that which he does not understand. He claims that “language problems are often at the bottom of most rationalistic “objectivity,” but in fact, his own misunderstanding of meaning and other philosophical categories is at the bottom of his own wrong-headed approach to conceptual analysis.

At the bottom of Smithson's completely turned-around understanding of meaning may again be his misunderstanding of the philosophy of language of Wittgenstein.



Criticism exists as *language* and nothing more. *Usage precedes meaning*. The “meanings” derived from the word Renaissance, such as “truth,” “beauty,” and “classic,” are diseased words and outmoded criteria. As one becomes aware of discrete usages, the syntax of esthetic communications discloses the relevant features of both “building” and “language.” Both are raw materials of communication and are based on chance – not historical preconceptions. Linguistic sense-data, not rational categories, are what we are investigating. Carl Andre has made it clear that without linguistic awareness there is no physical awareness.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that the only way to charitably read the first sentence here is as the tautology it seems to be. Indeed, criticism is generally in the form of meaningful sentences which function on the backdrop of more general notions of language – what “more” could it be? The second claim “usage precedes meaning,” is more problematic. It is clearly a paraphrase of Wittgenstein’s famous phrase: “For a large class of cases – though not for all, the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”<sup>46</sup> Smithson, in his paraphrase ignores, as do many readings of Wittgenstein’s famous claim that “meaning is use,” the condition “for a large class of case – though not for all.” Further, Smithson also misunderstands the specific intention of Wittgenstein’s formulation insofar as he claims “usage precedes meaning.” By this comment, I suspect he means something like “the past uses of concept-words among a community of speakers inform the meaningfulness of a language-game.”

What Smithson may be getting right about Wittgenstein is his desire “to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”<sup>47</sup> Words are in order and make sense as they are in fact used in everyday circumstances. The life of signs is nothing but their use,<sup>48</sup> for the function of representation comes into effect when they are applied with a view to their stage-settings. That is to say, the signs are made into means of representation in accordance with the ways in which they are tied to human activities.

Language operates between literal and metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tension of dispartes. A word fixed or a statement isolated without any decorative or “cubist” visual format, becomes a perception of similarity in dissimilars – in short a paradox.<sup>49</sup>

Here, the context of utterance of a word or phrase determines, not by a rule of grammar, but through the development of language-games among a community of users, the meaning in that language situation. What Wittgenstein finds when he ‘looks to see’ what is common across uses of words and phrases in

many and different situations is "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing "sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail," and he can "think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'."<sup>50</sup>

Particular mistakes regarding meaning inform Smithson's equally bizarre resentment of non-conceptual art, as did his resentment of being included with the conceptual artists:

The transparency of the window or wall as a clear "surface" becomes diseased when the artist defines his art by the *word* "painting" alone. Perhaps that is what Tony Smith is getting at when he says his works are "probably malignant." "Painting" is not an end, but a means, therefore it is linguistically an out-of-date category. The linguistic meaning of a "wall" or "window," when emptied of rational content, becomes surfaces, and line.<sup>51</sup>

Here his usual covert allegiance to various forms of essentialism rears its ugly head again in his imagining of a "window or wall as a clear 'surface'." Smithson's own tutor, Wittgenstein, has suggested the futility of positing such a philosophically or aesthetically clean slate:

"A thing is identical with itself."—There is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination. It is as if in imagination we put a thing into its own shape and say that it fitted. Does this spot "fit" into its white surrounding? But that is just how it would look if there had at first been a hole in its place and it then fitted into the hole.<sup>52</sup>

In clinging to the illusion of transparent clarity, Smithson commits a common mistake with respect to understanding the meanings of words in the language. How the decision to paint, rather than create other forms of art could corrupt and disease and artists is simply not addressed. In championing new forms of art, Smithson just wills others out of date and out of serious consideration without so much as one reason or argument given. While it is certainly true that conceptual content and other forms of art than painting had an enormous influence on 1960s minimalism and conceptual art, they did not do so because Smithson says they did. If he wanted comments like this to be taken seriously, some form of explanation is required.

### Logic

Wittgenstein provided insights into the relevance of logic to the kind of conceptual and language situations dealt with in Smithson's work. Wittgenstein persuades us to open our eyes to the more conspicuous dimen-

sions of language (i.e., the actual use of signs) and to note that there are found many and various orders under the seemingly unitary concept of language. Logic is in no way the order of our language under which every use of signs is uniformly subsumed. For "the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement."<sup>53</sup> This criticism, of course, compels Wittgenstein to have to look around for a non-hypothetical method of describing "something that already lies open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement."<sup>54</sup>

Related to Smithson's confused forays into the nature of language is his closely aligned investigation of logic.

*Wheeler:* So it's [the surd] not tautological.

*Smithson:* No. That always seems to me a cop out, tautology, I would say that's the weakness of [nonart].

*Wheeler:* The easy way.

*Smithson:* Yeah. That also takes you into what I would call logic. In a sense, this system defeats any idea of any kind of system. The system itself is self-canceling. You're into what I would call a surd area. A surd area is beyond tautologic . . . not really beyond, there's no beyond. As a matter of fact, it's a region where loci is suspended. I would look this up, too, this particular idea which might be somewhat [generative] . . . There's no commensurable relation, or incommensurable. So you're into a kind of irrational area.

*Wheeler:* That's where it becomes your own, too. It's not simply something that's distilled from pseudoscience . . .

*Smithson:* No, because it would be a cheap kind of logic to get into that, I think. It becomes sophomoric if you get into tautological logic.<sup>55</sup>

The idea that the concept of tautology is in non-art situations a "cop out" is one of the most absurd things Smithson has to say. The innocuous and yet useful notion that, for example "a=a" is somehow a "cop out" is simply wrong. Logic is a construct of logicians and mathematicians and is used that way. It is symptomatic of Smithson's general concealed commitment to a kind of essentialism that he expects logic to be somehow mysterious and magical, and when he finds it not so, he calls one of its devices a "cop out." This is a failure in his understanding, not of logic. A great artist he may have been, but the arbiter of what is and is not a logic is certainly not a position for which he was qualified. What is "sophomoric" is his reasoning, not tautological logic.

### **Art, Criticism and Curatorial Practice**

More promising than his failures to understand language, but ulti-

mately disappointing, are his attempts at grasping certain interesting facts about his and other art. He is best when talking directly and descriptively about objects:

Plastic exists between solid specific and a glittering generality . . .  
One could also say it has a "non-content."<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, Jack Flam attributes to Smithson an approach to art, which is derivative of John Cage's notion that art is "paying attention":

This allows him to give a special kind of accent to apparently random perceptions, which would not easily find a place within an expository text, but which can create flashes of illumination when properly placed or glanced at. In his writings, Smithson is a master of the glance – of the obliquely placed perception that sometimes allows the sublime and bathetic to be encompassed in a single phrase.<sup>57</sup>

This insight, regarding the importance of Smithson's particular ability for sublime perception, presents a refreshingly anti-essentialist reading of the significance of his work. Nevertheless, Smithson's paranoia toward being grouped with the conceptual artists and the categories of art history can be seen in full force when he writes:

Journalism in the guise of art criticism fears the disruption of language, so it resorts to being "educational" and "historical." Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their "truth" breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote. Wittgenstein has shown us what can happen when language is "idealized," and that it is hopeless to try to fit language into some absolute logic, whereby everything objective can be tested. We have to fabricate our rules as we go along the avalanches of language and over the terraces of criticism.<sup>58</sup>

It is completely unclear how it is that journalist art critics, whose medium is language, could fear "the disruption of language" or even what such fear would mean. I do not understand exactly how he can fault art critics for being either "educational" or "historical," both entirely reasonable and useful approaches to art history and criticism. The idea that he would prefer an approach to art criticism that was poetic, rather than a "matter of reasoned discourse," is quite frankly absurd.

Art criticism is not poetry; it is reasoning and argumentation, history

and education. It is extraordinarily ironic that Smithson refers to Wittgenstein, who he paraphrases entirely wrongly. Wittgenstein does not show “us what can happen when language is “idealized,” nor does Wittgenstein’s treatment of the relation of logic and language have anything to do with his verificationist tendencies involved with what Smithson refers “objective” testing. Finally, Wittgenstein is very clear on the fact that rules are in fact followed as we all live our lives – and that least of all with language is it the case that anything goes, as would be implied by Smithson’s claim that “we must fabricate our rules as we go along,” a phrase which I am sure has Wittgenstein rolling over in his grave.

At the root of Smithson’s juvenile understanding of Wittgenstein is his failure to grasp the meaning of the language-game. The language-game “is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”<sup>59</sup> It is, Wittgenstein says, “a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases.”<sup>60</sup> In brief, the language-game is a descriptive concept in that language and life interact upon each other, ironically a concept that Smithson was grasping for in all his writing.

As I have suggested, an “anything goes” view of meaning is clearly *not* Wittgenstein’s view. It is a feature of our language that we are able, to use Cavell’s phrase, “to project a word into various contexts,”<sup>61</sup> but this does not imply semantic *carte blanche*. While the language is receptive to the development of concepts over a variety of contexts, it is still illiberal insofar as *communication* requires standards. Obviously what will count as admissible in each context is quite tightly bounded by the world and by our language. Any specific activity or situation must be appropriate for the use of a concept in order for it to be meaningful in that context. This way in which words are both concrete<sup>62</sup> and malleable is intimately connected with Wittgenstein’s larger notion of *grammar*.

More absurd than Smithson’s misunderstanding of the way in which language actually functions is his bizarre fear of museums as institutions in the business of showing great and important art.

Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called “galler-

ies." A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of esthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.<sup>63</sup>

Again Smithson's bourgeois and pedestrian view of art shows through his provocation. Rather than confining the viewing public by presenting art in the context of a museum, good curators work to present works in stimulating ways. Artists make art, dealers sell it and curators show it in museums – there is no one telling an artist what he or she has to be or make. Smithson rants about "this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of [artists]." Does he really expect anyone to take seriously the view that museums are like prisons or asylums? The way he complains and bemoans is unmistakably his own personal gripe session with every critic or curator who ever did not understand or like his work. There is no substance to his claims or arguments made – just a lot of claims made without support.

Museums are the buildings in which we as a culture show art. They have evolved over the years to look in a variety of ways. Yes, critics and curators make pronouncements on what is better and worse, more meaningful and less meaningful, more interesting and less interesting, and so on, regarding art that is produced. But how is that any different than any other discipline in which things produced are judged for quality and significance. The museums don't restrict and constrict art production; they enable it and its enjoyment. He is irrationally committed to the (vain) view of the singular unmatched importance of the artist.

*RS:* People who defend the labels of painting and sculpture say what they do is timeless, created outside of time; therefore the object transcends the artist himself. But I think that the artist is important too, and what he does, the way he thinks, is valuable, whether or not there is any tangible result. You mainly follow a lot of blind alleys, but these blind alleys are interesting.<sup>64</sup>

Robert Smithson's art is provocative and singular; his writing is plaintive, attacking and annoying. Smithson would have us enthralled by the artworks he creates, his writings, and even the very concepts that he rejects.

Perhaps the greatest irony of Smithson's writing is the profoundly low-level understanding of language, art and philosophy he exhibited while accusing others of worse offenses.

*Wheeler:* It's like Lippard organizing a Conceptual Art show, in that sense.

*Smithson:* Well, I'm sort of bored by that, . . . even though I contributed to it . . . Just very sort of superficial sophomoric philosophy, you know, that's been sort of rejected by philosophers, and then a lot of third rate minds are picking up this rejected philosophy in quotes . . . I just don't like that direction. I think that the whole idea of literature is as bad as philosophy, because those are all postulating some kind of omnipotent state where you're in control. The literary person is not dealing with languages and material, he's dealing with it as a kind of means to an end [rather than] and end in itself . . . It's just a surrogate kind of humanistic dog idea . . . I mean it's impossible to get to the point where you have that kind of detachment.

*Wheeler:* You can't extricate yourself.

*Smithson:* Yeah. So you can recognize that possibility of it always breaking down there too, where the ego intrudes, and you go from one plateau to another plateau . . .

*Wheeler:* It's kind of amazing how quick the Conceptual Art faded, even more so than Pop Art . . .

*Smithson:* Yeah, well, you see, Sol LeWitt had his own reading of that and he completely deformed it to fit his particular view, which is very interesting in terms of Sol LeWitt. As far as concepts are concerned, it's completely . . . you know, the idea that art doesn't take a physical form is ridiculous.<sup>65</sup>

Lucy Lippard is a vastly subtler thinker than Smithson. His claims about her show read like a self-indictment of everything that is worst in his writing. Smithson's writings, as we have seen are "just very sort of superficial sophomoric philosophy . . . that's been sort of rejected by philosophers." Smithson's "third rate mind" has picked "up this rejected philosophy in quotes." Most significantly, "Conceptual Art" following Smithson has not faded – it is one of the defining aspects of post-war art.

As I have shown, Smithson's writing on art reads more like a low-level confessional than insightful art criticism. He simultaneously fears being put in categories and left out of them, of being part of art history and being outside it, of being an artistic success and selling out. Robert Smithson is ultimately successful in negotiating these conflicts in producing some of the greatest art of the post-war period, but fails in his writing, leaving behind a confused mess of essays impenetrable not because of their brilliance, but because of his inability to grasp or articulate complex philosophical concepts, maintain a con-

sistent perspective, or provide insight about the meaning or significance of his or others' art.

*I wish to thank Dr. Bruce Barnes for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this essay.*

## Notes

1 Robert Smithson, quoted at *Collected Writings*. Edited by Jack Flam. Berkley: U of California Press, 1996, xvii.

2 I will argue against this claim in great detail in this essay.

3 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. xiii.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., xv.

6 Robert Smithson, as quoted in *Collected Writings*:

Journalism in the guise of art criticism fears the disruption of language, so it resorts to being "educational" and "historical." Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their "truth" breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote. Wittgenstein has shown us what can happen when language is "idealized," and that it is hopeless to try to fit language into some absolute logic, whereby everything objective can be tested. We have to fabricate our rules as we go along the avalanches of language and over the terraces of criticism. (107-8)

7 Ibid., xv.

8 A related and similarly wrong-headed understanding is given by Smithson through a different metaphor when he writes:

Moreover, Smithson saw words themselves as containing a crucial (if usually overlooked) physicality which, through a slight shift in perceptual emphasis, could be seen to contain its own network of meanings: "Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void." (CW xvii)

9 Smithson even goes to far as to bizarrely suggest that critics actually ought to be poets:

Journalism in the guise of art criticism fears the disruption of language, so it resorts to being "educational" and "historical." Art critics are generally poets who have betrayed their art, and instead have tried to turn art into a matter of reasoned discourse, and, occasionally, when their "truth" breaks down, they resort to a poetic quote. (CW 107-8)

10 Ibid., xvi.

11 Ibid., 208.

12 Ibid., xvi.



13 Ibid., xvi.

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: MacMillan, 1968, 1-6.

15 This too further calls into question Smithson's claims that he is outside the boundaries of conceptual art:

This materiality, he felt, distinguished his work from conceptual art, which he characterized as "essentially ideational." When asked what he meant by the "material" quality of language, Smithson elaborated: "Well, just as printed matter – information which has a kind of physical presence for me. I would construct my articles the way I would construct a work." (CW xvi)

16 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, xvii.

17 Ibid., xvii.

18 Ibid., 209.

19 The technical philosophical position being circumscribed here as a kind of dismantling of the myth of foundation have played a central if not dominant role in twentieth century philosophy as put forward first by Ludwig Wittgenstein and then, since the middle of the century, in the work of Willfred Sellars, Willard van Orman Quine, Stanley Cavell and Richard Rorty. In "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Sellars argues that the notion of "self-authenticating nonverbal episodes" that would provide a foundation for empirical knowledge is a myth, nothing merely causal, not already in conceptual shape, could possibly play the justificatory role required of such a foundation. Relatedly, Rorty takes Quine, in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism,"<sup>19</sup> to make the complementary point that the notion of analytic claims true by virtue of meaning, of self-authenticating verbal episodes that might provide a foundation for another sort for knowledge, is again a myth.<sup>19</sup> A third moment in the dismantling of the myth of a foundation—this time for the contentfulness of our thoughts rather than for the truth of our beliefs — is due to Rorty himself. As he argues in "Realism and Reference"<sup>19</sup> (and again in Chapter 6 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), the notion of *reference* as a nonintentional or "external" word-world relation that would ground our thoughts' representational bearing on things, and so explain how thoughts can so much as purport to be true, again involves illicit appeal to the idea that, independent of what we take it as, an object can have cognitive significance. An external relation of reference cannot serve as the unmoved mover of the contentfulness or aboutness of thought. Nor, if Quine is right about the breakdown of the analytic/synthetic distinction, can meanings or word-word relations play this role. It looks very much like we have moved further and further from a substantive notion of meaning or reference that could help to foundationalize semantic theory. One can see an endpoint for this reductive or deflationary view of meaning in Stephen Schiffer's no-theory theory of meaning given in *Remnants of Meaning*.

20 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1-6.

21 Ibid., 114.

22 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 208.

23 Joseph Cunningham, "the simplest most powerful things: The Art of Agnes Martin," *Art Criticism*, 17.2, p. 17.

24 Another of the most egregiously misguided of Smithson's attempts at interrogating concepts:

*Smithson:* They're languages that simply aren't just words. Languages that have syntaxes in terms of other materials like maps, like photographs, like . . . any kind of visual art, you know . . .

*Wheeler:* What's the difference, then, between philosophy why you read it, and conceptualization?

*Smithson:* This whole conceptual thing . . . treats language as a secondary thing, a kind of thing that'll disappear when it doesn't disappear. Language is as primary as steel. And there's no point in trying to wish it away. And when you invoke it, it's dangerous. It's always like running amok. It's like these people start developing systems and they kind of grow out, like deltas, into the oceans. I mean what's the meaning of that? It's just there, sort of building itself out. And you contend with that. So that a lot of people have on these totems seem to me completely conjectural or hypothetical. Founded in their own psyche, sort of colored by their psyches, distorted and deformed by their own misreading of these people . . . (CW 214)

25 As Smithson writes:

Wittgenstein has shown us what can happen when language is "idealized," and that it is hopeless to try to fit language into some absolute logic, whereby everything objective can be tested. We have to fabricate our rules as we go along the avalanches of language and over the terraces of criticism. (CW 107-8)

26 A very similar set of confusions inform Smithson's understanding of conceptual art:

*Smithson:* That tends to get into the same kind of trap that Conceptual Art would get into. The cerebral isn't touching rock bottom; it's just a sort of pure essence that is up here somewhere. So it's going back into a kind of pseudophilosophical situation. I'm really not interested in philosophy. I'm interested completely in art. (CW 209)

27 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*. 1958. New York: Harper, 1969, p. 17.

28 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 108.

29 *Ibid.*, 65.

30 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, p. 208.

31 *Ibid.*, xvii.

32 *Ibid.*, 155.

33 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 340.

34 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 56.

35 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 130.

36 *Ibid.*, 122.

37 Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. 1969. Ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. New York: Harper, 1972, 559.

38 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, xviii.

39 *Ibid.*

- 40 Ibid., 55.  
41 Ibid., 107.  
42 See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980.  
43 In Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 50.  
44 Ibid., 52.  
45 Ibid., 59.  
46 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43.  
47 Ibid., 116.  
48 Ibid., 43.  
49 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 61.  
50 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 66, 67.  
51 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 60.  
52 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 216.  
53 Ibid., 107.  
54 Ibid., 92.  
55 In Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 199.  
56 Ibid., 3.  
57 Ibid., xv.  
58 Ibid., 107-8.  
59 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 23.  
60 Ibid., 201.  
61 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1979, 182.  
62 'Concreteness' in this sense is related to the real world, even realist spin Wittgenstein gives to the ways in which meanings become a part of our lives in particular uses. As I've suggested, use is not a free-form, anything-goes affair. Instead, in order for words to have meaning as we use them, there must be a materiality or 'concreteness' engendered across the body of past uses as meaning is projected into new language-game situations. Concreteness of words and their meanings is meant to capture the nexus of the body of past uses as they are connected to the reality of particular uses in a given context.  
63 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 154-5.  
64 Ibid., 175.  
65 Ibid., 214.

