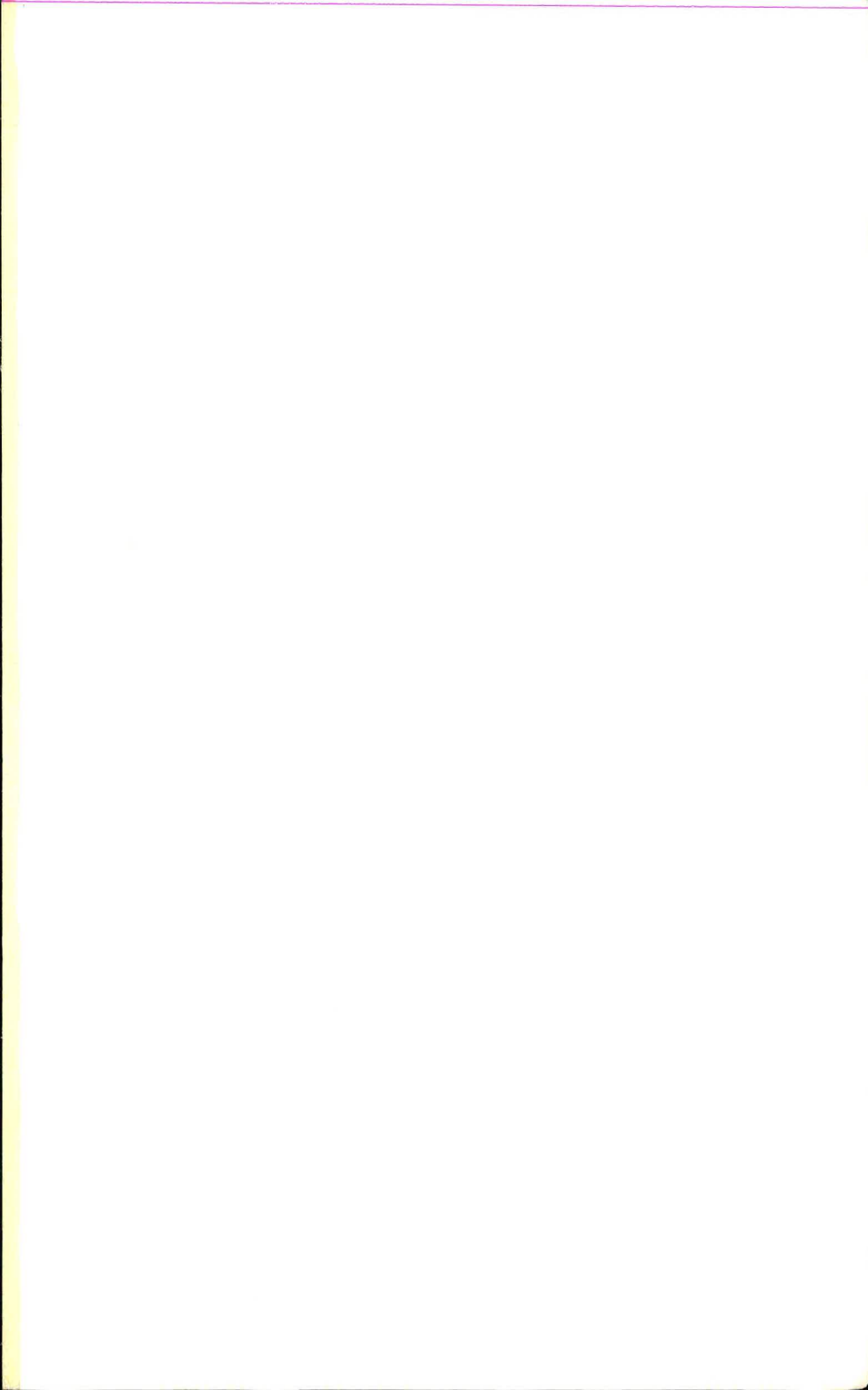


VOL. 11, No. 2

ART CRITICISM



**FRIDA KAHLO AND ANA MENDIETA ... DIALECTIC NEGATION
AND SIGMAR POLKE ... ROGER BROWN'S DAEDALUS AND
ICARUS ... THE FURNITURE-OBJECTS OF SCOTT BURTON ...**



Art Criticism

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The editor wishes to thank the Stony Brook Foundation,
Provost Bryce Hool and the Dean of Humanities and Fine
Arts, Richard A. Kramer for their gracious support.

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ISSN: 0195-4148

On the cover:

My Nurse and I (1937), Frida Kahlo.