## Newman's *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, A Jewish Take

Matthew Baigell

It is a well known fact that several Abstract Expressionist painters and sculptors who came of age during the 1940s were Jewish, but there is relatively little in the literature that deals directly with them as Jews and as Jewish artists who lived through the Holocaust, albeit in the safety of the United States. Barnett Newman (1905-1970) was one of them, and it is my firm opinion that the events of those years profoundly affected his production as an artist.<sup>1</sup> I want to consider here within a Jewish context his *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (1958-66), a group of fourteen paintings of essentially black stripes on either white fields or raw canvas. In so doing, I want to discuss the series in ways largely neglected in the literature and which might also help explain Newman's choice of title.<sup>2</sup>

The first point to note is that Newman was neither the first nor the only modern Jewish artist to have explored Christological themes in painting or poetry. Especially during the 1940s and after, during the years of the Holocaust and its aftermath, it would seem paradoxical that Jewish artists would employ themes associated with Jesus at a time when many Christians in Europe were trying to kill or had just killed as many Jews as possible. Yet, Newman's use of this type of subject matter occurred at a moment in modern history when Jewish artists felt enough at ease within the majority Christian culture in which they lived to use the prime religious figure and symbol of that culture while at the same time retaining enough memory of and interest in their own religious culture to charge that symbol with Jewish meaning. Jewish artists apparently found in images of Jesus or in aspects of his life, themes that reflected both the Jewish condition and their own personal situation in the modern world. For these artists, Jesus was seen as a Jew who was crucified, as a symbolic figure murdered in the Holocaust, and/or as a surrogate for the individual artist. Several paintings using these themes were exhibited in New York galleries and reproduced in the art magazines during the 1940s, some of which Newman must have seen. So, before looking at *The Stations of the Cross* directly, I want

to describe briefly some of these works.<sup>3</sup>

We need go no further back than 1941. Marc Chagall, who had just escaped from France, exhibited *The Martyr* at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York City that year.<sup>4</sup> This painting, not precisely a Crucifixion, showed a man on a stake with his arms bound behind him and his body wrapped in a prayer shawl. He was clearly Jewish and the painting's meaning, given the Jewish situation in wartime Europe, was obvious. By 1944, Chagall had completed at least five paintings which showed both Jesus and Jews crucified: *Yellow Christ* (c. 1941), *Descent from the Cross* (1941), *Yellow Crucifixion* (1943), *Obsession* (1943), and *The Crucified* (1944). In all of them, the principle figures, because of their dress, were clearly meant to be Jewish. Jesus was wrapped in a prayer shawl or wore phylacteries and other figures were clearly eastern European Jews. Torahs, menorahs or candelabra, images of the Wandering Jew, and burning *shtetls* appeared on the sides or in the backgrounds of the paintings.<sup>5</sup>

Within a matter of months after *The Martyr* was exhibited, gallery owner Fernando Puma held an exhibition entitled *Modern Christs* in 1942.<sup>6</sup> Of the twenty-six artists who participated, around seventeen were Jewish, including Adolph Gottlieb, Mané-Katz, Sygmunt Menkes, Louise Nevelson, and Max Weber. Some of the works seen were crucifixions, others descents from the cross. Mané-Katz, for example, entitled his entry *Now Ye Are Brethren*. It showed Jesus freeing an arm from the Cross and extending it over a group of dead children who lie near a Torah and a menorah. Max Weber portrayed Jesus as a naked, middle-aged Jewish man.

In a stunning review in the Yiddish-language magazine *Hemshech* (*Sequel*), Jennings Tofel questioned the validity of Jewish artists employing any kind of Christological theme.<sup>7</sup> The review is important not only for revealing Jewish anger, but also for its bluntness at a time when even in America Jewish-Christian relations were strained. Clearly, Tofel felt no obligation to be polite and had no fear of expressing his feelings quite plainly.

Other artists, such as Max Band and Joseph Foshko, also created works in the middle 1940s that expressed their anger with the world's indifference to Jewish life, or more accurately, the end of Jewish life. Band, living in California, painted *Ecce Homo* in 1944, in which he updated the subject by placing it in a Kafkaesque courtroom scene. The principle figure seems unaware of the crime of which he is accused. And in 1944-1945, Foshko's *Forgive Them NOT, Father, For They KNOW What They Do* shows an image of a Jewish-looking Jesus on the Cross who speaks to God the Father in very abrupt and obviously unforgiving terms. (The title is a variation on Luke 24:34: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.")<sup>8</sup>

Abraham Rattner, who returned to America from France in 1939, also painted many works in the 1940s. In fact, he mentioned in a letter to a friend that he was working on "several violent 'Christ' compositions."<sup>9</sup> These included

*Descent from the Cross* (1940-1942), *A Place Called Golgotha* (c. 1941-1942), *Darkness Fell Over the Land* (1941-1942), *Design for Memory* (1943), and *The Jeweled Christ* (1943).<sup>10</sup> In the middle 1940s, Mark Rothko also employed Christological themes, either indicated by title, as in *Entombment* (1944) and *Entombment I* (1946), or, by images that obviously recall depositions and entombments, as in a group of untitled paintings dating from the middle years of that decade now deposited in the National Gallery.

This is not an exhaustive list of what Newman might have seen, heard, or read about, but it does indicate that such themes, although not very common were also not very rare. Some artists also made statements about Jesus and about the Crucifixion in poems, interviews, letters, and diary entries (mentioned below). The chances are Newman would not have known these, but it is important to note such writings because they indicate the ways Jewish artists thought about such themes. One can also imagine that during the 1940s Newman spoke with his friend Rothko about such matters, as did Rothko with Ben-Zion who knew each other since their days as part of the group, The Ten, during the late 1930s, and as did Rattner who probably knew Chagall in Paris before both fled to New York.

Among the statements artists made, Chagall, for example, said in 1944, "for me, Christ is a great poet, the teaching of whose poetry has been forgotten by the modern world." Decades later, in 1977, he said, "for me, Christ has always symbolized the true type of the Jewish martyr. That is how I understood him in 1908 when I used this figure for the first time.... I was under the influence of the pogroms... This is undoubtedly the primary meaning of my use of this image." Of his *The Crucified*, which shows three Jewish men crucified, Chagall said in 1947 about those who fought in the ghettos of Polish cities, "their crucifixion in the streets of Vitebsk and other places took on the tragic appearance of the crucified Christ Himself."<sup>11</sup>

Rattner identified himself more closely with the crucified Jesus. On one occasion, he said, "it is myself that is on the cross, though I am attempting to express a universal theme—man's inhumanity to man," and on another, "if it is a crucifixion I paint—the motive has nothing in common with the religious event—only an outward presentation of the symbol-metaphor dirge of all the inner responses to my life's experience," and on yet another occasion, "we gave Christ to the world. The Crucifixion is me because I've suffered so much because that's me in the Crucifixion. Not just me: everyone who's suffered."<sup>12</sup> So closely did Rattner identify himself with Jesus, that one observer was even moved to write, "Rattner has painted the Crucifixion more than once, and when he paints Jesus on the Cross, he is painting his own suffering, not that of Jesus, and he thinks of Rattner, not Christ."<sup>13</sup>

Jennings Tofel in the previously mentioned article in *Hemschech* took a different point of view in that he rejected the appropriation of Jesus on any

level by Jewish artists. He found the symbol of the Cross itself an annoyance and that Christians had turned a Jew into a god with superhuman powers. And Jack Levine in a similar vein said, "I am not one of the Jews who take an enlightened, liberal attitude about Jesus Christ. Christ on the Cross is to me a symbol of Jewish persecution and nothing more, and I refuse to celebrate it."<sup>14</sup>

Ben-Zion in an undated poem, "And When He Raised His Voice," considered the Crucifixion differently. In contrast to Tofel and Levine, Ben-Zion located Jesus' last words in an everyday human context. He also compared the physical death of Jesus to that of the Jews in the Holocaust whose cries counted for nothing.

And when he raised his voice  
With those terrifying words  
"Eli, Eli lama shavactani"  
He hung way up on the cross  
On the open hill—  
Among people, friends, brothers  
And relatives—his mother near him  
And his disciples around him—and his voice  
Was heard with decision toward is death.

And now?  
We are dragged to death  
Lonely, without the knowledge  
Of our relatives, friends,  
And elders, and the outcry of the  
Condemned is not heard  
"Eli eli lama shavactani"  
The voices of the condemned  
Are not heard.  
Condemned to eternal silence.<sup>15</sup>

Ben-Zion's anger is palpable. He implies that God's abandonment of the six million was more harsh, more difficult to bear, and more likely to be ignored by people than the crucifixion of Jesus. And beyond that, there is the inference that the image of Jesus on the Cross as a symbol of compassion did not extend to Europe's Jews in the 1940s.

I cannot and will not argue that Newman was influenced by one or another of these artists. My point here is to note that Jewish artists did use Christological themes during the 1940s. There is yet another context I want to consider before looking at *The Stations of the Cross*, one suggested by art critic Harold Rosenberg's thoughts on Jewish art and artists. For Rosenberg, Jewish identity meant not identifying as a Jew, but as the quintessential modern person, doubly alienated from both the mainstream and from one's own

culture. "Since the Jew," he said, "possesses a unique identity which springs from his origin and his story, it is possible for him to be any kind of man—rationalist, irrationalist, heroic, cowardly, Zionist, or good European—and still be a Jew. Jewish identity has remarkable richness for those who rediscover it within themselves."<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, Rosenberg was thinking about a person who had long since departed from traditional religious beliefs and practices as well as from cultural habits and norms. As he further elaborated a short time later, a person's Jewish origins no longer meant that he or she had anything in common with other Jews as in the past. Now, self-definition had become most important. "The individual who seeks in himself the hidden content of his Jewishness must accept the risk of what he may find. Like all serious adventures in self-discovery, such a search is an affirmation of a faith in value and demands moral courage as well as a certain inner stability, his daring implies a sense of being secure in his worth." In short, Judaism "cannot be delineated by any static concept of Judaism nor represented by an 'organized group.'" Ideally, a person becomes somebody "only through the acts by which he projects himself into the future. Whatever he is to be, will be the result of his self-creation or his choice... By making the very self who is to decide for us, we replace nature and tradition and, like the First Maker, create a man in the image we desire."<sup>17</sup>

Whether all or any of this is Jewish in any sense, traditional or otherwise, is not relevant here. (I think not, since it is more about a person who wants to break with his or her parochial background—like Rosenberg.) But if we look at Newman in light of Rosenberg's comments, then Newman becomes the latter's ideal Jewish artist, borne out by the most famous passage in Newman's most famous essay, "The Sublime Is Now," written in 1948: "Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings."<sup>18</sup> This would seem to suggest, plainly and simply, that Newman was intent on reinventing himself independent of any sense of past or present history or of any past or present culture. This is further corroborated by Newman's comments apropos the creation of *Onement I* in 1948, his first stripe painting. He is reported to have said, according to Thomas Hess, his biographer, "the artist... must start, like God, with chaos, the void..." Hess goes on to say that "the image not only re-enacts God's primal gesture, it also presents the gesture itself..."<sup>19</sup> This comment seems to correspond to Rosenberg's notion of the re-invented Jew playing the role as First Maker, literally the maker of his own universe. My own observations are that the creation of the stripe paintings by Newman, who saw himself as the artist as Creator, grew on the one hand from Newman's rejection of the Deity, history, and world culture because of his response, in part, to the Holocaust and on the other hand to the creation of a new world symbolized by the new state of Israel founded in 1948.<sup>20</sup>



Following this line of reasoning, we can say that Newman turned himself into a self-assertive and self-invented artist. But this does not mean that in his personal journey Newman cast vulnerability aside, that he never spent a time trying to figure out which end was up, or that he had answered all the big and little questions of life. And this brings us finally to *The Stations of the Cross*. Its subtitle, *Lema Sabachthani*, an Aramaic phrase, translates as “Why have You forsaken me?” and refers to the passage in Matthew (27:46) when Jesus on the Cross cries out to God. Initially, Newman had not intended to create a series of works on this theme. The first two paintings that became part of *The Stations* were painted in 1958 and then the remainder followed in 1961, 1962, 1964, 1965, and 1966. (They were first exhibited as a set at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966.<sup>21</sup>) When making the fourth painting in what was to become the series, Newman used a white line whiter than the canvas and it was *that*, as Newman said, that gave him the idea for the cry and for the series. “It occurred to me that this abstract cry [*Lema Sabachthani*. Why have You forsaken me?] was the whole thing—the entire Passion of Christ.”<sup>22</sup> The cry, I would argue, was also Newman’s cry, especially when he rephrased the question more bluntly, asking not why he had been forsaken, but, with New York moxie: “What’s the idea?”<sup>23</sup>

Initial critical responses in 1966 were largely negative. John Canaday’s review in *The New York Times* was gracelessly anti-Semitic. With a back-of-the-hand slap, he said that each work “consists of one or more vertical bands of black and white, like unraveled phylacteries.”<sup>24</sup> Phylacteries, which I doubt Newman ever wore, are used in morning prayers, prayers which I doubt Newman ever said. But because of Newman’s interest in Kabbalah and his knowledge of ancient Jewish texts, he would hardly have insulted those who did say morning prayers. Unraveled phylacteries would hardly be the *ur* source for the series, unless one had nothing good to say about a Jewish artist who crossed the religion line and called a series of works *The Stations of the Cross*. Of accounts by contemporary critics, only Lucy Lippard seemed to have understood Newman’s intent. She said that he had “rendered his vision...that of the artist, perhaps synonymously with that of Christ....”<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Newman’s position was not far removed from that of Abraham Rattner, for in a manner similar to Rattner’s, Newman invoked the words of Jesus through a Jewish lens.

Cultural historian Sander Gilman provides us with that Jewish lens in trying to understand Newman’s choice of subtitle. Gilman, in his observations of what might have sounded too Jewish in the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion, compared passages similar to “*Lema Sabachthani*” in each one. He said,

In the first set of passages Jesus Christ speaks in Aramaic. Matthew, the first gospeler, represents a Christ whose last words are

as follows: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?' that is to say, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (27:46)... The significance of this lies in the presentation of Christ as speaking the language of the Jews: his words need to be translated into Greek, Latin, German, or English for the self-labeled Christian reader to understand. The reader is thus made aware of the foreignness of Christ's language—he speaks the language of difference; he is Jew who sounds Jewish.<sup>26</sup>

The language is similar in Mark. But in Luke and John, it is quite different. In Luke, for example, the text says, "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost" (23:46). In this passage, Jesus' language no longer needs translation. He is therefore no longer Jewish, but Christian.<sup>27</sup> In regard to the language Newman selected to represent Jesus' cry, therefore, Jesus had not yet become Christian.

The source for the passage in Matthew is Psalm 22:2: "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me; why so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring?" In the psalm, the supplicant goes on to say that he has been challenged and abused by those around him. He then asks for deliverance, offers praise, and ultimately believes that "the Lord's fame shall be proclaimed to the generations to come." The supplicant thus ends his lament by praising and accepting the will of God. Newman acknowledged that Psalm 22 was the source, but as will be made clear when we look at the "Statement" he wrote for the catalogue of the Guggenheim Museum exhibition, Newman would not acknowledge God, let alone praise Him or accept His will. He still held fast to the same position he held for himself as Creator when he made the first stripe paintings years before in 1948, in acknowledging no force larger or greater than himself.

In his "Statement," Newman wrote that "the outcry of Jesus... has no answer... This question that has no answer has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—since Adam—the original question. Lema? To what purpose—is the unanswerable question of human suffering." Newman goes on to say, "the first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment, not to reduce it to a pious legend; nor even to worship the story of one man and his agony, but to stand witness to the story of each man's agony: the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed—world without end."<sup>28</sup> And, as Newman said in an interview after his exhibition opened at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966, "I'd always been disturbed by those last words. They gave Jesus the touch of being very much the son of man—not divine. Because as I see it, that cry—'Why hast Thou forsaken

me?’—that was the cry of a man, of everyman who is unable to understand what is being done to him.”<sup>29</sup>

In trying to explain his position in 1966, Newman also used language close to that of the 1940s. Ultimate meaning still—and always would—escape him. At that earlier time he referred to his desire to penetrate “into the world-mystery,” to “search for the hidden meanings of life,” to understand the tragic metaphysical problem of being alone but also belonging to “another,” and to realize that other artists in other cultures had developed shapes that carried “awesome feelings...before the terror of the unknowable.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, he still felt terror and was still searching, or at least asking, for answers in the 1960s, but now confronting and pointing his questions directly at the godhead. But, in truth, Newman was not going to allow himself to find any answers.

This is made clear in his exhibition “Statement” of 1966 to which Newman added some lines from the *Pirke Abot* (4:29), a part of the Talmud known as “The Wisdom of the Fathers,” collected between the third and fifth centuries CE. (The *Pirke Abot* contains maxims, ethical doctrines, guides to religious activities, and constant reminders to study Torah in order to insure a good and godly life.) Here are the lines Newman included. “The ones who are born are to die, Against thy will art thou formed, Against they will art thou born, Against thy will dost thou live, Against thy will die.” And then Newman concluded, “Jesus surely heard these words from the *Pirke Abot*, ‘The Wisdom of the Fathers.’” (Newman, historically conscious, was careful to say that Jesus heard these words, meaning that He heard them from the Oral Tradition, or in Psalm 22, since the Talmud was not written down until centuries after His death.)

But if Jesus had in fact heard these words, He, no doubt, would have known the rest of the psalm (considered above) and all of those passages in the *Pirke Abot* which Newman omitted from his “Statement.” Newman probably knew the *Pirke Avot* from childhood, since it has been often published and republished and is included in virtually all religious instruction. He might even have owned a copy printed in 1955 with illustrations by Ben-Zion.<sup>31</sup> Be that as it may, the particular chapter Newman cited is about birth, death, and God’s judgment of one’s life. But Newman omitted from his “Statement” the opening and closing passages. The opening lines are,

Those who are born are destined to die, the dead to rise again, and the living to be judged, in order to know, to teach, and to make it known that there is a God, that He is the maker, He is the creator, He is the discoverer, He is the judge, He is the witness, He is the plaintiff, He will judge in the future. Blessed is He, for in His presence there is no wrong doing, no forgetting, no favoritism, no bribe-taking, for all is His. Know also that everything will happen

according to the reckoning.

And the last lines are, "Against your will you shall have to give account and reckoning before the supreme King, the Holy One, blessed is He."

The chief point of this chapter of the *Pirke Avot*, which Newman edited out, is to acknowledge the existence of God and that even though we have no control over our own birth, we are each nevertheless responsible and accountable for our life, not only to ourselves but to a higher authority.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that Newman concentrated on Jesus' cry of pain and abandonment, he, Newman, still refused to acknowledge the Deity. In whatever way he invoked Jesus' Passion or cited lines from the *Pirke Avot*, Newman still insisted on going it alone and was therefore unable to find an answer to the big question: Why? In truth, Newman could not leave well enough alone. On one occasion he said that he "concentrated on that one issue [the cry]. This is what the paintings meant to me—the cry."<sup>33</sup> On another occasion, he said that "the cry of *Lema*—for what purpose?—this is the Passion and this is what I have tried to evoke in these paintings. The cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without end."<sup>34</sup>

Newman sounded like a person in torment. The last lines of his exhibition "Statement" state as much. "No one gets anybody's permission to be born. No one asks to live. Who can say he has *more* permission than anybody else." These words reflect the same tough-minded attitude of the self-willed, self-created person who built cathedrals to the self. No one is special—not Newman, not the person in the street, not even Jesus. But still, as Newman revealed, the unanswerable, never-ending cry lurked in the back of his mind and would never allow him to live in peace. Perhaps Newman really meant to say, or at least imply, that trust and belief in one's own self was not enough, not sufficient, that ultimately there was nothing out there in which to have faith—which leads one to think that perhaps his real problem was that he knew that he seemed to lack the faith to have faith. Or perhaps he understood that at the core, that however much he wanted to build cathedrals to the self, he was still a solitary individual and a solitary Jew, scorned by the world, symbolically murdered in the Holocaust, with no recourse except to the never-ending cry, demanding an explanation that in hindsight obviously could never be answered.

### Notes

1 See my *Jewish Artists in New York: The Holocaust Years* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

2 For recent bibliography, see Ann Temkin, ed., *Barnett Newman* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002). At the 2003 annual meeting of the College

Art Association, a panel was devoted largely to *The Stations*, but Jewish aspects were entirely omitted.

- 3 For the European background, see the following: Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "The Jewish Jesus," *Journal of Jewish Art* 9 (1982): 84-104; Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993), 178-197; and Amishai-Maisels, "Origins of the Jewish Jesus," in Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd, eds., *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 51-86.
- 4 This and subsequent works are considered in Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 178-185; and in my *Jewish Artists, passim*.
- 5 See *The Art Digest* 17 (November 1, 1942): 11; *The Menorah Journal* 31 (October-December 1943): 215, 315; *Art News* 47 (November 1948): 44.
- 6 *Modern Christs* (New York: Puma Gallery, 1942); "As Moderns See Christ," *The Art Digest* 16 (April 15, 1942): 22.
- 7 Y[ehuda] Tofel, "The Jewish Artist," *Hemshech* 4 (1943): 3-16. Renee Baigell translated the article. I also want to thank Lauren Strauss for telling me about an index that lists articles written by artists for Yiddish-language journals on file at YIVO (the Yiddish Institute for Research) now housed in the Center for Jewish History, New York. I discuss the contents of the article in my *Jewish Artists in New York*.
- 8 See *Max Band* (Westwood Hills, CA: James Vigevano Gallery, 1945), n.p.; and *Joseph Foshko* (New York: Feragil Gallery, 1945), n.p.
- 9 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Abraham Rattner Papers, roll D204, frame 287, letter to Ramon Guthrie. Further references to the Archives will be listed as AAA.
- 10 In addition to the references in note 3, see also Allen Leepa, *Abraham Rattner* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1979), *passim*.
- 11 Franz Meyer, *Marc Chagall: Life and Work* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1964), 16; James Johnson Sweeney, "An Interview with Marc Chagall," *Partisan Review* 11 (Winter 1944): 91; Chagall, "Unity is the Soul of Culture," *Jewish Life* (supplement) (November 1947): 4, in the Museum of Modern Art's microfiche files on Chagall.
- 12 Leepa, *Abraham Rattner*, 42; Leepa *Abraham Rattner*, exh. cat. (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1970), n.p.; Susan J. Bandes, *Abraham Rattner: The Tampa Museum of Art Collection* (Tampa: The Tampa Museum of Art, 1977), 32n.
- 13 AAA, roll N681, frame 570, Whitney Museum Papers, Israel Shenker, "Paris Dispatch #26," typescript, February 12, 1960.
- 14 Stephen Robert Frankel, ed., *Jack Levine* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 134.
- 15 Ben-Zion, *Remember* (Tel Aviv: EKED, 1981), 120.
- 16 Harold Rosenberg, "Does the Jew Exist?: Sartre's Morality Play About Anti-Semitism," *Commentary* 7 (January 1949): 18.
- 17 Rosenberg, "Jewish Identity in a Free Society: On Current Efforts to Enforce 'Total Commitment,'" *Commentary* 9 (June 1950): 513-514.
- 18 Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," in John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California

- Press, 1990), 173.
- 19 Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 56.
  - 20 See my "Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah; A Jewish Take," in my *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 232-242.
  - 21 Lawrence Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist," in *Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 11. Alloway's essay is reprinted in his *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 42-51.
  - 22 *Newsweek* 67 (May 9, 1966): 100; Newman, "The 14 Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966," *Art News* 65 (May 1966): 26. This essay is reprinted in O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 189-190. See also Alloway, "The Stations of the Cross," 11.
  - 23 Mentioned in "A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess (1966)," in O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 276-277.
  - 24 John Canaday, "Art: With Pretty Thorough Execution," *The New York Times*, April 23, 1966, 26. See also Max Kozloff, "Art," *The Nation* 202 (May 16, 1966): 598; and Dore Ashton, "Art," *Art and Architecture* 83 (June 1966): 4-5.
  - 25 Lucy R. Lippard, "New York Letter," *Art International* 10 (Summer 1966): 108.
  - 26 Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, 13, 15.
  - 28 Newman, "Statement" in *The Stations of the Cross*, 9.
  - 29 *Newsweek*, 100.
  - 30 In order, the first two citations are from "The Plasmic Image" (pp. 140, 145), the third from "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb" (p. 76), and the fourth from "The Ideographic Picture" (p. 108), all in O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*.
  - 31 Judah Goldin, ed. and trans., *The Wisdom of the Fathers and Its Classical Commentaries* (New York: Heritage Press, 1955). See also Rabbi Dr. Marcus (Meir) Lehmann and Rabbi Eliezer Liepman Philip Prins, *The Lehmann-Prins Perkei Avoth* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1992).
  - 32 Chapter 3, verse 1 contains a very similar message that Newman could have used to similar effect.
  - 33 "A Conversation," O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 277.
  - 34 Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958-1966," 57, cited in O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman*, 190.