Table of Contents

In Her Own Image: Self-Representation in the Art of Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta.....	1
by <i>Danielle Knafo</i>	
Please Seat Your-Self: A Winnicottian Reading of the Furniture-Objects of Scott Burton.....	20
by <i>Larry Busbea</i>	
Public Art/Private Iconography: Roger Brown's Transformation of the Myth of Daedalus and Icarus.....	38
by <i>Mary Mathews Gedo</i>	
Dialectic Negation and the Unpresentable Object of Nihilism in the Painting of Sigmar Polke.....	54
by <i>Lara Ferb</i>	
Anonymity, Artistic Brotherhoods and the Art Market in the Fin de Siecle.....	71
by <i>Laura Morowitz</i>	
The Post-Modern, Avant-Garde Enigma: Who and What is Killing Art?.....	80
by <i>Elaine A. King</i>	
In the Name of Peirce: Art Criticism and the <i>October</i> Circle.....	92
by <i>Barbara Jaffe</i>	



In Her Own Image: Self-Representation in the Art of Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta

Danielle Knafo

For centuries, the representation of women has been nearly the exclusive province of male artists. Duby and Perrot report three "obsessional" themes most frequently encountered in their survey of female images in the history of art: the sexual woman, the mother/protector, and the "subordinate and submissive" mate.¹ They add that images of woman's body as an "object of lust" have permeated Western Art and by far outweigh the other two as the male artist's preferred subject. It is evident that historically male artists and spectators have actively projected their fantasies onto the often passive female form. In Kenneth Clark's widely acknowledged book on *The Nude*, for instance, women appear only as subject, not as creator.² As a result of this rather restrictive view of femininity, the male gaze has become the focus of many writers who believe that the dynamic of male as seer and female as surveyed reflects the way gender roles have been divided in society.³

Over the last century, significant shifts have taken place in female representation in art, largely due to women artists who have sought new ways to depict themselves. Creating alternative representations of women, these artists have produced work that has prompted them to step out of silent, marginalized places as defined by others and confront subjects that have remained largely taboo in our culture. They have used their bodies *to define themselves* and to replace male-generated images like that of the idealized female nude portrait painted in the classical European tradition. Consequently, they have employed forms and metaphors nearer to their own subjectivity and experience. Documenting their lives from a woman's perspective, they have spearheaded the creation of a new feminine aesthetic.

I will discuss two Latin American women artists: Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta, each of whom shared the struggle in a quest for identity as woman and as woman artist, and each of whom employed her art to express and resolve that struggle. I will argue that female self-

representation in art is intimately linked to the relationship with the mother. It therefore differs both from male self-representation and from male representation of the female. That the theme of maternity has captured the attention of many women artists is not surprising since it represents a unique female experience in which women's body egos, the psyche's representation of inner and outer bodily sensations, are profoundly influenced by the fact that they are biologically designed for and potentially taken over completely by the procreative process.⁴ In representing maternity in their art, women have replaced phallic power with the power of the womb. This is not at all to say that male artists have been uninterested in the theme of motherhood (e.g., Gustav Klimt). However, as with their idealized female nude portraits, male artists have usually depicted motherhood as the glorification of femininity; their subjects seem to live out their instinctual female destiny in a natural surrounding from which they form an inseparable part.

It is interesting to note that a parallel process has taken place in the evolution of psychoanalytic thinking. Freud referred to women as "the dark continent" and clearly had a blind spot for the significance of the mother in early development. His case studies reveal a marked omission of mothers, along with a uniform stress on the influence of the oedipal father. Freud wrote that "Everything in the sphere of this first attachment to the mother seemed to me so difficult to grasp...so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify...it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inexorable repression."⁵ He deserves credit for having recognized his limitations for tapping into the more archaic layers of the psyche, represented by the early union with the mother, and for predicting that future analysts, particularly women, might be more successful than he in probing these regions.⁶ In fact, women analysts, most notably Melanie Klein and Margaret Mahler, have shifted the psychoanalytic focus from the father to the mother by uncovering and elaborating the insufficiently explored territory of preoedipal relations, with its attendant emphasis on early maternal bonding.⁷

One obvious reason for woman's easier access to psychic material related to the maternal is due to the fact that she shares the same physical features as her mother. The female self-portrait, therefore, provides an outlet for feelings about one's own body as well as that of the mother. Most importantly, in painting a self-portrait or creating body art, one necessarily treats oneself as both subject and object. I believe that relating to the self as an object results in representation of the manner one was first treated as an object by one's primary caretaker. Therefore, artists who employ self-representation in their work *transfer* their original maternal care onto their art. By recreating the early mother-child relationship, the artist now identifies with both passive *and* active roles. I

would like to propose the term *artistic transference* to refer to the representation of this early mother-child dyad and its simultaneous attempts at reparation that take place in the creation of artworks.