# Aesthetics of Photography: Combining the Viewer's and the Artist's Standpoints

Chong Ho Yu

## Status of Photography

Paul Weiss, in his book *Nine Basic Arts*, classifies the nine basic arts as architecture, sculpture, painting, music, story, poetry, music, theater, and dance. Obviously, photography is not highly regarded by Weiss. In the last chapter he says, "They (photographers) have little and sometimes even no appreciation of the aesthetic values of experience. And when they do have such appreciation it is rarely relevant to their purposes. One need not...be an artist to use a camera with brilliance."<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that painters such as Manet and Degas were highly influenced by photography, throughout art history photography has been considered less valuable and less important than painting, sculpture, dance, and drama. When photography appeared in the last two centuries, it was hardly recognized as fine art. Around the 1850s a cartoonist named Nadar drew a humorous spoof of photography in which Mr. Photography asks for just a little place in the exhibition of fine arts and Mr. Painting kicks Mr. Photography out angrily.<sup>2</sup>

In 1859 the French government finally yielded to consistent pressure from the Society of French Photographers and its supporters, and a salon of photography became part of the yearly exhibitions held in Paris. The photographs were described as though they were works created by hand, compared with paintings and held to the same standards of appraisal. A landscape photograph, noted one critic, had the elegant look of a Theodore Rousseau. Another photographer's work was likened to the pictures of Holman Hunt.<sup>3</sup>

The status of photography as fine art continued to be challenged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When Alfred Stieglitz introduced photography as a form of fine art, a director of a major art museum was skeptical: "Mr.

Stieglitz, do you seriously think that photography is fine art?"<sup>4</sup> The rejection of Stieglitz's work by painters was even more blatant. Stieglitz said, "Artists who saw my early photographs began to tell me that they envied me; that my photographs were superior to their paintings, but that unfortunately photography was not an art...I could not understand why the artists should envy me for my work, yet, in the same breath, decry it because it was machine-made."<sup>5</sup> In order to free photography from the shadow of painting, Stieglitz encouraged photographers to use their work to emphasize what the medium of photography could do best, and not "prostitute" the medium by trying to do what other media could do easily.<sup>6</sup>

Besides Stieglitz, some other photographers also defended photography as a type of fine art. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Man Ray went even further, abandoning painting and devoting himself entirely to photography. He said, "I began as a painter. In photographing my canvases I discovered the value of reproduction in black and white. The day came when I destroyed the painting and kept the reproduction."<sup>7</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson is another example. At first he was trained to be a painter, but after taking pictures in Africa, he switched his medium to photography because "the adventure in me felt obligated to testify with a quicker instrument than a brush to the scars of the world."<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, Alfred Stieglitz, Man Ray, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and many others deserve credit for making photography a school of art.

Today many art history books have little or no mention of those great masters. If I ask art majors or art history majors to what school Picasso belongs, every one of them can answer "Cubism" immediately. But if the same question is asked about Henri Cartier-Bresson, few of them have ever heard of "Photography of Decisive Moment." Further, it is currently acceptable if an art school does not offer a photography emphasis, but painting is required. When photography courses are offered, they are electives, whereas painting courses are mandatory. Painting overwhelmingly dominates many art magazines such as *American Artists* and *Art in America*. Although there are several photographic magazines such as *Popular Photographer* and *Outdoor Photographer* in the market, they feature the technical aspects instead of the aesthetic. Taking all of the above into consideration, it is necessary to build a theory of the aesthetics of photography.

Few philosophers of art address the aesthetics of photography. Even if the topic is addressed, the way of studying photography by most photographers relies mainly upon showing. For example, in 1977 a group of photographers held an exhibition and published a book entitled *Reading Photographs: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography*. They proclaimed that "what we need, above everything else, is an informed and interested public that is aware of the scope and the nature of photography and consequently cares to go and see the best examples."<sup>9</sup> In fact, the lower status of photography is not



due to the lack of good examples, but to the lack of an aesthetic theory that describes the nature and scope of photography in terms of its relations with the artist's inner life, symbols, and reality.

Since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the advance of digital photography has added more complexity to this issue. Digital photography is perceived as hindering rather than helping the status of photography. While conventional photography is regarded as the result of a mechanical process, digital photography is considered the result of an electronic process. Many believe that with more advanced machines, the creativity in the work declines. While further discussion of digital photography is out of the scope of this article, the preceding misperception, which can be found in both conventional and digital photography, will be a focal point here.

Throughout history, many philosophers of art have aimed to develop universal theories that could be applied well to all arts. However, when those philosophers developed a "universal" theory, they relied on only one or two media, thus creating biases. For instance, Aristotle based his theory on tragedy and claimed it as the highest form of art. Susanne Langer, one of the most prominent philosophers of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, says in her book *Feeling and Form* that the symbolic function of arts is the same in every kind of artistic expression, though she realizes that every art is different.<sup>10</sup> Scholz argues that Langer's theory of art would have been very different if she had used music instead of poetry as her starting point.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in *Problems of Art* Langer says that her approach to interrelation among the arts has been to look at each art autonomously and ask what it creates, what its principles of creation are, and what its scope and possible materials are.<sup>12</sup>

A close cousin of universal aesthetical theory is "pictorialism," in which photographs are judged in the same way that other pictures are.<sup>13</sup> Unlike universal aesthetic theory that can be applied to visual art, performing art, and literature, pictorialism confines the criteria of judgment within pictures. Pictorialism views photography as a means and art as the end, and de-emphasizes the unique intrinsic value of photography. To rectify the situation, this paper will describe the uniqueness of photography as a medium.

### **The Audience's Standpoint on Art**

There are two ways to approach the aesthetics of photography: we can look at photography from the perspective of the audience or from the viewpoint of the artist.

Collingwood tends to evaluate art in terms of its effect on the viewer. He states that art is not simply amusement but a "magic" that can bring the audience an emotional current to keep their lives going.<sup>14</sup> I appreciate Collingwood's effort to distinguish amusement-focused art that only emphasizes mere sensuous pleasure from the genuine arts—art proper. However,

how can we measure an emotional current? How can we know how the audience's lives have been moved by the art? A picture that is an amusement for one person may be art proper to another.

Furthermore, Collingwood asserts that art is the primary and fundamental activity of the mind. Art arises of itself and does not depend on the previous development of any other activity. It is not a modified perception. He is disappointed at the nature of our education because it is an education in facing facts; it is designed to lead us away from the world of imagination in which the child lives. In his view, imagination is sharply opposed to thinking. To imagine is to isolate the object; to think is to place it in a world of objects with which it is continuous. He concludes that each work of art is an object of imagination.<sup>15</sup> The point Collingwood makes about imagination can be applied to both artists and viewers, but he emphasizes the audience. He says that an object is only beautiful to a person who looks at it imaginatively, and that the kind of beauty that he finds there depends on the intensity and character of his own imaginative activity.

I agree that art is an activity of the imagination. A perceiver needs to imagine the implications beyond the words, the sound, or the scene bound by the frame. However, it is questionable to regard thinking as the opposite of imagination. This theory can hardly be applied to journalistic and high tech photography, such as that capturing images of the subatomic world. His assertion is inevitably contradictory: his purpose in writing books on aesthetics is likely to discover proper ways for the reader to appreciate art; therefore his writing is philosophical and the result of thinking! Also, I do not agree that Western education reduces imagination. From my own standpoint as an artist, imagination and thinking are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Imagination must be based on facts. No matter how "otherworldly" artistic creation is, it must rely on the facts of our real world order. As I mentioned, the viewer's standpoint is one-sided. I suggest that combining the audience's and the artist's standpoints will improve the study of the aesthetics of photography.

### **Expression of the Idea of Emotion**

Langer tends to view art from the artist's standpoint. She declares that art is an expression of the idea or the knowledge of emotion through symbols.<sup>16</sup> However, my experience as a photographer leads me to believe that expression through the camera is based on the knowledge of both my emotion and the emotion of others. For instance, in my photograph "Japanese girl," a girl was blowing bubbles while I took her picture. The image of the girl and the bubbles conveys both emotion and meaning. Although her emotion dominates, my perception of her emotion drove me to add a Hoya Fog B filter on the lenses to amplify her emotion, and thus, the photo is an expression of the idea

of both her and my emotions.

Langer holds that neither the external world nor the inner life of humans is itself intelligible and therefore comfortable: one comes to terms with the world and oneself by imposing symbolic forms, or patterns, which are themselves orderly and therefore intelligible. She asserts that every work of art, in whatever medium, is a "semblance" or an "appearance" through symbols.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned in the discussion regarding thinking and imagination, I hold the position that they are not mutually exclusive. Langer seems to concur that emotive expression and logical conception can coexist. She regards artistic expression as a form of "logical expression." To be specific, "emotion is logically expressed when symbols are devised through which the emotion can be conceived, and the emotion is conceived when it is contemplated objectively so that its form becomes apparent."<sup>18</sup>

Sparspott argues that Langer's theory "just leaves us right where we started in our quest for the proper way of describing a work of art."<sup>19</sup> Although the concept of "symbol" seems to be a tautology, it is still a usable term for understanding the aesthetics of photography. Because the photographic image looks real, many viewers tend to forget that it is a semblance and overlook the symbolic nature of photography. Many times I have heard tourists complain, "The pictures of the place are very beautiful, but when I went there, I was very disappointed."

Sontag points out that photography is a "semblance of knowledge" or a "semblance of wisdom." The camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. Thus, photography is "knowledge at bargain price."<sup>20</sup> In regarding photography as art, we must not engage the "tourist attitude" of viewing photos; rather, we must regard photos as a semblance or a symbol. To be specific, a photographer cannot take the subject as it is, and the viewer should not assume that what s/he sees is what it seems. In art there is something more than the appearance—the power of symbol. As Turner said, "Photography can use fact as a metaphor to create new fact."<sup>21</sup> Another well-known photographer, Jonathan Bayer, said, "Good photographic images intrigue, present a mystery, or demand to be read. They are constructs of frustrations and ambiguities which force the viewer to actively interact with the photograph."<sup>22</sup> Prominent art critic Berger holds a similar view that photography is a "quotation from appearance rather than a translation," because extraction from context produces a discontinuity, which is reflected in the ambiguity of a photograph's meaning.<sup>23</sup>

### **Imitation of Reality**

Humans tend to organize the disorderly world in an intelligible way, as Langer says, but sometimes we reverse the process in an attempt to disintegrate the world order into disorder. Sigmund Freud made an insightful point

that humans have both life and death instincts—the tendency to create and to destroy. Does the world have an order? What is the relation between art and reality? These questions are important for us in defining what photography should be.

In Bell's well-known book *Art*, he refers to painting as creation and to photography as imitation.<sup>24</sup> However, imitation is a strength of photography rather than a weakness. When painters regard painting as a creation, they treat the artistic realm as a self-sufficient world without any reference to reality. Painters dare to ignore the existing world order and form their own.

There is a controversy as to whether a universal world order exists, as Kant, Hegel and Leibniz found, or there is no order and all things "just happen," as Hume and the existentialists suggested. Nevertheless, in everyday life we must assume that there is an order in reality or we cannot function in this world at all. Although modern artists are so revolutionary as to break many traditional rules of composition and color harmony and do strange things such as gluing broken glass on a canvas, they cannot make paint float in the air, use paper as a stretched bar, or thin oil paint with water.

In fact, nature, or the spatial reality, is full of order, though it has terror and ugliness. Artistic creation should be based on the real world rather than ignoring it. Photography is an imitation of reality. No matter how non-representational a photographic image is, the photographer must take a subject from reality. For example, once Grobe made a fabulous abstract image of a matrix of circles, which is actually a magnification of integrated circuits.<sup>25</sup> The image of a painting can be constructed through a pure mental process, but when a picture has been taken, it means that the subject represented by the image really existed. Therefore, the beauty of photography is derived from the existing world. A photographer can distort the scene with various filters, lenses, darkroom techniques, and/or digital retouching, but the skills are only enhancing the natural order—making the color more saturated, polarizing the contrast, and so forth.

Art, especially photography, has the power to show the terror, ugliness, disorder and absurdity of the world. Sontag says that photography can reveal an "anti-hero."<sup>26</sup> In her view, American photography aspires to demystify; some photographers use the medium to level the gaps between the beautiful and the ugly. A picture of an athlete could be taken at the moment that he falls. A photo of a beautiful woman could be taken while her makeup is messed up by rain. The camera has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal.

However, even if you want to expose the terror and ugliness of reality, there will still be an order to that terror and ugliness. Collingwood goes even further to say, "It is impossible to imagine anything that is not beautiful...ugliness is a low degree of beauty."<sup>27</sup> For example, war is terrible, but Wessing pre-

sented the horror in an order. One of his famous pictures is a scene of soldiers and nuns walking in different directions, which constructs a beautiful composition and implies a political or even a philosophical theme. In another picture showing a corpse and his weeping mother, Wessing wisely uses a high angle to form two diagonal lines amplifying the helplessness of the people. "Death of a Loyalist Soldier" by Capa is another good example of how the terror of death can be presented in a beautiful and orderly manner. The off-center composition and the decisive moment of the soldier's falling reveals that it is a picture by control rather than by luck.

When one judges a photographic image, reality should be as a reference. It doesn't mean that the viewer should look at how sharp the picture is or how well the skin tone on the photo matches the real person. Instead, one should ask, "If the image on the photograph occurred in reality, will the viewer think the image is beautiful and prefer it to the original one?" For instance, I have added a polarizer and a sepia filter on the lens to shoot a sunset scene; the contrast is sharper and the red is more saturated. I love a sunset like that, though this enhanced scene would never happen in the physical world.

One may question, "Do you want the terror of war and the pain of death shown in Koen Wessing and Robert Capa to occur in this world again?" In photography showing tragic subjects, I don't wish the incident to occur again, but the judgment should still refer to reality. Do we want to reduce war and death to "just happen," or do we want to know why it happens and what we can do to prevent them from occurring? The order, composition, contrast, and color of the picture give meaning to the incident and invite us to think about our world deeply. Unlike the mere imagination that Collingwood spoke of, it is imagination with philosophical contemplation.

### **Photos by Non-Artists**

Besides the reality that can be perceived by our eyes, there are other levels of "reality," which are revealed by high technology such as thermography and microscopic photography. However, can these photos made by non-artists for practical purposes qualify as art? News photos taken by reporters, microscopic photos taken by doctors, thermography made by physicists, mapping satellite pictures for geographical study, and computer enhanced pictures of planets taken by the probe "Voyager" and the Hubble telescope all fall into this category. Although these pictures are extraordinarily beautiful, certainly they are made by scientists for non-artistic purposes.

First, we look for the answer from the artist's standpoint. According to Langer, art is the creation of expressive forms to present ideas of feeling, or what is called inner life. A work of art will carry "vital import," which is the element of felt life objectified in the work.<sup>28</sup> The high tech photographic methods such as thermography and micrography are applied by a few special ef-

fects photographers. Although they may do it for illustration, they still have a "vital import," for their fabulous images demonstrate the confidence of human wisdom, as well as the courage of exploring and demystifying the deeper structure of reality. Every kind of art should have "vital import," but certainly high tech photography imports the felt life of solid facts, a reference to reality that is beyond our eyes.

When we see those photos created by non-artists through the viewer's perspective, the answer is still the same. Barthes discussed photography in his book *Camera Lucida*, which overwhelmingly centers on journalistic or realist photography. He says that the attraction certain photographs have for him is adventure. As a spectator he is interested in photography for sentimental reasons. He states that some journalistic pictures, such as the one by Koen Wessing showing soldiers and nuns marching in Nicaragua, urges him to think about ethics and politics. Barthes uses the Latin term "Studium" to describe this kind of enthusiastic commitment.<sup>29</sup>

As Collingwood says, art proper is a magic that stimulates our morale to keep our lives going. Some journalistic photos can provoke us to think about our existence and our world. Moreover, scientific photos made with high technology undoubtedly increase our morale tremendously. Mythology is an expression of our dreams and desires, and science fiction is considered a modern mythology. If science fiction, though we know that it is not real, can inspire us to human wisdom and courage, then scientific photos, which bring us closer to reality and expand our imagination in the form of Langer's "logical expression," should lead to a positive psychological impact. With high tech photographic equipment, we are able to see where no one has seen before on both micro and macro scales. We can magnify a cell 50,000 times, detect the variation of heat of any surface, scan the inner structure of a human brain, see the earth in a high latitude, and even reach out to the galaxy. It is apparent that those are surrealist pictures because we cannot see them with our naked eyes only. They are actually realist pictures and they give us "emotional current" more than science fiction.

### **Appreciation of Process**

By looking closely at the nature of photography, we might question whether art appreciation is only limited to what the work is, or extended to how it is made. The former concern is more from the viewer's side while the latter is more on the artist's side. Interestingly enough, photography is more likely to stimulate the viewer to ask about the artist's process than painting is.

When viewers look at my painting, they rarely ask me what brushes and paints I used. However, when people look at my photographs, they tend to ask, "What lenses did you use? What film is that? Did you retouch it on the computer?" Probably they think that the credit of a good painting should go to the

painter, while the photographic and computing equipment did the work in photography. Some of them even go further to think that if they have the same equipment, they can make the same pictorial effect. Actually, better equipment does not necessarily produce a better picture, although it increases the chances of creating a good photograph. Prominent photographer Middleton made a valid point:

I'll get better photos with a more expensive camera. Wouldn't this be nice if it was true? Then all the best photographers would be the ones with the most money. Wouldn't that be simple? Alas, the world of photography doesn't work this way. Give John Shaw a \$200 camera outfit, and his photos would still be phenomenal. Remember, it's not the equipment, it's the operator. No one ever asked Van Gogh what kind of brush he was using and, if you're always asking pros what kind of cameras they're using, you're missing the point.<sup>30</sup>

Because some people credit the photographic equipment, they regard those who do their own processing and printing as "advanced photographers." When I was a painter, no one asked me whether I framed my works. However, after people noticed that I was a photographer, almost every of them asked me whether I did my own processing and printing. Indeed, to my experience, the darkroom work could be as routine and non-creative as using a one-touch camera. Nonetheless, when one assesses the aesthetic value of a photo, is it wrong to ask such questions as "What lenses did you use?" "What film is that?" "Do you use Adobe PhotoShop?" or "Do you do your own processing and printing?" One could ask those questions if one doesn't give the credit to the equipment and the photo lab. The technical information can enrich our aesthetic experience. This suggestion contradicts the aesthetic theory that insists on feeling the art instead of thinking about it. However, the mind of the audience has both functions: feeling and thinking. It is absurd to demand the viewer to shut off the intellectual faculty and just feel the art. Even if it could be done, the viewer might reorganize the feeling by thinking after he/she had felt the art! If the viewer wants to share feelings about the art with his/her friends, he/she will present it in a systematic or at least comprehensible way. The process of conveying the feeling is no doubt an intellectual activity!

Likewise, one must comprehend technical information in a scientific mode of thinking, but the thought may turn into a feeling, and eventually, an aesthetic experience. The technical information of photography is the process of production, which qualifies as an art itself. The quotations "love is an art" and "management is an art" do not mean that love or management creates any physical appearance. Instead, these phrases suggest that the process creates

the appearance. Consider cooking as a metaphor. In an authentic Chinese restaurant, especially those that provide Beijing dishes, the chef cooks in front of customers. The ends (the food) and the means (the cooking techniques) are equally appreciable to the Chinese.

Besides the effect on the picture, the skill of operating the equipment is also beautiful. Most people do not see how I make a picture. When I describe the process, you only can imagine it. The fascination of the skills could be viewed as an aesthetic experience.

### **Previsualization**

The above observation is from the viewer's standpoint. Now we switch to the artist's viewpoint to see the role of technical knowledge in photography. Edman defines art as "the realm of all controlled treatment of material, practical or other".<sup>31</sup> Good art reveals the artist's control. Compared with other media such as painting, writing and composing music, photography may involve more difficulty in gaining precise control. If a painter works on a painting, he/she will postvisualize the image—he/she sees what he/she is doing immediately. If the color is not good, he/she can paint over it. A composer and a writer can also enjoy the same kind of advantage.

For a photographer, the story is entirely different. Often someone asks me, "The image looks great on the viewfinder; why is the print so terrible?" I always answer, "Don't trust the viewfinder. You must previsualize the image by technical know-how." For instance, a sunset or a sunrise scene carries high color contrast. The range of brightness will not fit into the film's latitude. In this case, I should add a neutral density filter for compensation. The eyes, hair and skin of a white model are very reflective. In order to create a nice looking skin tone on the picture and avoid the red eye effect, I should use off-camera flashing, or umbrella lighting. The above examples are simple ones for the convenience of illustration. I often encounter more complicated situations and have to consider many factors to predict what the picture will look like. Darkroom work, by the same principle, is also a work of previsualization backed by technical knowledge.

There are two exceptions. A Hasselblad camera can attach to a Polaroid magazine. With this configuration, the photographer can take an instant picture to preview the possible outcome of the image before he has used the print or slide film. Also, photographers who use a digital camera can preview the just-taken picture on a LCD display.

Aesthetics is not simply a judgment of beauty. As I mentioned before, the more control the artist has, the more respectable his work. Technical information may seem irrelevant to aesthetics, but in fact it is important for us to judge whether the photograph is a work of control or a work of chance. It is a serious challenge for the artist when he/she cannot see what he/she is doing.



## Conclusion

Affirming the status of photography in fine arts should be accomplished by exploring its aesthetics rather than by only showing good photos. Neither constructing a universal theory of art nor applying pictorialism to claim that photography is like painting can help. Collingwood's theory of art as emotion and imagination is the view of only the audience; thus it fails to analyze the medium's uniqueness.

Combining the viewer's and the artist's standpoints is a more appropriate approach for the study of the aesthetics of photography. Unlike the claim by Collingwood that imagination and thinking are mutually exclusive, Langer views art as a logical expression of the idea of emotion. This is certainly true. A photographer must start with knowledge or ideas. Besides the knowledge of emotions, s/he should also have the knowledge of world order and technical information. The former helps both the photographer and the viewer to use reality as a reference, while the latter empowers the photographer to previsualize the image and lead the audience to an appreciation of the process.

## Notes

1. Paul Weiss, *Nine Basic Arts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 216, 218. See also Patrick Maynard, "Photography," *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut & Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2001), 477-490. Maynard described how photography as a form of fine art is neglected by saying, "a bibliography of philosophical writing on photography could be printed on a single page, with little of that about art photography. Not only in philosophy, but in aesthetics generally, cinema is a far more developed topic: indeed, some of the better known 'aesthetic' essay on photography are prefaces to film theories" (477).
2. Naom Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville, 1984).
3. Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1986).
4. Public Broadcasting Services, *American Photography: A Century of Image* (Alexandria, VA: Public Broadcasting Services, 2000).
5. Robert Leggat, A history of Photography. (2001) [On-line] Available: <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/>
6. Kathleen Kadon Desmond, *Photography as a Function of Visual Aesthetic Judgement*, 1976, 54.
7. National Museum of Art/Aperture, *Man Ray's Man Ray* (West Palm Beach, FL, 1994), 7.
8. Carel Squies, "HCB—The Decisive Moment," *American Photography*, September/October 1997, 48.
9. Photographers' Gallery, *Reading Photography: Understanding the Aesthetics of Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 7.
10. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scriber, 1957).
11. Bernhard Scholz, "Discourse and Intuition in Susanne Langer's *Aesthetics of*

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12. Susanne Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).
  13. Kathleen Kadon Desmond, "Photography as a Function of Visual Aesthetic Judgement, 1976," & Albert Sadler, "Objective vs Subjective." *PSA Journal*, 61, (1995): 10-11.
  14. R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950).
  15. R.G. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).
  16. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scriber, 1957).
  17. Ibid.
  18. A. Berndtson, "Semblance, Symbol, and Expression in the Aesthetics of Susanne Langer," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14 (1956): 498.
  19. F.E. Sparshott, *The Structure of Aesthetics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 425.
  20. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 23-24.
  21. Photographer's Gallery, 77.
  22. Photographer's Gallery, 9.
  23. John Berger and Mohr Berger, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 128.
  24. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick Strokes, 1921).
  25. Kathryn Livingston, *Special Effects Photography: The Art and Techniques of Eight Modern Masters* (New York: American Photographic Book, 1985).
  26. Sontag, 29.
  27. Collingwood, *Essays*, 61-62.
  28. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 60.
  29. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
  30. David Middleton, "Subdue These Creativity Killers," *Outdoor Photography* 13, no. 3 (1997): 47.
  31. Langer, *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures*.

## Freud-Vitruvius Dialogue

Eugene Mahon

On the evening of his death in 1939, Sigmund Freud was visited by the spirit of Marcus Pollio (Vitruvius). When a man is drowning they say his life in a series of images swims into consciousness, a final act of memorial defiance supposedly, a last human assault on the mandated silence of eternity. There is a lesser known version of this mythology which suggests that on the evening of his death a man can converse with any protagonist from the whole history of ideas. "I had not known death had undone so many," Dante says in the *Commedia*, re-echoed by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. But according to this mythological legend, the dead are not undone at all but summonable to the deathbed for final conversations that can last a considerable amount of time given that the measurement under these circumstances is tectonic rather than conventional. The record of these posthumous conversations have been documented and I have stumbled on them in the attic of Columbia University where some disgruntled anti-Freudian librarian in a fit of psycho-prejudicial pique had no doubt secreted them. There is a Freud-Fliess correspondence "on creativity," a Freud-Shakespeare conversation about "the nature of an artifact called mind" that my midnight fumbling, I dare not call it diligence, in this attic has rescued from the repressive mania of this aforementioned librarian. Perhaps it was the adolescent son of the librarian who is responsible. I shouldn't slander the father I suppose until I am more sure of the facts. But I am convinced that the attics of Ivy League universities, a neglected intellectual treasure trove to date to my knowledge, their structure and content, could have architectural interest for a zealous young dissertation seeker were he or she only made aware of this hidden research potential.

This is the document I found in my midnight fumbling(holding it up). This is a pretty strange document as I'm sure you've already surmised but strange as it is I believe it's not without interest for our seminar. For instance the two men discuss architecture and child development, how Euclidean space is not a given but has to be constructed by each child, piece by developmental

piece, so to speak; they discuss the appearance of architecture in dreams, its disguises, its functions; they discuss gender, anatomy, ambiguity and their reflection in architecture; they discuss architecture as family romance, and they get a bit long-winded at times let me warn you but I don't want to spoil it for you: I'd prefer to let the document speak for itself and let its strange mischief work on you and leave the deconstruction of it for later. So pretend you're eaves-dropping on this uncanny dialogue and I'll try to bring it to life with as much theatricality as I can muster!

On that evening in London in 1939, it was Freud who spoke first.

Freud: Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, welcome.

Vitruvius: How come you recognized me?

Freud: The great architect of Augustus a mere two thousand years ago! Not recognize you! Rome was always an obsession of mine. Couldn't wait to get there, a Hannibal complex some have called it. An architectural fetish I'd call it. I didn't feel whole anatomically until I'd made this geographical acquisition.

Vitruvius: We don't acquire geography, my dear Sigmund. (They were immediately intimates, you can see, as if tectonic time had no time, so to speak, for conventional etiquette). We don't acquire geography my dear Sigmund. We merely decorate it, enhance it.

Freud: An architect is an exterior decorator you mean?

Vitruvius: I'm not sure that's what I meant at all. Have you made a habit of the offensive interpretation? Wasn't it you who introduced the concept of rap-port?:

Freud: My apologies, Vitruvius. Time has undone my Viennese charm to the extent I ever acquired it. Like Brahms, lately I feel like apologizing to anyone I haven't insulted sufficiently. Please return to your point. I promise to be civil.

Vitruvius: I was saying we don't acquire geography. That's the conquista-dors' fantasy. The architect recognizes that man is the measure of all things perhaps, but not the master.

Freud: You mean to say the Roman Empire did not try to acquire most of the geography of the then known world?

Vitruvius: Empire is one thing. Aesthetics another. I shouldn't have to instruct you on that. When psychoanalysis tries to become an empire, it's merely a preamble to its decline and fall.

Freud: It happened already. In New York in the fifties, Vitruvius.

Vitruvius: But we're not here to discuss local politics, provincial gossip. (*na-ively*) Why are we here, Sigmund?

Freud: Because a lonely dying man about to enter the indefinable architecture of eternity summoned, in his last gasp, the spirit of history's greatest architect to console him, to remind him stone by stone, of the ontology and mainte-

nance of the structural world he must wean himself from.

Vitruvius: When you say structural world, I think of the structures, the imagined structures of the human mind you yourself invented when your topographic theory of consciousness and unconsciousness proved too small a container for the elaborate ideas you were hatching in the 20's.

Freud: Superego, Ego, Id a house without walls, an idea that some of my slavish followers have reified so much they picture my theories, my mythologies as solid blueprints, not only written in stone, but actual stone, a concreteness of thinking that now could impede the flow of ideas rather than advance them. If only history could protect us from our heirs, from our misinterpreters!

Vitruvius: Come on, Sigmund. History always advances from interpretation to misinterpretation, from ignorance to insight and back again: when courage gets blinded in the uncompromising glare of too much truth, what can you expect? My own ten books of architecture were tossed aside until they washed up again in Florence in the so-called Renaissance that sent the Dark Ages packing, at least for a while, a tectonic while hopefully.

Freud: The Dark Ages. The historical correlative of what I called, more personally, "repression".

Vitruvius: I was a renaissance man Sigmund, before the term got invented by those upstart quattrocento Florentines. I believed an architect should be a mathematician, a musician, a philosopher, a poet. Who else but a well rounded aesthetic man should be allowed to build a house or temple or amphitheatre? I believed that architecture was an extension of the body and since there was no mind-body dichotomous foolishness in those days, an extension of the mind as well, but not just any old body or mind, mind you, but a mind schooled in, steeped in philosophy, music, mathematics, art, a body martial, sexual, gender expressive. Why, I thought the Ionic was a young woman in beauty and nature, the Doric, the body of Adonis.

Freud: You were a romantic, Vitruvius.

Vitruvius: A classical mind that is not romantic, Sigmund, is a Stradivarius without strings.

Freud: We thrive on anachronisms here in our tectonic splendor, don't we?

Vitruvius: Time is only a human convention, Sigmund. The sun, moon and stars have no use for it.

Freud: Do they have use for architecture?

Vitruvius: Not at all. That's the beauty of it, nature's total indifference to manmade structure is at the core of all aesthetics. There would be no *ars gratia artis* if nature gave a damn.

Freud: Your vision Vitruvius, is darker than even my own.

Vitruvius: All art is chiaroscuro. Doomed eyes playing with darkness and light.

Freud: How does that apply to solids? Architecture does deal with solids in

space, does it not?

Vitruvius: *Touché*. I revise my definition. All art is three dimensional chiaroscuro. Doomed eyes playing with darkness and light in a doomed spatial context.

Freud: That's reassuring.

Vitruvius: I'm not a shaman. I'm a builder, Sigmund.

Freud: (*equally indignant*) I know what you mean. Harold Bloom stole all my ideas, called me a shaman to boot and covered his plagiaristic tracks with a slogan, "the anxiety of influence." Some influence, some insight when the inventor refuses to recognize his debt. As if Oedipus invented Freud rather than vice versa.

Vitruvius: I see a sensitive chord has been struck, Sigmund. I thought sensitivity was an attribute of the artist, not the scientist.

Freud: A scientist who is not an artist is like a Stradivarius without strings.

Vitruvius: *Se non é vero é ben trovato*.

Freud: All truth has to be found out, Vitruvius. It's not just lying there, some entitlement of the passive.

Vitruvius: The vault had to be invented by the Romans, you mean. Greek beauty, Greek truth needed Roman muscle to augment it.

Freud: A vulgar way of putting it, Vitruvius, and not completely accurate. Surely the vault was conceived by the eye of the mind before muscles got in on the act.

Vitruvius: Piaget might give you a developmental argument about that, my dear Sigmund.

Freud: Oh?

Vitruvius: Yes. He believed the spatial world of Euclidean geometric design with its verticals and horizontals, you know, the world of space we all occupy, the very stabilities our perceptual and conceptual feet stand on and take so much for granted, the world of space time if you want to put a modern Einsteinian relativistic spin on it.

Freud: Yes?

Vitruvius: Well that world of verticals and horizontals and familiar angles and perspective had to be constructed by the child. It is an achievement of child developmental experience. There is no *tabula rasa*, no empty lap that the perceptual world falls into, it has to be constructed by sensorimotor actions! In a sense, each child is the architect of his own psychological reality. That's the genetic epistemology of Jean Piaget in a nutshell, a modest architectural container rarely used by modern thinkers, wouldn't you agree?

Freud: Yes, yes. Wordiness often does reveal the confusion of underlying ideas rather than their clarity. But your point about Piaget and each child the Vitruvius of his own architectural developmental achievements—fascinating, absolutely fascinating—and not out of keeping at all with my ideas about the

body ego. The mind steps out of the body, not vice versa.

Vitruvius: Instinct is the body's hunger reflected in the mind, represented in the mind.

Freud: You quote me, misquote me poetically.

Vitruvius: Well, I'm merely returning the compliment. I like the way you called each child the Vitruvius of his own architectural developmental achievements a moment ago. But I have a developmental question for you, Sigmund, that will shake the architecture of that extraordinary mind of yours.

Freud: An intellectual fast ball, let's have it, Vitruvius, your hardest pitch!

Vitruvius: I thought you hated America and all things American.

Freud: I do and I did. Everything, that is, except baseball. The metaphoric would be too greatly impoverished without that extraordinary sport. So, come on, Vitruvius, play ball.

Vitruvius: OK, Sigmund, here's my question. If Euclidian space is not a given, if the verticals and horizontals have to be "invented," "constructed" by each child, as development proceeds, how would you describe the pre-Euclidian world, in which verticals and horizontals do not exist? Is it a crooked world we all started out in?

Freud: In a way, yes. I was visiting Manhattan once, with my two year old grandchild. The skyscrapers must have seemed even more extraordinary to the eyes of a child. But I got a glimpse of her architectural world when she, peering up at the tall structures, asked me if I would take one of them down for her. A crooked world? Maybe. Certainly, an animistic world. A surreal world.

Vitruvius: A pre real world?

Freud: Yes. If there's Euclidian space to be constructed, there is Freudian space also, one impinging on the other, as long as conflict has a proscenium to frame its spatial dramas with.

Vitruvius: Could we say Art, Sigmund, is forever poised at the interface between the surreal and the real?

Freud: We could. Reality that does not emerge from a surreal background would be a bore. Euclid needs Freud, you see, or reality would be a mere paint by number job, rather than the complex psychological masterpiece it uniquely is.

Vitruvius: So, each child is not simply a Vitruvius of his own development, but a Euclid and Freud also.

Freud: Yes, the child is building on many fronts and to extend this point, Erikson has claimed that in children's play you can tell the male architects from the females. Gender has already a signature in the playroom, in the phallic towers of boys, in the womb-like enclosures of girls.

Vitruvius: Political incorrectness is a developmental achievement, you mean?

Freud (impatiently): We have passed through nature to eternity, Vitruvius, as Shakespeare put it. Here on the threshold of eternity, words don't have to pass

through customs inspection. History will decide which ideas in the history of ideas have durable half-lives and which don't. If straight talk becomes a casualty of intimate dialogue, even hell won't be worth waiting for.

Vitruvius: Well, I wasn't simply conforming, my dear Sigmund. It just seems simpleminded to me to think that boys are all towers and girls enclosures. Piaget has shown that the concept of space is not a given. The contours of it, the angles of it, yes the dimensional sense of it as enclosure has to be mulled over and internalized by the developing human mind regardless of gender. We are all towers and enclosures. And I don't have to instruct you about bisexuality, do I?

Freud: *Touché*. But anatomy is an issue. The internalizations of their body contours and enclosures could be different, are bound to be different for boys and girls.

Vitruvius: *Vive la différence*. Just don't politicize it.

Freud: I didn't. I described it. I didn't politicize it.

Vitruvius: Did too.

Freud: Did not.

Vitruvius: Did too.

Freud: Did not.

Vitruvius: We sound like bickering Oxford dons in Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*.

Freud: We're talking about the invention of the mind, the architecture of the soul. An even vaster topic than Stoppard's love.

Vitruvius: The invention of the mind. The architecture of the soul. "What a piece of work is a man. How noble in reason. How infinite in faculty. In form and moving how express and admirable. In action how like an angel. In apprehension how like a god. The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

Freud: And yet, this paragon at age 6 is a prejudiced paragon, Vitruvius: at age 6, boys and girls hate each other. The normal chauvinism of latency, one observer has called it. How do you explain that?

Vitruvius: I admit I can't.

Freud: Well I can. Children at age 6 become chauvinistic, form exclusive clubs, exclude each other based on gender because they need a respite from all the developmental *Sturm und Drang* of the Oedipus complex that has preoccupied them from ages 3-6. Phallic towers and feminine enclosures do not mix well in the prejudiced architectural psychology of the 8yr old, it would seem!

Vitruvius: But is it politically correct Sigmund, this normal chauvinism of latency?

Freud (impatiently): It's developmentally correct. It's defensively correct. It's architecturally correct if we are talking about the architecture of the developing soul of mankind.



Vitruvius: An architect must always acknowledge the raw material and context of his cornerstone, you mean: the local granite, the climate, the soil, the air, the whole atmosphere that helps the stones to breathe. If childhood with all its infantile sexuality as you call it Sigmund and its infantile aggressions, its prejudices and its magical theories is at the core of the psychic architecture of adulthood, its very cornerstone, so to speak, neglect of this developmental fact is perilous.

Freud: Yes, prejudice can influence architecture to put it mildly.

Vitruvius: Phallic masculine caricatures, you mean, or their vulvar counterparts.

Freud: Yes, the cigar room for men only. The male clubs that exclude women. And opera houses and theatres Vitruvius. Women's bathrooms have long lines always. Men urinate much more expeditiously from their vertical vantage point. Seated women need more time, more room. Why do architects ignore these physiological facts? Did no architect ever consider making women's bathrooms more spacious?

Vitruvius: Touche Sigmund. Prejudice and architectural blind-spots! There's a topic! But the cigar room would have to be designed like a penis or a cigar before we could say it was formally prejudicial from an architectural point of view.

Freud: What about the Baptistery in Florence, compared to the campanile di Giotto? The Baptistery is round, breast-like in its embrace of the infant about to be baptized. The belfry is phallic, tall as it measures Time and bellows out its call to worship. Is baptism and infancy unconsciously designing the Florentine baptisteries along maternal lines whereas Time and belfries and worship are assigned to phallic, male, Florentine authority?

Vitruvius: You're implying that unconscious chisels may affect the stones of our buildings more than we've realized.

Freud: Yes. The cornerstone of any building, Vitruvius, architectural or developmental is flesh.

Vitruvius: My, are we becoming philosophical?

Freud: An architect who's not philosophical is like a Stradivarius without strings—perfect structure for silence to play on, but not a form where music can reside.

Vitruvius: For me, Sigmund, the cornerstone was always tripartite: "Haec autem ita fieri debent, ut habeatur ratio firmitatis, utilitatis, venustatis." "With buildings these things should be so carried out that account is taken of strength, utility, grace."

Freud: My tripartite structures struggled for strength, utility and grace also, Vitruvius, but I reminded man that the cornerstone of his sublime soul was ridiculous sex and fear and hatred, and mankind never did, never will forgive me.

Vitruvius: We are in the unassailable home of eternity, my dear Sigmund (or very close to the lifting of the latch of it in your case) where the concept of forgiveness has no longer any hold on us.

Freud: "Home is the place where when you get there, they have to take you in," Frost said. Was he talking about eternity perhaps?

Vitruvius: "I should have thought of it as a place you somehow do not have to deserve."

Freud: Frost was trying to build a house beyond the confines of human guilt and despair. No architect can build that house. Not even you Vitruvius, with all due respect.

Vitruvius (indignantly): I never tried, Sigmund. It was religion that co-opted basilicas into their new found game of mystical commerce. For us architects a stone was a stone. The casting of the first stone, the architecture of sin and guilt and hypocrisy came later. Speaking of hypocrisy: you know it's a Greek word for stage actors (*hypokriton*). An architect builds theatres. Hypocrisy is the creation of another discipline.

Freud: Well said, Marcus Pollio: I always thought it was the creation of the Jungians, but we won't get into that!

Vitruvius: They (the Jungians) want to build stairways to heaven, Sigmund. We are content to use the raw materials of the earth, their strength, utility and grace. The body reflected in the mind. The mind reflected in the architecture the body helps it to build.

Freud (beaming): You are a Freudian, Marcus Pollio.