I will demonstrate how both Kahlo and Mendieta employed their art to come to terms with early maternal losses. Finding the mother in the self, and fusing one's own image with that of the mother, allowed Kahlo and Mendieta to restore the broken tie they had with their mothers as well as to create a new image of woman in art. Creation for these artists was in essence a re-creation. Although their art is highly personal and responsive to specific circumstances related to time and place, it ultimately extends beyond the autobiographical, to woman as metaphor for the female experience, to a universality that transcends the individual.

Frida Kahlo (1907-1954)

Frida Kahlo has recently attained a degree of popularity and public fascination usually reserved for cult figures. Over the last 10 years, Kahlo has begun to be hailed as a feminist icon and perhaps the most talented of all Latin American artists. One conclusion clearly emerges from discussions of Kahlo's celebrityhood: her star quality and larger-than-life status are not due to her art alone, but rather to the whole of her life and personality. For years after her death, Kahlo was known only in her native Mexico, and primarily as the wife of internationally acclaimed muralist and painter, Diego Rivera. Although Kahlo adamantly rejected the designation of Surrealist, she is often classified with the movement.⁸ She wrote, "They thought I was Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality."⁹ Nevertheless, André Breton, the father of Surrealism, hailed Kahlo a self-created Surrealist and arranged for a one-woman exhibition in Paris in 1938. He alluded to the characteristic surrealist coexistence of feminine and destructive elements in Kahlo's art when he referred to it as "a ribbon around a bomb."¹⁰ The primitivist style which further characterizes Kahlo's work shows the influence of both Rousseau and Gauguin and was at least partly adopted to camouflage her artistic naiveté.¹¹

Kahlo began painting at the age of 18 following a near-fatal accident which she claimed "destroyed" her by fracturing her spine, shattering her pelvis, and crushing her foot. Her vagina was impaled with a steel rod, which eventually resulted in her inability to bear children. Already struggling with polio since the age of six, she was obliged to wear plaster casts and corsets; required to undergo over 30 operations; and was bedridden and incapacitated over long periods of her life. Twice married to Rivera, Kahlo was deeply distressed by his numerous infidelities, including an affair he had with her sister. Toward the end of Kahlo's life,

she became addicted to pain killers. Following the amputation of her right leg, she felt defeated by physical and emotional pain and chose to end her life in suicide at the age of 47.

Upon initial observation, it appears that Kahlo's art primarily served as a means for coping with physical injury (e.g., *The Broken Column*, 1944). She actually had an easel mounted onto her bed to allow her to paint while prostrate. Her careful paint strokes probably reflect the restrained quality of her physical movements. It is true that she seriously turned to painting only following her accident at the age of 18. However, upon closer examination of her life, it becomes clear that Kahlo was coping with early childhood circumstances that predisposed her to a particular form of artistic expression, with its obsessive emphasis on self-portraiture.

Kahlo's mother, a devout Catholic Spanish-Indian woman, was unavailable to her daughter as an infant. Matilde Kahlo was apparently an histrionic personality who suffered from pseudoseizures that were curious replicas of her husband's authentic epileptic episodes. Unable to have her needs met by her mother, Kahlo turned to her father, a Hungarian-German Jew, for love and guidance. Guillermo Kahlo was a sensitive, somber loner whose physical handicap (epilepsy) and artistic work as a photographer facilitated Kahlo's bonding with him. In a family portrait (*My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, 1936), she places herself in close physical proximity to her father as one way of demonstrating the unwavering tie she had with him. Kahlo's relationship with her father was indeed strong. Nevertheless, her conflicted relationship with her mother proved a deep and more direct driving force for her art. The infant Frida was not breastfed by her mother, but instead, suckled by an Indian wet nurse and cared for by her older sisters. Kahlo explained, "My mother could not suckle me because eleven months after I was born my sister Christina was born. I was fed by a nana whose breasts they washed every time I was going to suck them."¹² In *My Nurse and I* (1937) (see cover illustration), Kahlo boldly represents her mirroring experience as she is shown suckling the breast of a masked Aztec Indian goddess. Although her body is one of an infant, her face is that of an adult. This Rousseau-like painting, where the lack of physical proportion reveals the blurred boundaries between childhood and adulthood, indicates the state in which Kahlo found herself. Even as an adult, she seems to be saying, her needs remained those of a child. The nurse represents the Indian heritage that Kahlo found nourishing and from which she later adopted her persona. It is also significant to consider that she depicts her own mirroring experience as one in which she was obliged to gaze into an impenetrable weeping mask of iron. Not only does the nurse look straight ahead instead of at the child she holds in her arms, but the infant Frida stares blankly as she turns away from the masked face and body of her "symbolic" mother.

Kahlo not only lost her mother's attention at an early age, she also lost her nurse who was fired because she was discovered drinking alcohol.¹³ Thus, her early mothering experiences were associated with unavailability, loss, and rejection.