Vitruvius: Yes, in the sense that Sophocles and Oedipus and Shakespeare were Freudians, and Freud was Greek as well as German.

Freud: Citizens of the world all of us, you mean, the history of ideas an interlocking complementary series in the consciousness of us all.

Vitruvius: Careful, you'll end up sounding like a Jungian.

Freud: Humor will always protect us from his kind of arrogance.

Vitruvius: And your kind of arrogance?

Freud: I was never arrogant, Vitruvius. I fought hard to identify sex and the unconscious as cornerstones of the architecture of man. I fought hard against the resistance of my age which thought the cornerstone was social hypocrisy. If this is arrogance, I was arrogant and proud of it. The other kind of unearned narcissistic arrogance—to the extent I had it, was guilty of it, in my defense all I can say is I was as human as my intellectual next door neighbor. What more can history ask from a man?

Vitruvius: History is like nature: totally indifferent to the whims and sufferings of man.

Freud: We should get back to our topic or philosophy will undo us.

Vitruvius: We have a topic? You summoned me here with a topic in mind?

Freud: Well of course! I summoned Shakespeare to talk about the drama of the

human mind. I summoned you to talk about the architectural structure of the mind.

Vitruvius: Architects don't always think in terms of building the structures of the mind. We're pompous, but not that pompous.

Freud: But if we're going to have a dialogue there has to be common ground. We're both interested in the strength, utility and grace of structures. I know nothing about pillars and vaults and you know nothing about the unconscious. It's perfect. We will have to learn each other's languages like two savages trying to learn to build a fire.

Vitruvius: They say a well constructed fire will burn all day and next morning in the cinders you can find some unquenched embers to light the wick of a new day's fire with, and so on ad infinitum. The architecture of fire: flammable architecture, shall we call it? In fire some have even seen the salamander, but that's another story.

Freud: You are a poet, Vitruvius, not an architect.

Vitruvius: William Carlos Williams said a poem was like a little machine, carefully constructed with this word and that, word on word like stone on stone or metal on metal; if constructed well, the poem caught fire in the reader's imagination and the engine of aesthetic communication rattled on.

Freud: Not only a poet, but an engineer too.

Vitruvius (with surprised indignation): Well some of my architectural work had to do with war. I was architect to the Roman Empire you know. It wasn't run by the Christian brothers. At least not yet.

Freud: A dream could be compared to a poem, the strange, symbolic architecture of it. Could we, perhaps, conceptualize a dream as a well constructed engine composed of manifest surreal imagery that obfuscates the underlying unconscious sexual desire so well a man can sleep from dusk to dawn without realizing, all night long, in the artifice of dream disguise, he's been fucking his mother.

Vitruvius: That's some engine, Sigmund. Augustus would have been impressed with that!

Freud: Do you think it's foolish of me to picture a dream as architecture as if a blueprint of it could allow someone with your talents to actually build it?

Vitruvius: Fantastic. Not foolish. Chapter 7 of your *Interpretation of Dreams* is a blueprint. But so original no one could understand the blueprint but yourself. But if DNA can be pictured as a double helix, why couldn't dream be pictured as an imaginary structure built of strange raw material to be sure, but raw material nonetheless.

Freud: Yes. The raw materials are unconscious processes. Primary processes as I called them to distinguish them from the secondary processes of more mature reasoning. Out of magical wish and primary processes of unconscious symbolism and displacements and condensations a manifest visual architec-

tural structure is made, a house that houses nothing but illusion and yet the illusion is the cornerstone of the soul.

Vitruvius (humorously, teasingly): They may call you Emperor Freud and say you are wearing no clothes.

Freud: "They" have never bothered me. They wear the skins of other animals and forget the animal flesh that clothes their own bones.

Vitruvius: The bone house of flesh as Beowulf puts it.

Freud: Now there's a poet who knew about the architecture of the human condition: the bone house of flesh. Man, bare forked animal, the measure of all things.

Vitruvius: They say Leonardo took his golden section measurements of the human body from my architectural measurements of buildings which I intuited from the structure of the human body. How's that for history repeating itself? The bone house of flesh and its measurements, the golden sections of the body informing artistic and architectural measurements, a vicious cycle of flesh and art, aesthetics the great beneficiary.

Freud: Some psychoanalysts have argued that the first golden sections are imprinted in the infant as it stares so intently into the mother's eyes and face, the face of the mother like a primal work of art, a canvas of anatomical features teeming with golden sections.

Vitruvius: The distance between eyes, mouth, nose, forehead, chin all classical measurements built on the so-called Fibonacci series (5:8 as 8:13 as 13:21 and so on, the sequence reflecting a perfectly ironic symmetrical asymmetry ad infinitum) the mathematical chisel of nature indelible from the get go.

Freud: Anatomy is destiny. Art reflects its indebtedness to the bone house of flesh. Art which doesn't reflect such object relatedness is pornography, as Gertrude Stein said in her insightful essay on Picasso.

Vitruvius: You're on thin ice now, Sigmund, pontificating about what art is and isn't.

Freud: Frost said a poem is like a piece of ice on a hot stove. It rides on its own melting. Art dares. It knows it's doomed. Pornography is fake. It pretends the ice of human flesh doesn't melt, doesn't ride on its own melting between child birth and the grave. Pornography turns the doomed majesty of the bone house of flesh into an inert centerfold. Is there architecture that's pornographic or is that unthinkable?

Vitruvius: Pornographic architecture! Yes, yes, Sigmund, you're on to something! Houses that ignore human artifacts and human process: prisons, concentration camps, massed produced concrete boxes to house the homeless that leave no space, give no thought to human leg room, no runway for human wingspread and the flight patterns of the soul.

Freud: Most modern architecture you mean.

Vitruvius: Empires decline and fall, Sigmund. Today's modernity is tomorrow's

rubble. An architect builds. An analyst interprets. Honest labor keeps history honest. History is only an extension after all of the bone house of flesh, the doomed architecture of memory trying to keep a record of itself.

Freud: Your vision sounds darker than my own, Vitruvius.

Vitruvius (soberly, tragically): Visual acuity sees the writing on the wall even when its death's penmanship and the wall in question is the surface of the human soul.

Freud: I agree. A patient dreams about a strange elevator in a house. The elevator is really a box. The box is a coffin. Death wishes, death fears cannot be ignored. If murder will out, dreams are often the venue of the outing which brings me to the only kind of architecture I know anything about, Vitruvius—dream architecture and this time I don't mean the double helical analogy we were talking about earlier. I mean the appearance of architecture in dreams and all the implications of its bizarre configurations. They say Art represents space, sculpture displaces space and architecture encloses space. Could we say dream architecture encloses space (but also distorts it) and in a most idiosyncratic way?

Vitruvius: How do you mean idiosyncratic?

Freud: If architecture is an extension of the body (whatever happened to McLuhan by the way) and if dream is an extension of the body, a disguised representation of raw instincts in the night, dream architecture is doubly ambiguous.

Vitruvius: How so?

Freud: A building in a dream is not really a building.

Vitruvius: But nothing in a dream is what it purports to be.

Freud: *Touché* my dear Vitruvius. You are a Freudian, by God, by Jove, by whatever passes for deity in eternity, this godforsaken place.

Vitruvius: Big bang?

Freud: By big bang then. Where was I?

Vitruvius: Nothing in a dream is what it purports to be.

Freud: Yes, exactly, but architecture is our topic so let's stick to buildings. A building in a dream is not really a building. Listen to this example from childhood, Vitruvius. A child draws a house she dreamt about. A rudimentary drawing of a structure with a door. A drawing so naïve, so spontaneous in execution, it makes you wonder if more mature art for all its wonder and beauty and pretension can ever capture that complex simplicity again.

Vitruvius: Complex?

Freud: Yes. Getting simplicity right in art or life or childhood is a complex thing. Seemingly spontaneous. The total self possession behind it as rooted as the darting signature of a swallow's flight. But Art goes to my head. I stray from the point. Where was I? The child's drawing of house and door and then her heart breaking comment, "A door is a tear in a house." She was 4, Vitruvius.

Her father and mother had divorced. He left a tear in the house when he left, not to mention the tear in her heart.

Vitruvius: How do you know all this, Sigmund?

Freud: I listened. I didn't turn away from her sorrow. Listening is an underrated branch of science, wouldn't you say?

Vitruvius: Yes. Yes. That is why I argued that an architect should be a musician, a mathematician. I built theatres made of stone. The actor's voice is made of blood and sound. It needs assistance to be heard. I built bronze vases, strategically placed among the rows of seats, to resound, to echo, to nourish the human voice as it set out on its journey of communication from flesh to flesh, buffeted by indifferent wind and inert stone.

Freud: Ah, to have heard Sophocles under those conditions. Vitruvius, I envy you.

Vitruvius: And I envy what you can see in the scribbles of a child.

Freud: Speaking of childhood and architecture, Vitruvius, another child of 5 told me a joke once: he had constructed his joke out of a freshly minted dream.

Q. "Why did the chicken steal the bagpipes?" A. Because he wanted to have a perfect house?" The *non sequitur* followed such a hidden sequence it was music to my ears.

Vitruvius: You've lost me, Sigmund. Explain. Explain.

Freud: The child couldn't construct humor yet. At least not what passes for humor in adult circles.

Q. "Why did the chicken steal the bag pipes?" A. "Because he wanted to have a perfect house." The child apes the sound of a question-answer kind of adult joke but he doesn't have the hang of humor yet and so the *non sequitur* is music to my ears because it catches development in *statu nascendi*, the training wheels of the mind.

Vitruvius: But what did the child mean?

Freud: Oh, you force me to be Freudian, Vitruvius: he was 5, but already the mischief of perfectionism was stirring in him, the concept of a perfect house already turning dynamic Freudian wheels in that recently minted mind. Can you believe it? Only five and a perfectionist already. It brings to mind Beckett's comments on the human aesthetic enterprise in general: that Art in these doomed existential days is an aesthetic exercise doomed to failure, but it is the certainty of failure that ironically fuels the creative responsibility of the artist. All Art is an attempt, not to succeed but to fail better. "Teach us to fail better" as close to prayer as Beckett ever came! Art for Beckett is a rejection of the perfectionistic impulse, the architectural obsession to build the perfect house.

Vitruvius: The five year old wasn't quite there yet. He dreamed of larceny, the perfect crime, the perfect house.

Freud: Yes. His anatomical house, its Euclidean verticals and Freudian cross beams had shortcomings *vis à vis* his father's. If he could steal the bag-pipes

of his father his phallic self-image would lack for nothing.

Vitruvius: But how do you know all this?

Freud(with impatient wonder): I listened. You had bronze vases to assist the actors of your time. I held up the shell of the unconscious to the ear of a child and the ocean of development spoke to me.

Vitruvius: It must have been the wine dark sea of Homer's.

Freud: The very same, a small tectonic turn of the dial later. I have heard it in adults too.

Vitruvius(with childish wonder and disbelief): The wine dark sea of Homer?

Freud: Yes. Listen to this tragic slice of the human condition. A man dreams of "a house with no windows. Inside he can see a fireplace, a strange fireplace with a light in it but no human warmth, no warming fire, only an eerie uncanny light. There's a cat. That turns into a mouse. Then into a rat."

Vitruvius: What did it mean?

Freud: I didn't know at first. But I knew what the man had told me already about his childhood. He caught his finger in a closing gate at age 5. Instead of offering sympathy, his mother accused him, as if the injury to her brand of maternal narcissism hurt more than the ignored pain of her son!

Vitruvius: Accused him of what?

Freud: Rupturing her illusion of perfection.

Vitruvius: So why the house with no windows?

Freud: He never felt safe, as you can imagine, with this kind of mothering. He interpreted the weird dream architecture, the striking absence of windows as follows: "Without windows no one can peer in and judge me. Without windows I don't have to pay attention to the outside world". There was no fire in his fireplace. No human homely warmth he could rely on. In its stead only the light of eternal vigilance that might protect flesh from the gates of this world that can snap on your fingers, an internal light of wariness to protect you from the maternal gatekeepers who are lousy at their job.

Vitruvius: The domestic dream cat turned wild like a rat, home no safer than the wild?

Freud(exultant): I have made a Freudian out of you, Vitruvius.

Vitruvius: The hand healed.

Freud: Yes, but memory takes a while.(more philosophically, thoughtfully)The span of a man's life, Vitruvius, is a piece of architecture, his current consciousness held aloft on beams of memory and an armature of desire, a haunted house of cards that manages nevertheless to house a hundred years more or less give or take ....

Vitruvius: The give or take of destiny! Did you factor that into the architecture of your life's project?

Freud: Yes. In my paper "On transience" I wrote "a flower that blossoms for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely".

Vitruvius: The lily does not mourn the lack of flint that would give it a longer life as Stoppard might say?

Freud: No. But Brahms on his death-bed can weep for the music of the human future he will neither write nor hear!

Vitruvius: A man could mourn his own life you mean but he'd have to be alive to do it.

Freud: That's what history is for: mourning and building.

Vitruvius: You make architecture sound like a construction site above a graveyard.

Freud: It is, Vitruvius. An architect is an "under-taker". Like a psychoanalyst he does not ignore the repressed. He builds on it, and when it returns to haunt him with memories of the dead he makes a vault out of his depression and scrapes another blue-print, another lining from the sky. As Shaw put it "if you have to have skeletons in your cupboard at least make them dance!" We all live in haunted houses. Our dreams are haunted houses we sleep in and when we wake the ghosts go with us on our rounds, subtle, invisible, not like sun-cast shadows but taking our full measure nonetheless.

Vitruvius: It's blind fear that diminishes our measure, not the sight of it, the full monty. Anxiety should be a signal, not a warning, as you put it Sigmund.

Freud: You know me better than I know myself, Vitruvius. Yes, yes, yes, fear unanalyzed can make a single-room occupancy (a vile phrase if ever there was one) out of all the spacious chambers of the human heart!

Vitruvius: Fear the most neurotic architect of all, you mean.

Freud: By God, yes, Vitruvius, yes, yes. With fear as a foundation the self is a house of cards. If you conceptualize the mind as an ongoing architectural project, whose raw material is desire, ambition, love, hate, courage, fear, affect, anxiety, guilt, to name a few, *conflict* and *compromise* are the posts and beams of this almost indefinable structure, are they not?

Vitruvius: Well if you say so, Sigmund.

Freud: I've spent my life defining the topographies and structures of this most elusive architectural project.

Vitruvius: You put the mind on the map, so to speak, Sigmund.

Freud: Which is easier, Vitruvius, let me tell you, than making a map of the mind. But I tried. Listen to this example of architecture as conflict, the architect using cement to cramp her quarters rather than expand them. This analysand, with very conflicted psychic architecture indeed, dreams that she is swimming in a pool in which she has dropped so much cement that there is hardly any swimming room left: this spatialization of fear and phobia allows her to eventually realize that fear is not something she conceptualizes and uses as a signal; fear for her has to be represented as a cramped self with no space to spread its developmental wings in, no room to foster its own individuation in. She pictures the self as helpless, fearful, dependent, an "as if" illegitimate non-entity



that must “impersonate” the identity of the mother rather than insist on its own individuation if it is to survive. As maternal impersonator, she resides in her mother’s psychic architecture rather than staking her claim to her own psychological real estate. She feels like a barnacle attached to a rock. The sense that she swims in cramped quarters because she carries her own self-diminishing cement around with her is an insight that can expand her spatial reach if she can become the architect of her own decoded spatial metaphors. As an analytic architect she must learn not to burn the blue prints before she can even imagine entering or taking possession of the building.

Vitruvius: She sadly swims into the snare of self, not beyond it.

Freud: Well said Vitruvius! The self should have sails as well as anchors. But analysis is helping her to lift anchor.

Vitruvius: Ship ahoy!

Freud: The world is her oyster if the “barnacle” can detach from the “rock”.

Vitruvius: Rome wasn’t built in a day.

Freud: Vienna neither.

Vitruvius: We’ve become silly.

Freud: Dulce est decipere in loco.

Vitruvius: You wrote a whole book on the topic.

Freud: (Nostalgically) Wit and its relation to the unconscious.

Vitruvius: And architecture and its relation to the unconscious?

Freud: That surely is our topic, Vitruvius, architecture and its relation to the unconscious.. Our topic surely is space, the enclosure of it, the gist of it, the invention of it, as Stoppard might say, and an analyst would add the distortion of it, the mischief of it, the psychological abuse of it.

Vitruvius: Explain yourself. Call a gable a gable, Sigmund. I’m word-weary and word-wary at this stage of our verbal marathon, or have we come to the end of our dialogue?

Freud: My answer comes in the form of a question, Vitruvius, a question that comes from all we’ve said about architecture as the extension of the body, its measurements, its golden sections, its projections into space, man the measure of all things.

Vitruvius: Yes.

• Freud: My ideas about anatomical sexual distinctions, castration anxiety, female sexuality were masterpieces of political incorrectness if I say so myself: science and controversy marching hand in hand lest we keep discovering the same wheel over and over.

Vitruvius: Yes, but what does it have to do with architecture?

Freud: I believe that details of female sexual anatomy—vulva, vagina, clitoris—are items of anatomical differentiation that both genders often remain ignorant of, keeping themselves in the dark about it, as if ambiguity and confusion protected them from the plain anatomical facts.

Vitruvius: But why? What's to be gained from ambiguity, confusion?

Freud: What's to be gained? The promotion of ignorance, the protection of primitive ideas of sexuality, anatomy and gender dragged into erroneous infantile theories about sexual crime and punishment, anatomy the great battlefield where imagination struts, castrated penises and mutilated vulvas the casualties of unconscious warfare.

Vitruvius: But what does it have to do with architecture?

Freud: Sorry, it was a long-winded preamble to the point, but here's my question finally. If it seems necessary for anatomy to remain confused about itself, shouldn't these confusions, these ambiguities be reflected in architecture, if as we've been arguing, the body is perhaps the first manual of the architectural academy?

Vitruvius: You mean if the body is confused about its anatomy, confused about its orifices, shouldn't buildings come with confusing orifices also, like trap doors, one-way mirrored windows, attics in the basement, basements in the attics, bathrooms with no bidets for women, toilets with no urinals for men.

Freud(wounded): I see it is easy to make fun of me, but Vitruvius a Freud basher, who would have thought it?

Vitruvius: *Mi scusi professore, non ho potuto resistere.* Excuse me dear professor I couldn't resist it. Now let me hear you, "listen" as you say and try to answer. Your point seems well taken: if literature is nothing unless ambiguous, great literature full of inexhaustible Empsonian ambiguities that centuries of scholarship and listening and reading can never unravel given the nature of language and art, should architecture not be rich in ambiguities also? *Venustas, firmitas, utilitas.* Beauty, strength, utility, certainly but not without the ambiguities that make all Art complex and unfathomable. Maybe utilitas is the crucial variable, Sigmund, maybe utility forces an architect to keep his feet on the ground. There is no other branch of art, is there, in which we actually live? We do not represent space as artists do, or displace it like sculptors, we enclose it so that we can live in it. We can exploit ambiguity somewhat I suppose. I can build a house with distorting mirrors, I can build a house for clowns with gags and trapdoors but with all due respects to your patients, Sigmund, a door is not a tear in a house and windows are essential no matter how blind our mothers were to our childhood sufferings. Maybe architecture has to be the least ambiguous art form, but maybe that's a good thing. Not a shortcoming. Reality has its principles. The equal of pleasure's. And its sobering to remember that 95% of the homes of this world were not built by architects. A man encloses space with wood or stone. The process of his labor, the artifacts of his sweat and blood define his culture which is, after all is said and done, a cluster of homes, a practical collection of shelters that defy the wind.

Freud: That is why no architect can solve the problem of the homeless, Vitruvius, by throwing pre-stressed concrete at the problem, stacking cubicle next to

mass produced cubicles to house a man's flesh in but give no thinking to the housing of his heart, the residence of his dreams.

Vitruvius: No, Sigmund, an architect can only listen and when he finds the four corners of a man's desire, try to enclose that space for him, a small fireplace where the flint of the human heart can start a blaze.

But Sigmund I have a question for you.

Freud: Yes.

Vitruvius: Why are you so interested in ambiguity?

Freud: We all crawled out of the doomed architecture of our mothers' bodies initially. Picture the odyssey of it, Vitruvius, a little vessel leaving the wine dark sea of the womb space, past the cervical narrows, out into vulvar space, past the clitoral pillar until finally post placental forever, and umbilically severed, air screams in our throat as wind and sails of flesh get acquainted.

Vitruvius: What does it have to do with ambiguity?

Freud (impatiently, surprisedly): A doomed vessel sets sail beyond the doomed architecture of maternal womb space seeking to enclose new space for ever to compensate for the loss of the old. You don't see anything ambiguous about such a voyage?

Vitruvius: What reductionistic simplicity, Sigmund. Otto Rank has gone to your head. The trauma of birth and all that genetic doomsday book thumping. Have you taken leave of your senses?

Freud (appeasingly, realizing he has been misunderstood): No, no, Vitruvius. I do not suggest that the precocious fetus has a memory of the extra-placental voyage that leaves him with a lifelong post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychological casualty of some Rankian birth trauma. What I'm suggesting is that adult fantasy cannot get its mind off origins, whether its theological or Darwinian or cosmological: from original sin to Lucy to Toumei to the big bang, man is obsessed with origins like a snobbish socialite hunting for the pedigree that finally proves my genetic royalties are greater than your genetic royalties.

Vitruvius: Didn't you call this a family romance?

Freud: Yes I did, Vitruvius, and the romance is a cover-up. I have royal blood, bluer than my father's and mother's is a cover-up of the ambiguity of all origins—a doomed vessel of flesh leaving a doomed maternal port hating the womb space that spawns and spurns, loving the compensatory womb space of romance forever, the immortal architectural enclosure of space, the building of a dream within a dream called reality.

Vitruvius (soberly, realistically): I place a stone on top of a stone, Sigmund. Your stepping stones connect the corridors of dreams, the romance of the mind.

Freud: Come on, Vitruvius, we're on the same voyage, different vessels, different sails, same wine dark sea, same Ithaca, same yearning for Penelope, same yearning for home. Earlier you said, "an architect can only listen and when he

finds the four corners of a man's desire, try and enclose that space for him, a small fireplace where the flint of the human heart can start a blaze". Maybe you can build a home for analysis, where no emotion will be ashamed to live and even ambiguity can rest from, and rest in, its confusions.

The manuscript ends here. One has the sense that the two could have gone on talking for ever, but since the manuscript ends here, so will I.

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## Approaching the Critic's Psychology through the Artist's Negative Representation of Him

Donald Kuspit

Many—and I emphasize “many,” not all—artists dislike critics. In fact, nobody likes critics—they’re carping, sarcastic, and envious of their creative betters, to use a few of the insults hurled at them. They spoil the fun of art—as though art was good innocent fun. A history of such dislike can in fact be traced from the beginning of modern art to the present day. The issue is what this tells us about the artist as well as critic—ideally a kind of twinship, perhaps in Kohut’s sense, but in practice rarely reciprocal. Another issue is how the critic deals with the artist’s dislike of him—unless, of course, he can be of use to the artist. To ask this another way, what emotional as well as social position does the artist’s negative attitude put the critic in?

Theoretically the critic may be the artist’s ideal selfobject—the perfect patient mirror, raising no questions about what is reflected in it—but in emotional practice this is far from the case: their needs diverge, for cognitive as well as emotional reasons. Nonetheless, one can’t be discussed without the other, for they depend on each other: the critic’s dependence on the artist is much noted, the artist’s dependence on the critic is less noted, even overlooked. Like everyone else, the artist needs emotional support, and the critic is optimally the source of that support—the ideal critic would be someone the artist can turn to whenever he needs emotional re-fueling, a limitless cornucopia of kindness, consideration, encouragement, and nourishment, in other words, the bountiful good breast—but I am talking of a deeper, more fundamental need. Art supposedly transcends the conditions that created it, but it can never transcend its critical condition, in the medical as well as philosophical sense of that term. The critic represents that problematic condition, for better or worse, and in fact has the fate of the art in his hands. The artist

knows, however unconsciously, that the critic has this power—the power of recognition and reception, as it has been called by Jauss, or the power of the receiver-reader, as it has been called by Eco—which is why he despises him, sometimes quite consciously, as a threat to the future of his art, and, more broadly, to his sense of entitlement. As Gladys and Kurt Lang make clear in their brilliant book *Etched in Memory: The Building and Survival of Artistic Reputation*, the critic, in his role as publicity agent and advocate for an art, not only helps create its market—19th century prints in their case study—but seems to guarantee its posterity by making it memorable, that is, inscribing it in collective memory, where it survives as a critical-artistic trace. As Baudelaire wrote in “The Salon of 1846,” “how many artists today owe to the critics alone their sad little fame!”

Clement Greenberg’s assertion that he can find much to damn in an art while admiring it does not exactly endear him to the artist. Nor does his attack on “art-adoration”—even psychoanalysts suffer from it—and on the belief that the artist is “a prodigy of nature whose activity does not brook the weighing, qualifying and comparing proper to criticism.” Criticism attempts “to place his art in relation to other art,” and this place changes with every change in critical perspective as well as in the history of art. Greenberg is interested in the situation or context of art as much as he is in any particular art, and while celebrating the significance of many artists he swears allegiance to none. For him every art is subject to re-evaluation, suggesting that its value is never assured let alone absolute. A gradual consensus may evolve around it, as he said, but the consensus may be challenged, and in fact, as Adorno argued, always is by the movement of history and thought. There are no unequivocal winners—an artist or thinker who rises above criticism, as though immune to it—in either. But the narcissistic artist does not want differentiated appreciation, he wants blind endorsement—total, unconditional love, recognition, acceptance. For the grandiose artist there is no other art but his own, however much he acknowledges his debt to other artists—usually dead and out of the way rather than alive and competitive—and even to philosophical ideas and critical thought. Indeed, many artists have paid homage to Greenberg’s ideas as well as his power to advance their careers.

Here are some statements of dislike—not to say dismissive disdain, abusive hatred, and annihilative depreciation—by modern artists. “Art critics are useless or harmful,” the “Technical Manifesto” of “Futurist Painting” (April 11, 1910) states without further ado or explanation. Seemingly more reasoned, Gauguin writes, in a letter to the critic André Fontainas (March 1899), who wrote an eloquent, supportive, analytic review of an exhibition of his paintings: “Criticism of today, when it is serious, intelligent, full of good intentions, tends to impose on us a method of thinking and dreaming which might become another bondage. Preoccupied with what concerns it particu-

larly, its own field, literature, it will lose sight of what concerns us, painting. If that is true, I shall be impertinent enough to quote Mallarmé: 'A critic is someone who meddles with something that is none of his business.' There is clearly something offensive as well as defensive in this, and also something theoretical: criticism is a species of literature (verbal), painting (visual) is not literature—elsewhere Gauguin spends a fair amount of time arguing for the superiority of painting over literature—and never the twain shall meet. They are essentially incommensurate—which certainly insulates painting from criticism. But even Mallarmé, a literary figure, dismisses criticism: the literary critic is by definition not as creative as the poet.

Later, in a letter to Charles Morice (July 1901), Gauguin presents the "classical" reason for the avant-garde artist's rejection of criticism: "Why is it that before a work the critic wants to make points of comparison with former ideas and with other authors. And not finding what he believes should be there, he comprehends no more and he is not moved. Emotion first, understanding later." Thus the cliché: the critic thinks before he feels, if he has any feeling, or, as a psychoanalyst might say, he intellectualizes the art, precluding its becoming an intense emotional experience. He does this because he defends established art and norms, and thus is closed to new ideas, that is, he is committed to tradition rather than avant-garde innovation. He protects what is socially and institutionally objectified as art, dismissing any challenges to it as "errors."

Gauguin, who once wrote that "in art there are only two types of people: revolutionaries and plagiarists. And, in the end, doesn't the revolutionary's work become official, once the State takes it over?," consciously thought of himself as a revolutionary, but may have unconsciously felt that he was a plagiarist—an imposter, as it were. If the critic uncovered his debt to tradition, that is, the continuity of his art with the art and ideas of the past—for example, his unmistakable debt to Christian iconography, to stained glass windows, and to the romantic belief in the healing power of the exotic—the fraudulence of his self-proclaimed revolutionariness would become apparent. It would be another narcissistic lie, not a radical alteration of our consciousness of art. And however much Gauguin despised the State as the symbol of the conventions and outlook he was trying to overthrow, he implicitly wanted to be endorsed by the State, for without its imprimatur his work would not be officially art. He wanted social success as much as he wanted critical recognition as an avant-garde rebel. Thus he was in conflict: he wanted to be appropriated and assimilated, but realized that if he was—and he assumed he eventually would be—his art would lose its revolutionary cachet, exchanging it for social appeal. The critic is the instrument of this appropriation and assimilation even as he threatens it. He is the gatekeeper of the establishment, and Gauguin wanted to get through the gate even though he despised the establishment. Thus, with

one hand, he dismisses critics as “watching over artistic security” and “keeping a sharp lookout...for contraband talent”—such as his own—and, with the other, eagerly engages them, ostensibly to explain himself, but also to win their approval, and thus entry into the pantheon of the State museum. He never compromised his ideas, but he was psychosocially compromised to begin with.

As though elaborating on Gauguin’s ideas about critics, Kandinsky wrote in “On the Problem of Form” (1912), “one may never believe a theoretician (art historian, critic, and so forth) when he asserts that he has discovered some objective mistake in the work....the only thing which the theoretician can justifiably assert is that he has, until now, not yet become familiar with this or that use of the means....the theoreticians who find fault with a work or praise it, starting with the analysis of the forms which have already existed, are the most harmful misleaders. They form a wall between the work and the naive observer.” Kandinsky concludes: “From this standpoint (which, unfortunately, is mostly the only one possible), the art critic is the worst enemy of art.” Love me or leave my art alone, Kandinsky suggests, following in the footsteps of Gauguin and Mallarmé. Or, more extremely, better a naive uncritical—not to say mindless—viewer than a sophisticated, attentive mind. Kandinsky would rather be idolized—he did have a messianic complex—than understood. Art lends itself to idolatry, but the individualistic critic is not an idolater—indeed, he tends to be an idol-breaker—which is why Kandinsky prefers the gullible idol-worshipping masses to him.

But all is not lost: there is indeed an ideal critic for Kandinsky, and he strongly resembles Gauguin’s emotional critic: “The ideal critic...would not be the critic who would seek to discover the ‘mistake,’ ‘aberrations,’ ‘ignorance,’ ‘plagiarisms,’ and so forth, but the one who would seek *to feel* how this or that form has an inner effect, and would then impart expressively his whole experience to the public”—in effect becoming the artist’s spokesperson. This critic, Kandinsky adds, “would need the soul of a poet, since the poet must feel objectively in order to embody his feeling subjectively. That is, the critic would have to possess a creative power. In reality, however, critics are very unsuccessful artists who are frustrated by the lack of their own creative power and therefore called upon to direct the creative power of others.” The put-down clincher is another stupid cliché: the critic is a failed artist. This prejudiced, pernicious cliché is echoed in unthinking psychoanalytic form by Franz Alexander, who writes (1940): “Often he has a more critical than creative mind and unconsciously resents the genius’ creative capacity. And should he himself possess a productive intellect and have ambitions for originality, he might feel envious of the giant with whom he is unable to compete.” This stereotyped distinction—it is not dissimilar to the hierarchical distinction between art and craft, more particularly, the visionary artist, that is, what Jung



calls the artist who has “primordial vision,” and the humble craftsman, a mere maker of artifacts, which however exquisite lack this primordiality—appears in different form in a book by Lucy Jo Palladino, titled *The Edison Trait: Saving the Spirit of Your Nonconforming Child*. Chapter 2 on “Children Who Are Divergent-Thinking-Dominant” opens with a section “Can Critics Learn to Create?,” as though people who can create don’t have to learn to be critical. The hackneyed orthodox distinction between creative artist and uncreative critic also survives in perhaps the only psychoanalytic article that directly addresses the psychology of the critic (JAPA, 10 [1962]:745-61). In what is admittedly speculative, Philip Weissman writes “that the childless state of the critic may extend from his personal to his artistic self....Biographies of critics should be studied to reveal the nature of their oedipal conflicts. One solution which might be predicted is the surrender of their own procreative wishes, which would then permit them to be both curious about and aggressively critical of their creative parents.”

In other words, they are an angry witness to the artist’s inner primal scene—for Hanna Segal, “in the genital position...the [artistic] creation is felt to be a baby resulting from meaningful internal intercourse” (*Dream, Phantasy and Art*, p. 95)—and determined to stop it, even annihilate the “parental couple” of the artist’s “internal world.” Well, maybe—certainly this fits in with Leon Edel’s remark, in an essay on “Literary Criticism and Psychoanalysis” (*Contemp. Psychoanal*, 1(1965):151-63), that “From the psychoanalytic point of view, I suppose it might be said that criticism is often founded on a fund of aggressivity” (Bere’s assumption that “the biographer displaces his unconscious feelings of aggression on to the subject of his biography” presumably applies *pari passu* to the critic)—but the point is that Weissman and Edel mechanically assume that criticism is not creative. Donald Meltzer, in *The Apprehension of Beauty*, has the same problem. After adulating artists—their “pained perception of the inhumanities daily in force about them, juxtaposed to a vision of the beauty of the world being vandalised by these primitive social process, forbids them to squander the huge blocks of life-time required for adaptation”—Meltzer attacks “the recent vogue in literary criticism [as] a precise example of acting-out ambivalence and hostility towards the artists.” His remark about artists strikes me as profoundly naive, and about literary critics profoundly stupid, all the more so because in the next breath he seems to suggest that they are part of the plot to treat artists “as members of the amusement industry” (p. 15). This is not only a gross misunderstanding of what Adorno and Horkheimer meant by “the culture industry”—the artist not only adapts to it consciously, but it unconsciously informs his mentality, leading him to produce work that “fits in” even when it seems “unfitting,” all the more so because its “irreconcilability” also has a predictable place in the administered society of which the culture industry is a branch—but a gross

misunderstanding of critical consciousness. It is by definition fundamentally different from what one might call amusement consciousness, although, no doubt, criticism administers the work by theorizing it—which hardly makes it amusing—thus suggesting that even critical theory can be an instrument of the administered society however much avant-garde theory de-administers the work by showing that it escapes the usual categories, or at least seems to as much as avant-garde criticism does.

To put the issue in Segal's terms, these theorists can't even imagine that the critical creation also issues from meaningful internal intercourse. Thus they take the artist's aggressive point of view, even as they are blind to his aggression, not only to the critic but against other artists. They ignore what might be called the Hobbesian influence on creativity and innovation—the war of all artists against all other artists even when they temporarily cooperate for social purposes. (The war is quite obvious in many statements by avant-garde artists, for example, Judd's notorious attack on Picasso, Mondrian, and Baselitz. Renato Poggioli points out that it is part of the "antagonism" basic to avant-gardism. Anyone who does not conform to one's position is automatically decadent, retardataire, and wrong-headed, everyone who does is automatically advanced, progressive, and right-thinking. The myth of progress in art is basic to avant-garde self-belief.)

Oscar Wilde seriously and convincingly disagrees with this, indeed, argues that the critic is more creative than the artist—no doubt one of Wilde's overstatements, but one to the creative critical point. I will later get to Wilde's idea that the work of criticism is an even profounder creation than the work of art. Ironically, Weissman's assertion that the "expert critic must have a higher sensitivity than the artist to the interrelatedness of stimuli" suggests as much. Thus the critic does not exactly identify with the artist, as is usually assumed—Weissman points out that "excessive identifications ('overhostile' and 'overloving')" are as "hazardous" for the artist as for the critic—but, as Wilde points out, uses him the way the artist aggressively as well as libidinally uses his model, creatively transforming and analytically subsuming the artist's work in his own synthesis of art, thought, and what Winnicott calls creative apperception, which gives life to both. Like artistic transformation, critical transformation is, in Eco's words, an uncanny mix of fidelity to and freedom from the model, be it external or internal. Or, to use Baudelaire's conception of imagination, the critical imagination, like the artistic imagination, is "both analysis and synthesis," for "it decomposes" its object and "creates a new world" out of "the raw materials," in the process making the object—the work of art in the critic's case, some subject matter in the artist's case (including art as its own subject matter)—seem new. In the language of Winnicott's potential space, the critic both finds and creates the work, creating into it to help it find itself. To stretch Bion's language, the critic makes the work available for under-

standing by elaborating it, thus allowing it to be stored in memory rather than expelled as an alien material, unbearable because of the unbearably raw feelings it threatens to arouse. In other words, the critic contains the novel work by performing the so-called alpha function, moving beyond his own initial tendency to subject it to a paranoid-schizoid analysis, toward a kind of depressive accommodation to and assimilation of it. The avant-garde or revolutionary critic inclines to the former, the establishment critic to the latter.

A superb example of paranoid-schizoid criticism is Baudelaire's ironical remark to his friend Manet that Manet's art was "the best of a bad lot." If this is ambivalence, it expands the horizons of perception, showing that, at its best, it is inherently dialectical. So is ambivalence, which is a way of grasping the structure of opposition within what seems self-same, indicating that self-identity is a social illusion. (For Baudelaire, realism was a failure of imagination, and as such decadent.) In contrast the establishment critic, usually art historically aware, appears to demonstrate that all art plagiarizes other art, however implicitly—that there is no unconditionally new art, only endless variations of old art—makes all art subliminally depressing. Neither Gauguin nor Kandinsky could tolerate either avant-garde or establishment criticism, each of which is dialectical in its own critical way.

Perhaps the best known putdown of the critic by an artist was made by Friedrich Schiller, whom Freud quotes with what seems to be approval, even though psychoanalysis is a mode of critical thought: "You worthy critics, or whatever you may call yourself, are ashamed or afraid of the momentary and passing madness which is found in all real creators, the longer or shorter duration of which distinguishes the thinking artist from the dreamer." Since antiquity, the artist has always been regarded as subliminally mad—a victim of what the Greeks called "enthousiasmos," possession by a god, a kind of madness ("mania") because it was beyond reason—and as such peculiarly superior to ordinary uninspired mortals. But here's another, more contemporary putdown of the critic—indeed, a kind of disgusted bristling at him. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* there's the following exchange:

Vladimir: Moron!

Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other. (They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.)

V: Moron!

E: Vermin!

V: Abortion!

E: Morpion!

V: Sewer-rat!

E: Curate!

V: Cretin!

E. (With finality.) Critic!

V. Oh! (He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.)

Presumably the critic is a moron, vermin, sewer-rat, cretin, etc. wrapped in one abortion.

Why such heroic insults against an anti-hero? Why bother to destroy what is already regarded as harmless and ridiculous? Well, W. S. Gilbert, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, gave up being a critic "because he did not like being hated, which was the doom of any critic who told the truth"—Gilbert's own words. Babcock notes that "the intuitions of the critic sometimes touch on ignored factors"—God forbid that the critic should discover the secret of the work. No return of the repressed for the artist, at least not in the critic's consciousness. Artists want to control the interpretation of their work; alternate interpretations, particularly those that see something in the work that the artist doesn't see—or doesn't want to see—must be discredited and slandered. This is in part done by dismissing the critic as a fool—but then Lear's fool was wise, certainly wiser than Lear. I have myself been derided by certain artists for interpretations they disliked—one woman artist wrote an article saying I ought to be squashed like a bug, another tried to run me over in his car—even though they offered no alternative interpretations. There was no counter-argument—and all criticism worth the name is a kind of argument—thus precluding dialogue by what is clearly authoritarian censorship. Of course being treated with violent contempt by these artists does not necessarily make me wise, but since they never bothered to explain the error of my interpretative ways I may have been on to something. Hiding behind their righteous indignation, they ended up tongue-tied in rage and anti-intellectualism, which suggests their one-dimensionality.

More to the point, I think, is Santayana's statement that "All criticism is...moral, since it deals with benefits and their relative weight. [It] is a serious and public function; it shows the race assimilating the individual, dividing the mortal from the immortal part of the individual." And that's just the point: the artist is in terror of this seemingly last judgment: he is afraid that his art may not be immortal. As Rank says, the ultimate ambition of the artist is to become immortal by making an immortal work of art. But by its very nature criticism cannot grant—even withhold—immortality, which is in any case a narcissistic illusion, indeed, the grandest of narcissistic illusions. The artist idealizes his work of art—immortalization is a form of idealization—and anyone who threatens that idealization is suspect. Anyone who brings into intellectual question what is emotionally unquestionable for the artist is the enemy of his art. Critical consciousness is experienced as inherently skeptical and inhibiting, and it evokes the artist's unconscious self-doubt—denied in the name of the undoubted immortality of his work. The work is a moon shot to immortality, but if there is anything wrong with the art rocket it won't reach the moon—and

the critic invariably finds something wrong with it, namely, that it is a part of its mortal times, even as he finds what's right with it, that is, what is enduring, or likely to be of continuing interest, in it. Separating the nourishing wheat from the worthless chaff, the critic threatens the integrity of the work. Through the critic the artist discovers the ambivalence of his own love for his art—a self-recognition he would rather do without, for it undermines his blind narcissistic faith in himself. Segal writes that “from a narcissistic position...the artistic product is put forward as self-created faeces, with a constant terror that one's product will be revealed as shit,” and the critic forces the artist back on the narcissistic position—at least in the artist's own mind—and makes him suspect and fear that what he has produced is shit, that is, that it does not “have a life of its own and one which will survive the artist.” The “symbolic recreation” is no longer a “psychic act” but a physical farce. And in fact the critic does show that the artistic product is in part psychic and social shit—mortal—in the act of finding its seemingly immortal component.

Thus the critic is in an unenviable position. But he is also radically free, in Fromm's sense of the term, in a situation in which people are reluctant to think freely and critically, because of a variety of social and commercial pressures. Critical consciousness is the last stand of freedom, as Adorno and Horkheimer write, which must be sustained—in part to sustain genuine individuality—even though it may have no historical effect, as they argue. Even the artist wants to escape from his own freedom by dogmatizing his style—turning it into a brand—thus locking himself in a procrustean social and self-understanding, which slowly but surely erodes and destroys the dialectics of nuance—in Viktor von Weisäcker's sense of that term—that is the well-spring of his creativity. The artist's contempt for the critic—the artist's displacing onto the critic his fear that his art may be shit, and thus be flushed away by time (instead, the critic becomes shit)—is an opportunity for emotional and cognitive freedom and autonomy. The artist's persecutory contempt is liberating, once its shock is worked through. The critic must have the ego strength to not allow himself to be crushed by it. The real shock is the artist's implicit demand that the critic limit his ideas to those the artist approves and inhibit his feelings to those that are generally sanctioned and thus likely to be “appropriate” or proper to the art, which generates a conflict in the critic. A secondary shock is caused by the artist's assumption of the inherent superiority of his art and himself to any understanding of it and any critic, a view that even Weissman shatters. Indeed, one might say that the artist's attempted negation of the critic is the necessary condition for truly freethinking. It liberates the critic from internalizing the authority of the artist and from the social compulsion to conform—to submit his critical consciousness to public opinion and the artist's opinion. It leads him to trust his spontaneity more than ever, without abandoning his knowledge of art, intellectual, and cultural history, thus achieving a new

integration of mind and emotion, and with that a new experience of art.

It makes the critic truly "original," in Fromm's sense of the term. Fromm writes: "This substitution of pseudo acts for original acts of thinking, feeling, and willing, leads eventually to the replacement of the original self by a pseudo self. The original self is the self which *is* the originator of mental activities. The pseudo self is only an agent who actually represents the role a person is supposed to play but who does so under the name of the self. It is true that a person can play many roles and subjectively be convinced that he is "he" in each role. Actually he is in all these roles what he believes he is expected to be, and for many people, if not most, the original self is completely suffocated by the pseudo-self." (*Escape from Freedom*, p. 229.) In a sense, the critic needs the artist's rejection—the artist's attempt to annihilate him—to come into his own as a critic, assuming, again, that it does not disturb him more deeply than is necessary, that is, does not panic him however much distress it causes. It catalyzes his originality, making him more of an original self than ever, that is, shifting the balance of psychic forces from pseudo-self to original self. Thus he rises to the occasion of the artist's contempt by escaping from his pseudo-critical self, which submits to society's assumptions about the critic's role—perhaps above all, the expectation that he will be subservient to the art, artist, and the status quo of art world opinion about both.

One might say, using Winnicott's terms, that under the impact of the artist's attempt at dominance the critic becomes more of a True creative Self than a False compliant Self—more ruthlessly and dynamically critical, one might say, and thus less passively accepting of the current gospel of art understanding. The original critic accepts fearless independence and freedom as his socially unfortunate but intellectually and emotionally exciting and happy lot. No longer "repressed because of his fear of being ridiculed or attacked" for his critical ideas, insights, and constructions, he sees even more in the art, unravelling its implications—its inner structure—until it becomes clear that the art itself, at its creative best, is a critical construction. There is no question that the best art criticism involves the dialectical convergence—as distinct from simplistic synthesis—of the artist's original self and the critic's original self, but there is also no question that this is usually rare because of the artist's own concern to fit into a certain trendy view of significant art and a certain trendy view of what is intellectually appropriate for legitimating and making his art culturally credible.

The critic becomes a hardy individualist in a situation of art group think, going against the conformist grain. His criticism may confirm existing opinion about an art—indeed, give it a foundation and substance—but only after it has passed the test of his critical consciousness. He disbelieves in the inevitable immortality of art in a situation in which everyone else does—a situation in which a civilization expects to be remembered through its art. (This

unwittingly turns it into a *memento mori*.) He has his identity apart from the art he investigates, while the artist depends on art for his identity. Art may be a kind of religion, as Kandinsky said, but the critic is not particularly worshipful, however respectful he is of the artist's faith in himself and his ideas about his art, which amount to a theoretical credo. Perhaps it is because the critic refuses to bend his knee at the altar of any one kind of art but judges every art in terms of extra-artistic as well as artistic standards, as Greenberg suggests, that the critic becomes the victim of hatred. The critic is by definition a skeptical protestant rather than a believer in one true universal art faith, and many artists think that their art is the exemplary version of it. Indeed, if they did not it would seem to lack a secure foundation and they would have no reason for making art, apart from so-called self-expression, presumably therapeutic if not exactly self-analytic. Balint writes that "the ambivalently loved and idealized image must be preserved at all costs as a good and whole internal object. In such a state any outside criticism—whether justified or unfounded—merely mobilizes all the forces of the pent-up hatred and aggressiveness against the critic." The artist protects himself—his ideal self-image and his view of his art as ideal, epitomized by the idea that it is immortal and deserving of absolute respect—against the critic with all the aggression and resentment the artist can muster. The aggression and resentment are rooted in self-doubt, that is, threatened even lost narcissistic confidence, and the undermining self-doubt becomes the artist's doubt of the critic, that is, his wish to undermine him. It is projected into the critic where it becomes the critic's imagined doubt of the work—not the analytic doubt inherent to critical consciousness, which is a sign of its freedom and spontaneity, but the expectation of the critic's automatically destructive response to the work. Thus the critic becomes the scapegoat for the artist's unconscious feeling of inadequacy when he cannot serve as the artist's ambassador to and buffer against an indifferent world. When the artist cannot call attention to the greatness of the art, he is blamed for its lack of greatness.

The artist negates the critic before the critic negates him—even if the critic doesn't negate him. The artist must negate the critic, not only because no critic is ever good enough, but because critical consciousness, with its deconstructive dialectical methods, which uncover the contradictions that give the work its historical momentum and unconscious appeal (and thus seem to dismantle it completely)—and more simply because it situates the work in a larger context than that of its making, thus showing that it is not as privileged as it thinks and demonstrating that its immediacy is mediated—is by its nature disillusioning. The worst disillusion the artist can suffer is to realize that his work is, after all, however marvelously and carefully constructed, just an illusion—a passing fancy, as it were. The artist doesn't want to wake from the dream of the work—that was Schiller's problem—but the critic insists on complete wakefulness as part of the condition of its appreciation. By the simple

fact that the critic separates the mortal from the immortal part of the art—splits it, as it were, into bad and good parts—he seems to destroy the wholeness and over-all value of the work of art. But for the critic the value of art does not depend on its immortality, but on the emotional and cognitive experience it affords. Accepting its partial transience, he is able to enjoy it fully even as he evaluates it—indeed, his enjoyment is part of his evaluation and his evaluation is part of his enjoyment. He can discover what Stendhal calls the promise of happiness in it even as he discovers its unhappy, self-contradictory state. Testing its qualities, he has a quality experience of it, however ironical that experience. He can approach it empathically without losing his mind, because he approaches it in the spirit with which Freud approached pleasure in his essay “On Transience.”

I want to conclude with two quotations from Oscar Wilde, both from *The Critic As Artist*, and one from Paul Valéry’s essay on “Degas, Dance, Drawing.” The first makes clear the difference between what the artist creates and what the critic creates. The second suggests, with ironical wit, that the critic is ultimately more creative than the artist. The third suggests that criticism and creativity are essentially the same, in that they are interventions in discourse that attempt to refresh life—the most difficult of tasks. Wilde, arguing that “the highest kind of criticism...treats the work of art simply as a starting point for a new creation” and “does not confine itself...to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final,” declares: “the meaning of any beautiful thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings, and makes it marvelous for us, and sets it in some new relation to the age, so that it becomes a vital portion of our lives, and a symbol of what we pray for, or perhaps of what, having prayed for, we fear that we may receive.” Here is the second quotation. Speaking of the *Mona Lisa*, Wilde writes:

Do you ask me what Leonardo would have said had anyone told of this picture that ‘all the thoughts and experience of the world are etched and moulded therein that which they had of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the Middle Age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias?’ [Pater’s words] He would probably have answered that he had contemplated none of these things, but had concerned himself simply with certain arrangements of lines and masses, and with new and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green.

In other words, the artist is interested in the technical and formal problems of



making a work, the critic in the depth of meaning that makes the work significant beyond its means and execution, and even form.

Valéry adds an important qualifier to Wilde's imaginary exchange. "Just as the thinker tries to defend himself from the platitudes and set phrases which protect the mind from surprise at everything, and make practical living possible, so the painter can try, by studying formlessness, or rather *singularity* of form, to discover his own singularity, and with it the original and primitive state of coordination between hand and eye, subject and will." Thus both the thinker and the artist are concerned with the critical task of creatively restoring surprise, singularity, originality to existence—"the sensation of newness," as Baudelaire said (however shortlived the sensation, like every sensation)—under the controlled conditions of limited discourse, suggesting that there is more to being human than practical living. As Hegel might say, they are both engaged in the speculative, absurd task of negating the negation of life that is social necessity by affording moments of critical-aesthetic transcendence of it. This would seem to make the critical thinker and thinking artist natural allies, but for the fact that social and narcissistic necessity disrupts the dialectic of their relationship.

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## Beat Sensibility: Verbal Or Visual?

Donald Kuspit

What strikes me, in reading Beat writing, is the number of references to the eye, and visual experience, and, secondarily but nonetheless important, to painting, a visual medium, and to color, which since Postimpressionism seems to have become its core. Towards the end of his career Allen Ginsberg made expressionistic paintings, and many of the film makers that Stan Brakhage discusses in *Film at Wit's End*—based on lectures he gave at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago from 1969 through 1981—began their careers as painters, and, as I will argue, continued to use painting as a model for their films. Brakhage, incidentally, acknowledged his debt to Surrealist painting in a 1964 letter to Yves Kovacs, the editor of *Etudes Cinématographiques*. He described it as follows: "I see thru into myself seeing thru into you seeing thru into yourself seeing thru into me seeing me see you seeing you see me." The emphasis is clearly on the act of seeing rather than on me or you.

The references shine like nuggets of genuine gold in what otherwise seems like a rather self-serving—that is, self-mythologizing, not to say self-aggrandizing—logorrheic narrative, passing itself off as a stream of uncensored consciousness. In their references to vision—to pure seeing, seeing for the sake of seeing—the Beats transcend their glibly narcissistic claims to being gurus and social critics, showing that they are, or rather want to be, aesthetes. I will argue that, in retrospect, what remains of value in the Beats is not their social rebelliousness and countercultural nonconformity, which were longstanding romantic clichés to begin with, but their unexpected aestheticism. It is heavily dependent upon the aesthetic ideas of the early modernists. Ginsberg is clearly envious of Paul Cézanne, as I will suggest. The question is how successfully he and Brakhage—the two figures I will focus on—realized the aesthetic idealism of what Clement Greenberg called modernist painting.

Both Ginsberg and Brakhage are exemplary figures, and both emphasized the visual, giving it a certain priority over the verbal. But in my opinion

Ginsberg's art is an aesthetic failure, for however well he seems to use the verbal medium to articulate visual experience—paint word images, as it were—his language subsumes and obscures his perception. Writing does not convey visual experience as adequately as painting, so that the writer is stuck in a paradoxical situation: he uses verbal language to convey an experience that is inherently unverbalizable and can only be presented convincingly in visual language. Pater made the point more than a century ago when he said that it was a mistake to regard a painting as a poem, for that missed its visual point. Ginsberg's problem is compounded by the fact that he cannot leave his vision alone—present what he sees as a spontaneously given phenomenon, existing in and for itself—but is determined to demonstrate that he is a wise visionary. He wants to be celebrated for his great insight into life not simply for what he sees—unlike his acknowledged master Cézanne, who simply wanted to see what is there to be seen and what he could see with his own eyes, rather than to have insight into it, that is, invest it with human meaning. (Cézanne ended up dissecting and desocializing seeing, that is, stripping his subject matter of conventional associations, however much this ironically revealed its archetypal import.) Ginsberg did not understand that it is just as hard to see what is given to be seen as it is to have insight, and perhaps even harder, for what is seen always seems peculiarly out of focus—vibrating, as Cézanne said, or dynamic, as Boccioni said—however obviously in focus, while an insight, once in focus, becomes a static truth. Ginsberg was too eager to be a preacher—like Ezra Pound, whom Gertrude Stein said was an impatient village preacher, eager to convert the unconverted to his version of the higher truth and thus justify his lower existence—to seriously devote himself to sustained, careful seeing. Ginsberg was unable to enter, at least for any duration, what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead calls the mode of presentational immediacy, which, Whitehead argues, is more difficult to realize and maintain than the mode of symbolic consequence, which has practical, everyday necessity. Interestingly, Whitehead argues that presentational immediacy is a more demanding mode of consciousness than symbolic consequence, which tends to remain unconscious or taken for granted, at least until the symbols lose their consequence, for whatever personal and/or social as well as analytic reasons.

In contrast, Brakhage was not only able to inhabit the mode of presentational immediacy—aesthetically purified perception, as it were—but was able to use it to symbolize and narrate, as it were, what the psychoanalyst Charles Rycroft calls the flexible “wider self” within the narrowly fixed everyday self. Indeed, Brakhage intuitively grasped the intimate connection between the wider self, with its Keatsian “negative capability,” as Rycroft says, and presentational or aesthetic immediacy. This is in sharp contrast not only to Ginsberg, who for all his protests to the contrary remained an everyday self eager to star in the everyday world, but also to most Beat film makers, who

seem more interested in their everyday lives and selves than in the wider self, for all their protests to the contrary. They were representationalists, mediating their lifestyle as a model of liberation for the unliberated masses, rather than presentationalists, whatever moments of presentational immediacy and pure seeing, which is genuinely liberating—the Beats tended to confuse lack of impulse control with liberation—appear in their films. Many Beats made Hollywood type films, which however different their content and meaning from the usual Hollywood film, suggest, as it does, that there is no escape from the status quo, however different their version of the status quo. Both Beat outsider and Hollywood insider films encourage conformity to collective norms, however different the collective. That is, both kinds of film confirm everyday identity and social roles, however different the identity and role. The beats may be anti-bourgeois—a standard avant-garde ploy since Romanticism—but they are just as rigid in their nonconformity as the bourgeois are in their conformity. Apart from William Burroughs, most of the Beats are lower middle class in social origin, and they have the authoritarianism—no doubt a utopian authoritarianism in their case—of the lower middle classes.

One might say, using Rycroft's distinction, that the level of self-awareness in Beat films is "one appropriate to childhood and life within a small and morally homogeneous group," while the level of self-awareness in Hollywood films is "appropriate to the wider and morally heterogeneous world of adult life." The Beats seem stuck somewhere between immaturity and maturity, and, as I will argue, between populist infantilism and high art. That is, they often seem like adolescents with a grudge against an adult world they only superficially understand, a grudge more symptomatic of arrested development than of determined idealism. Indeed, the main audience for Beat art was, and remains, adolescents. In general, adolescence is a period of identity crisis—a time when identity is not yet consolidated and often diffuse—and the Beats seemed to be in a perpetual identity crisis, which may suggest an openness to experience but also implies a failure to process and integrate it adequately. In a sense, they anarchistically rebel against an administered society whose rationale they do not and do not want to understand—to see its devastating human effect is enough for them. They are right in their understanding of its effect, but they are wrong in damning it wholesale, for without it there is only chaos. The administered society is our version of tragicomic fate. The spiritual life the Beats claim to offer as an alternative is not what it seems, for the transcendence they want is too contaminated by narcissism to be genuine, and the "methods"—if indiscriminate indulgence in drugs and sexuality can be called that—they use to achieve it, are completely antithetical to the disciplined exercises in consciousness traditionally used to transcend everyday consciousness of being. Disinhibition is not enlightenment. The disordering of the senses, and the accompanying abandonment and collapse of rational thinking, that Arthur

Rimbaud advocated, and that the Beats, who self-consciously emulated Rimbaud, struggled to achieve—such psychotic disorder is in fact easy to achieve, for all one has to do to become psychotically disordered is not to sleep for a night or two, as the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott remarks—is in fact descendental rather than transcendental. That is, it is a way of losing one's humanity in the unconscious rather than of realizing one's creative potential by stretching the limits of consciousness.

On another level the difference between the Beat group and the adult world is the difference between community and society, to use the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies distinction, that is, between a group of people bonded organically and a machine-like system in which people are so many indifferently organized and tangentially related atoms. But the point is that both worlds are hermetically sealed islands of conformity. In their different ways, both Beat cinema and Hollywood cinema are versions of "No Exit." It is certainly the basic existential meaning of "Beat." Jack Kerouac's adhesive identification with Hollywood stereotypes—suggesting a certain naive self-awareness—makes the point clearly. They gave him a banal sense of identity—or did they confirm his inner sense of being banal, just another guy in the same old world?—just as the idea of constantly being on the move on the open road did. It is another clichéd myth of American life, positing the eternal frontier which one needs only a car to reach whenever one wants to (think of the TV automobile ads that show a new car alone on a highway going through the wilderness).

Jack Kerouac realized that pure seeing was the only escape from this social condition—the only decisive freedom from the everydayness he tried to idealize but was ultimately unable to do so. "Beat" never quite became "Beatific," to use his own Catholic formula. This is why he ended his life an uncreative alcoholic regressively living in his parents' home. It is not the kind of regression that Brakhage, who rejected the socially conformist verbal for the nonconformist visual—finally overcoming the Word that William Burroughs thought was the enemy, because it was *the* instrument of control—achieved. Brakhage's visual art is an aesthetic regression in the service of the ego, while Kerouac's verbal art is a regression confirming his ego failure. There is a strong streak of banality in both Ginsberg and Kerouac that confirm the blurring of the boundaries between art and life, to use Allen Kaprow's famous idea, suggesting that their work is more what Kaprow called postart than art. This in turn suggests that their work is innovative social entertainment—they were always pitching themselves to the collective, cutting the esoteric wisdom of the ages down to public size—rather than the mode of transcendence called presentational immediacy or aesthetic seeing.

If the conflict between media consciousness and aesthetic consciousness is the conflict of our age of art, and aesthetic consciousness is on the

decline even as it is being popularized, then Ginsberg and Kaprow are on the winning side rather than the losing side. They are entertainers because their work demands little or no psychic work from us—this is the psychological characteristic of entertainment, as the psychoanalyst Hanna Segal remarks—all the more so because their work tends to turn psychic work into entertainment, in effect shortcircuiting and routinizing it. Such pseudo-working through seems to occur in Ginsberg's "Howl," more wittingly—he seems to be playing to the audience rather than critically examining his psyche, however much he claims to be—than unwittingly. This sharply contrasts with Brakhage, who explores the enigma of sensation with the best of the modernists, more than holding his own in sharp-sightedness. He works through appearances to what the psychoanalyst Donald Meltzer calls the "aesthetic conflict," finally arriving at "aesthetic reciprocity" with them, to use another term of Meltzer's. Aesthetic conflict is the unresolved dialectic between "the aesthetic impact of the outside of the 'beautiful' mother, available to the senses, and the enigmatic inside which must be construed by creative imagination." Awareness of the dramatic difference between the sensation-rich outside and fantasied inside of the object of loving perception is the fundamental paradigm of creative seeing. It seems to resolve the split without denying it. It overcomes the discrepancy between outside and inside, correlate with the tension between sensation and imagination, even as it shows that each tends to negate the other. In other words, creative seeing makes us conscious of the unconscious dialectics of seeing.

Lest you think the reference to the mother is beside the Beat point, one may recall that Ginsberg's "Howl" is in large part a meditation on madness, including his mother's and his own fear of madness. He had to sign off on her lobotomy, which generated the guilt that stands behind the interminable anger and destructive rage—the deep sense of narcissistic injury—of the poem. "Howl is really about my mother, in her last year at Pilgrim State Hospital—acceptance of her later inscribed in *Kaddish* detail." She is twice mentioned in the poem, and, as Gregory Stephenson writes, her "spirit provides much of the impetus for the poem." Stephenson even thinks that Naomi Ginsberg is "the prototype of the persecuted and martyred visionary" in Ginsberg's writings.<sup>1</sup> "Howl," on the surface, is an endorsement of R. J. Laing's once fashionable idea that society is more insane than any individual in it. This is a standard part of the anti-psychiatry movement, erroneous because of its indifference to biological predisposition and because of its nondialectical view that the individual is the passive victim of the environment, which makes it entirely responsible for personal destiny. This idea is also basic to André Breton's *Nadja*, another woman—indeed, muse—whose madness Breton blamed on society, just as Antonin Artaud thought that Vincent van Gogh's madness and suicide were caused by society and just as Artaud's own madness was blamed on

society and his psychiatrists. Naomi Ginsberg, Nadja, Artaud, and van Gogh became paranoid schizophrenics for psychobiological not social reasons.

But Ginsberg's poem is also an imaginative attempt to see into the enigmatic inside of the mad—the mad friend who is the ostensible subject of the poem, and his mad mother who is its implicit subject. Madness has made them emotionally strange and estranged them from themselves, which for Greenberg made them symbols of an America that had lost its bearings. Ginsberg dwells on this disorienting strangeness, lamenting and deploring it, which is not exactly to work it through. He offers no alternative to madness—no escape from it—because he sees it from the outside. It is a histrionic set of symptomatic appearances, which Ginsberg verbally re-enacts. He cannot see into and through madness, establishing the kind of visual dialogue—aesthetic reciprocity—with it that Brakhage thought was basic to Surrealism. For Brakhage, the task of art is to work through the sensuous outside of appearance in order to reach its enigmatic inside, reconciling them in the process. Art shows that they are opposite sides of the same coin, thus changing aesthetic conflict into aesthetic reciprocity. For Brakhage the eye in and of itself accomplishes this transformative working through. Surrendering to the aesthetic impact of the outside of the intriguing object, the eye identifies with it, which allows the eye to see its inside—experience it from the inside, as it were. The enigmatic inside is disclosed in an imaginative act—in a spontaneous image that resembles an epiphany or revelation. The eye effects what the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut calls a transmuting internalization—an imaginative identification with the object in which its mystery seems one's own. For Brakhage, the eye is receptive to sensations, but also inherently imaginative: it spontaneously transmutes the outside into its own inner substance—into “self-consciousness.”

“The agency of my sight darkens,” Gregory Corso writes in “The Geometric Poem,” one of the main poems in *Elegaic Feelings American* (1970). John Clellon Holmes writes of “the exact magnetic eye of [a] wild, uncaring night” in *The Horn* (1958). In *Get Home Free* (1964) he mentions the “Great Gray Eye” of television—obviously before color television—suggesting not only television's but the eye's power to determine consciousness. The metaphor also conveys the sense that society's eye is always watching you. Michael McClure speaks of the need for “New Eyes To See” in *Hymns to St. Geryon* (1959). What they will see is that the self is a “seraph.” In the poem “A Stepping Stone” McClure writes: “We take the steps of alchemy from scale to scale; we cannot fail to burst to new plateaus of musky seeing as we stretch among the breezes.” Interestingly, the photograph on the cover of *Jaguar Skies* (1975), the book of poems which includes “A Stepping Stone,” is the visual equivalent to the poem. Words are arranged like steps of a stairway, and the photograph shows what is in effect a long stairway to heaven: a flight of

steps hewn in weathered stone rising to the open door of a temple, above which clouds dramatically appear in the sky. It is a black-and-white photograph that could be a still from the Hollywood film *The Lost Horizon*, in which the Tibetan Shangri-la has been mythically glamorized, losing its peasant reality. In another poem in the book, "Ode," McClure calls "eyes" "wide explosions." In "The Bow" he writes: "The walls of the frontier are down for those/ who can see it." In "Hwa Yen Totalism" he asserts that we become "radiant momentary gods" when we really see. In "Mad Song" he declares: "Away with the frown and up with the eyelids!" Richard Fariña calls dreams the "mind's additional eye" in *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me* (1966). In *Her* (1960) Lawrence Ferlinghetti speaks of his "battle with the image," which he equates with his "transaction" with himself. Insisting on the priority of direct perception over "geometry and geometrical systems of thinking," the character Dean Moriarty, who appears in Kerouac's *On the Road*—Moriarty is modelled after Neal Cassady, just as Sal Paradise represents Kerouac—exclaims: "It's all *this!*," that is, the here and now visible to the eye. In *Planet News* (1968) Ginsberg talks of the "lacklove-curses on our Eyes" cast by American "Warlocks, Black Magicians," and, as though lifting the curses, in the poem "Kansas City to Saint Louis," which appeared in *The Fall of America* (1972), he expresses the wish "to kiss the eyes of your high school sailors/ and make laughing Blessing/for a new Age in America."

Perhaps the most dramatic, if indirect, apotheosis of seeing over writing occurs, ironically, in the work of William Burroughs, perhaps the best Beat writer. In *The Yage Letters* (1963), Burroughs's exchange of letters with Ginsberg, Burroughs, in response to Ginsberg's fear of going mad, advised him to cut up Burroughs's letter, indeed, cut up "any poems any prose," adding: "What scared you into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you. The word. The—thee word. In thee beginning was the word. Scared you all into shit forever! Come out forever. Come out of the time word the forever. Come out of the body word thee forever. Come out of the shit word the forever. All out of time into space." In *The Job: Interviews with Daniel Odier* (1974) Burroughs remarks that "the word is of course one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and [media] images as well....Now if you started cutting them up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system." For Burroughs the word was not the beginning, as Saint John said it was—for Burroughs certainly not the word of God, who had no authority for Burroughs, and was ultimately in control. Instead, it was what might be called the modernist uncontrolled negative collage-montage vision created by cutting up the positive controlled and controlling vision that the word and word-like images, that is, images that are illustrations of words, offered. Defying the authority of the word—the devil's basic sin was rebellious disobedience against God's word and envy of his absolute power, according to Milton—



means to disorder the universe, that is, separate space from time, creating chaos. Burroughs seems to advocate a return to primordial chaos, but primordial chaos is the false origin of the world. The true origin is God's word, which brought order out of chaos. But Burroughs claims that his anti-vision is the really true vision, for it overthrows God's controlling vision of the world, which limits the individual's control of his own vision—indeed, demands that the individual's vision of the world conform to God's, which is to deny the possibility of having one's individual vision. For Burroughs, and the Beats in general, the first sin is to see with one's own eyes. The question is whether they did.

Another way to ask this question is to ask whether they ever liberated themselves from literature. I don't think they ever did: seeing was a way into writing—visual sensations were a stepping stone to words—which means seeing was shortcircuited. For all their insistence on the continuity between visualizing and verbalizing, visual sense experience is never an end in itself to be elaborated for itself but rather a stimulant to cognitive verbal statement. The complex inarticulateness of pure visual experience is almost immediately transformed into more articulate verbal form, which however subtle is never as subtle as visual experience as such. Thus while Ginsberg, in a letter to Richard Eberhart (May 18, 1956), speaks of the "unspoken visual-verbal flow inside the mind," he remarks that "I transcribe from my ordinary thoughts"—rather than the extraordinary visual-verbal flow, in which there are no ordinary thoughts. The visual-verbal flow simply supplies the "kick" that gets him writing—in his words, the "extra exciting or mystical moments or near mystical moments to transcribe."<sup>2</sup> "A leap in the imagination...is safe to do in a poem," Ginsberg writes, as though it had to be put in written form to be controlled. While Ginsberg says he wants to express the "natural ecstasy" that is expressed in Hart Crane and Walt Whitman—not only models for poetry, but models of homosexuality for Ginsberg, as though homosexuals had more natural ecstasy than heterosexuals, because homosexuality is as "suppressed" in America [at least it was in 1956] as natural ecstasy is, according to Ginsberg—he equates the "leap in the imagination" with "a leap of detachment from the Artificial preoccupations and preconceptions of what is acceptable and normal," and thus a leap into "madness," as he says. Thus for him madness means "what seems 'mad' in America," which is not necessarily the inherent madness of the "visual-verbal flow inside the mind." It is safer to mock and rebel against American heterosexual norms—to spend time with other Beats "talking about our assholes...our cocks...about who we fucked last night, or who we're gonna fuck tomorrow, or what kinda love affair we have, or when we got drunk, or when we stuck a broom in our ass"<sup>3</sup>—than to risk surrendering to the mind's madness. Instead, Ginsberg endlessly repeats clichés about it, mistaking madness for mysticism. Eager to be a saint, as he explicitly says, he misunder-

stands what it means to become a saint, simplistically equating it with social outsidership, which for him means "living outside [the] context" of "people's opinions" and not having an academic job. It is a rather naive conception of what it means to be a social outsider, and a bit of a lie, since Ginsberg earned much of his living by reading his poetry and presenting his ideas about life to students in universities. This doesn't exactly make him an academic poet, but it shows that he never got far from the academy. Indeed, his poetry is academic, in the sense that it turns Crane and Whitman, among other sources and models, into stereotypes by dogmatizing their work into a prescriptive ideology, thus destroying its living dialectic. Also, playing Pied Piper to the young is standard academic practice, however unacknowledged. It was at Berkeley in fact that he met Eberhart. Ginsberg arrogantly believes that the pseudo-madness of rejecting convention is sufficient to "make [his] own sanctity" (letter to Eberhart). But he also writes that "actual living sanctity...requires more time"—than writing, presumably. Indeed, it requires a lifetime, and something more than posturing beyond good and evil as socially defined. Being a social outsider was Ginsberg's version of theater.

The literary use of seeing seems particularly evident in Burroughs's use of Rimbaud's equation of colors and vowels in the "Alchemie Du Verbe" section of "A Season in Hell." As Stephenson notes, "the first version of *The Soft Machine* was divided into four large sections or Color Units: Unit I, Red; Unit II, Green; Unit III, Blue; Unit IV, White." While "this structure was abandoned in the second and third version...it remains embedded in the text."<sup>4</sup> "Color imagery dominates" the book, producing "the effect of synaesthesia." Burroughs thought that Rimbaud's "color of vowels" notion was both a means to and effect of his proposed "systematic derangement of the senses"—the five color-vowels symbolized the five senses—which would result in what Burroughs called a "kinesthetic" vision. He thought that images could be smelled and heard when cut up—a Kandinskyesque idea, it seems: Kandinsky speaks of the scent and sound of colors. In fact, it has been argued that Kandinsky, officially the first Abstract Expressionist, was also the first kinesthetic artist. Kinesthetic art can be understood as an application of his ideas about the imaginative integration of different kinds of sense experience. His play "The Yellow Sound" is a kind of kinesthetic work. But for Burroughs images are verbal constructions—as they were for Rimbaud—suggesting that words were used to generate what might be called an imagistic effect, instead of being used to articulate experienced images. When one reads both Rimbaud and Burroughs one realizes that what they call images are metaphors, indeed, particularly startling word associations that seem imagistic in import because of their extravagant unintelligibility. They jump off the page and hit one in the eye, as it were, all the more so because they are initially incomprehensible. That is, they can be seen but not read and understood, except with great

intellectual effort, and then with no certainty that they have been understood or correctly analyzed. Baffled by their meaning, one is left staring at their arrangement, sometimes in surprise, sometimes with the suspicion that the whole thing is, after all, a verbal show—a sort of verbal sound and fury signifying nothing but nonetheless intriguing and sometimes amusing. Sometimes it seems that Rimbaud and Burroughs were not so much intoxicated by language as manipulating it to generate a sense of mystery, with no certainty about the nature of the mystery: mystery for the sake of mystery not some particularly mysterious thing that language was signifying, however inadequately.

Writing about Cézanne, Ginsberg notes the “literary symbols” that proliferate in his paintings, despite his effort to present only the sensations of his eyes. The symbols in effect control the sensations, socializing them, for symbols are translatable into words—instruments of social control—the way sensations can never be. The conflict between sensation and symbol that Ginsberg saw in Cézanne’s paintings became the conflict of Ginsberg’s poetry. But where Cézanne slowly but surely worked his way through symbol toward sensation—sensation for the sake of intense sensation, rather than sensation serving to enliven symbols, and thus cohering and congealing in the symbol rather than diffusing through space—Ginsberg never did. His sensations were always secondary to his symbols, which were socially communicative in a way sensations never could be. Ginsberg was a propagandist for pure sensation, which he connected, correctly, with mystical experience—but he thought it was the be-all and end-all of mystical experience rather than a side-effect or perhaps a starting point—but he was never able to have a pure sensation without the help of drugs and sex. And I’m not sure whether he really did have pure sensations, or whether the novelty of the experience was “sensational” for him, so that he confused it with the sensations it gave him.

This is in sharp contrast to Cézanne, who found pure sensations in the most mundane phenomena, from his father reading a newspaper and men playing cards to the surrounding everyday landscape of his hometown. Unlike Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Rimbaud, Cézanne didn’t need drugs and sex to carry him over the threshold of luminal vision, which is why his vision was more sustained than theirs. He never forced his sensations and vision with the aid of artificial stimulants. Cézanne realized that they were at their purist when they came naturally—uncontaminated by an ulterior motive. More than Crane and Whitman, Cézanne was a natural ecstatic, which is why his paintings are as quiet as they are intense. He had gotten beyond his *Sturm und Drang* youth and temperament, as Ginsberg never did. It may be that Ginsberg tilted more toward symbol than sensation—subsumed sensation in symbol—than Cézanne because Ginsberg was a writer and Cézanne a painter. But it also seems that Ginsberg liked the sensation of engaging a crowd—being the leader

cheered on and celebrated by the pack—rather than being alone with his own sensations, while Cézanne preferred the solitude and privacy necessary to cultivate the garden of one's sensations. Ginsberg's words eagerly reach out to the crowd—desperately try to attract a mass society audience—as a Cézanne painting never does. Winnicott writes about the ability to be alone as a sign of maturity. Ginsberg never really had it, perhaps because the ability to be alone develops when one is alone with one's mother, according to Winnicott, and Ginsberg couldn't bear to be alone with his mad mother—no reciprocity was possible with her—however much he may have wished to be.

“I got all hung up on Cézanne around 1949 in my last year at Columbia...about the same time that I was having these Blake visions.” (1965 interview.) In my opinion this is a retrospective rationalization of images of himself and his mother, both seriously disturbed emotionally. Ginsberg narcissistically appropriated Blake for his own grandiose purposes. Throughout his career he remained a master of exploiting other people's ideas to inflate his own sense of self. He was a master publicist of himself who used other selves to convince himself and the world that he was a special self. Nonetheless, the fascination with what Ginsberg called Cézanne's “*petites sensations* of experience” seems genuine. Experience is a continuum divided into “*petites sensations*” Leibniz argued, and Ginsberg wanted to immerse himself in the continuum of experience—have an oceanic experience, as it has been called—to forget his emotional troubles and his limited particular identity and personal history. Submerged in a continuum of sexual and drug experience he became a pagan cosmopolitan, transcending his provincial roots as a guilt-ridden New York Jew. Cézanne showed that art was a way of having an oceanic experience. For Ginsberg, “the flashing that you see in Cézanne's canvases” and “the enormous spaces which open up in Cézanne's landscapes” are signs of it. Immersed in this weird unearthly or otherworldly space—the same space that for Burroughs lifted one out of matter and time, the twin enemies of life brought together in the body—things flashed with “extraordinary sensation,” indeed, “cosmic sensation,” as Ginsberg said. That is, the luminous, lyric sensations afforded by things in pure space—their unusually intimate appearance, in which every little detail stood out with “uncanny,” “mysterious” vividness and urgency—contrasted sharply with the sensations things afforded in the everyday world. For Ginsberg, Cézanne, like Blake—he associated the two—was a visionary. That is, his paintings paradoxically convey an out-of-body experience by showing that every experience, even of phenomena such as atmosphere and light, is bodily. The Impressionists realized this when they gave atmosphere and light body, as it were. Cézanne extended Impressionism by pushing bodily experience of other bodies to the limits of sensation. His paintings suggest that by giving oneself completely to the sensations aroused by an impinging bodily presence, one has the sensation that it is disembodied,

or at least unencumbered by a body even as one realizes that it has a absolutely given cumbersome body. With dialectical deliberateness, Cézanne demonstrates that the more concretely sensations are experienced the less concrete they seem. They seem to lose connection to the material that aroused them, becoming "pure" by doing so. As Cézanne wrote, "And this *petite sensation* is nothing other than *pater omnipotens aeterna deus*."

It is worth noting, as Cézanne clearly implies, that he was able to "reconstitute the *petites sensations* that I get from nature" because he had given up sex, or was unable to perform sexually. (He seems to have been bored by his wife, who was initially his mistress, and who was a servant from a class lower than his own. But he may simply have sacrificed his sex—and life—to his art, finding art easier than sex and life, which involve direct relationships with objects rather than the indirect relationship involved in artistically representing or relating to them.) "I'm an old man and my passions are not, my senses are not coarsened by passions like some *other* old men I know," Cézanne wrote. "The attempting to reconstitute the sensation in his own eyeballs" or "actually looking at his eyeballs in a sense," as Ginsberg said commenting on the passage I have just quoted, was contingent upon Cézanne's loss or rejection or sacrifice of passion, that is, a kind of trade-off of impure passion for pure sensation. The association of the *petite sensation* with God the all-powerful father implies that passions are associated with the mother, that is, had unconscious Oedipal import for Cézanne. Renouncing passion he renounced his mother and became the father of his own sensations, giving him the illusion of omnipotent independence—a great alternative in fantasy to actual impotence. In any case, Cézanne's ability to transcend his passions and focus on his sensations made him one of the pioneers of the new sensibility, as Franz Marc called it, or, as I would say, with a certain irony, an epistemological primitive.

Now Ginsberg was not able to give up his passions—they gave him a feeling of being intensely alive that flashes of refined sensations could never match—and passions lent themselves to symbolization as sensations did not. Indeed, the passions have been externalized in art—with much discussion of their distorting effect on pure form (famously in Lessing and Reynolds)—since cave painting, and conspicuously in Greek and Roman art. The passions are also clearly the subject of literature and mythology, at least since the Gilgamesh and certainly in ancient tragedy and comedy. So Ginsberg had a history of literary treatment of passion to fall back on, which he did. He identified with Cézanne, using Cézanne's apparent artistic craziness to rationalize his own feeling of being actually crazy. Ginsberg thought that Cézanne "didn't know if he was crazy or not" in his attempt "to reduce" "a flash of the physical, miracle dimensions of existence...to canvas in two dimensions" and make it look "as much three dimension as the actual world of optical phenom-

ena when one looks through one's eyes" (p. 46). But Ginsberg was unable to do the same thing in the medium of words because they came to him trailing a history of symbolic meaning that for him gave his sensations a depth of meaning and emotional resonance sensations as such never had.

When, in his poem "Ah! Sun-flower" (the same Sunflower that van Gogh painted?) Ginsberg speaks of "cunts of wheelbarrows" and "rubber dollar bills" and "skin of machinery," he is not so much trying to evoke the sensation of a cunt, a wheelbarrow, rubber, dollar bills, skin, and machinery, as arbitrarily and suggestively associating, in the best Surreal manner, incongruous objects. His metaphors are an ingenious bit of Surrealist phrase-making that conveys nothing about what he saw with his own eyes—his own visual sensations of those objects. Ginsberg is interested in objects and the symbolic use he can put them to not in sensations concretely experienced. You can imagine that a wheelbarrow is a female body with a cunt where the sides converge toward the single wheel—and what does it tell us about your attitude to woman when you compare her to a wheelbarrow?—but that doesn't mean you have seen a wheelbarrow and a cunt as phenomena in their own concrete right. Ginsberg's leap of imagination in fact precludes the ripening of his sensations. One has to stick with them, not use them as springboards for one's own meaning. The leap in fact stops their vibrating, to refer to Cézanne's notion of "vibrating sensations," turning them into static ornaments on ordinary objects—just as Ginsberg's constant references to literary mystics are decorative covering on his ordinary thoughts.

Ginsberg's flashes are flashes in the symbolic pan rather than existential miracles, as he thinks. His insistence that they have unconscious meaning makes the point clearly, that is, makes it clear that they are not ecstatic phenomena, or rather that they are make-believe ecstatic phenomena—literary flourishes rather than visual experiences. One might say that Ginsberg pre-empt's sense experience by interpreting it in symbolic terms, rather than conveys, with whatever difficulty and uncertainty, pure sensation—which is inherently difficult and uncertain—as Cézanne's proto-modernist painting does. Cézanne struggled to escape the history of meaning embedded in symbols by looking through his own eyes, and often managed to do so whatever residual symbolic import his paintings may have, but Ginsberg had no eyes of his own, only borrowed literary eyes.

I think the true Cézannean in Beat art is Brakhage. In *Metaphors on Vision* he writes: "I suggest that there is a pursuit of knowledge foreign to language and founded upon visual communication, demanding a development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word. Suppose the Vision of the saint and the artist to be an increased ability to see—vision. Allow so-called hallucination to enter the realm of perception, allowing that mankind always finds derogatory terminol-

ogy for that which doesn't appear to be readily usable, accept dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams, as you would so-called real scenes, even allowing that the abstractions which move so dynamically when closed eyelids are pressed are actually perceived."<sup>5</sup> It is when he finally arrives at the abstractions—disinters them from hallucinations and dream visions—that he meets Cézanne. I regard his films as vernacularized Cézanne paintings. It is because of their Cézannean vibrating sensations, uprooted from objects—what Brakhage called “shuffling patterns” that “muddle the pure white beaded screen”—that they break with and transcend the populist Hollywood film, entering the space of solitude where sensation is authenticated. Brakhage is the purest aesthete in Beat film—film usually not thought of in aesthetic terms, but rather as quasi-biographical narratives of social alienation, masquerading as an altered state of consciousness. His films truly convey the altered state of consciousness which is aesthetic consciousness, affording what he calls a new “visual understanding” of reality. His originality has less to do with his attempt to recover the innocent vision of childhood, as he thought—it has been a standard avant-garde strategy and rationalization since Romanticism—but rather was his attempt to incorporate into what he calls “human visual realities” nonhuman visual realities. I don't know if he's successful or not, but his attempt to use the vision of “creatures of uncolored vision”—the vision of dogs, “the known internal mirrors of the cat,” “the bee's sense of scent through ultraviolet perceptibility”—in his films certainly expands the field of sensation, suggesting the seemingly infinite multitude of visions that exist. His films thus take us beyond Cézanne's human vision, and even beyond Picasso's Cubist vision, which attempted to break away from human vision without knowing where to go.

As Brakhage has said, “man must, as in all other homo motivation, transcend the original physical restrictions and inherit worlds of eyes.” He must move beyond “narrow contemporary moving visual reality, in recognition of the fact that any so-called “absolute realism” is a delusion. “One may hold the camera and inherit worlds of space,” Brakhage writes. Clearly this is a much more complicated world of space than the pseudo-sacred space imagined by Burroughs and Ginsberg. Brakhage's embrace of a plurality of visions and spaces, unified into a cosmic eye, is a much more genuinely ecumenical perceptual mysticism than Ginsberg's literary mysticism. Brakhage thinks that “the artist has carried the tradition of vision and visualization down through the ages,” but he clearly implies that there are non-human artists who may have clearer vision than human artists, for they see reality and space abstractly to begin with.

I leave you with Brakhage's vision of vision. Writing about the eye, he invites us to “Imagine an eye unruléd by manmade laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to

the name of everything but which meets each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception....Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmered with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word'." It is the old avant-garde myth of primordial perception, but Brakhage's films show that it is the inner truth of real seeing. More than any of the Beats, Brakhage opens what Aldous Huxley called "the gates of perception" of Suchness.

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#### Notes

- 1 Gregory Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 53.
- 2 Ann Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul* (New York: Penguin, 2001), p. 214. All subsequent quotations from Charters are from this letter.
- 3 Allen Ginsberg, Interview (1965) in George Plimpton, ed. *Beat Writers at Work* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 39. All subsequent quotations from Plimpton are from this interview.
- 4 Stephenson, p. 67
- 5 P. Adams Sitney, *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. 120-21



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