The mirroring experience is responsible for providing the child with her first sense of identity, which initially means body identity. Early visual contacts with the mother are considered the precursors of the infant's sense of a body self.¹⁴ When the mirroring experience is unempathic, distorted, absent or negative, the child's own existence becomes negated and she develops a disturbance in her primitive self-feeling. Clinicians, including Freud, Winnicott, and Kohut have emphasized the importance of mirroring as a source of transference and cure in the analytic process.¹⁵ I believe that the same search for self that takes place in the mirroring reciprocity between mother and infant and between analyst and analysand can also be undertaken by artists in the creation of their works. In previous writings, I have proposed that the physical limitations of art provide a concrete dimension to the mirroring experience.¹⁶ For Kahlo, the self-portrait represented an apt, almost self-evident, means by which she was able to act as a mirror to herself reflecting her need for self-definition while simultaneously attempting to achieve it.

Although the Indian mother surrogate in *My Nurse and I* has plenty of milk, she also sheds tears of a "mater dolorosa" similar to the painting in Kahlo's depiction of the scene of her own birth (*My Birth*, 1932). In both of these "mother paintings," the mother's face is hidden by a sheet or steel mask only to be replaced by depictions of a weeping martyred virgin or a tearful Aztec goddess. Kahlo's maternal images do not represent a nurturing mother whose face and expression are ready and eager to mirror her child and confirm its existence with pleasure. Instead, she faces masks of mothers, masks that would eventually become the source of her own facade—an inaccessible mask in its own right alluding to profound pain on the one hand, and Mexican femininity on the other. Rivera insightfully wrote that his wife painted her maternal objects in this manner because she was "aware that in reality she had never seen their faces."¹⁷ Interestingly, Kahlo was attracted to Rivera, who was twice her age and three times her size, partly because she loved "the sensitivity of his wonderful breasts" and his notable nurturing qualities.¹⁸

To compensate for a failed mirroring experience with her maternal figures, Kahlo transformed her canvas into a mirror on which she worked at defining herself. Incessantly painting self-portraits, she seemed to be painfully striving to obtain what she did not receive from her mother's eyes: confirmation to help delineate a firm and cohesive sense of self. Not only did she struggle artistically with the theme of mother as faulty mirror, but her self-portraits *replaced* her mother by becoming the mirror

she never had.¹⁹ In *The Two Fridas* (1939), her largest painting, Kahlo represents the self-containment of her world. One Frida holds surgical pincers in her hand to keep the other alive. Although this is a complex painting with many layers of meaning, a central motif concerns Kahlo's appropriation of the maternal function with which to nurture herself. Acting against feelings of self-disintegration and fears of loss of self, Kahlo endeavored to reconstruct a novel self. She thereby introduced into her art the potential for repeatedly reinventing herself. Adjacent to several small self-portrait drawings in her diary, she wrote: "The one who gave birth to herself."²⁰

The self that Kahlo gave birth to was indeed a fabricated self, and to some extent, it was a false self aimed at concealing her true self.²¹ Unsurprisingly, Kahlo's self-image came to resemble a mask. Although it sometimes shed tears, it nearly always refused to display emotion. Kahlo intimated the origins of her mask when she commented, "No one in my house believes that I am really sick since I cannot even say so because my mother...gets sick, and they say it was because of me."²² Unable to tolerate her daughter's infirmity, Kahlo's mother barely visited her for the entire year she was hospitalized following her accident. As a result, Kahlo became the heroic sufferer, and the one who protected her mother by pretending she was well and did not need her. Condensing her image with that of her mother, Kahlo adopted the "mask" of her unresponsive mother, internalized her unaffected face, and subsequently externalized it by projecting it onto the canvas as her own image. Kahlo thus came face-to-face with the face she had once internalized.

Kahlo's identification with her Spanish-Indian mother was far-reaching. She preferred popular methods of representation, related to indigenous Mexican culture known as *Mexicanidad* to more academic European traditions. Kahlo explicitly appropriated the traditional style of *retablo* or *ex-voto* painting in many of her works and it served as an important inspiration for her art. Retablos are small paintings made on sheets of tin and nailed in church as thanks-offerings after a miraculous recovery from an accident or disaster. In addition, the majority of Kahlo's self-portraits portray her in long, feminine, Mexican dresses typical of women from Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, a well-known matriarchal society. She invariably dressed herself as if she were attending a festival, adorning her body with native jewelry and weaving colorful ribbons into perfectly braided hairdos. In fact, Kahlo's elaborate Tehuana costume became such a significant part of her persona that, at times, she even painted it alone and devoid of a body (e.g., *My Dress Hangs There*, 1933). Trying to imitate her mother, whom she depicted only in her white lace wedding dress (*My Grandparents, My Parents and I*, 1936), Kahlo painted herself (*Self-Portrait as Tehuana*, 1943) in an elaborate bridelike costume.

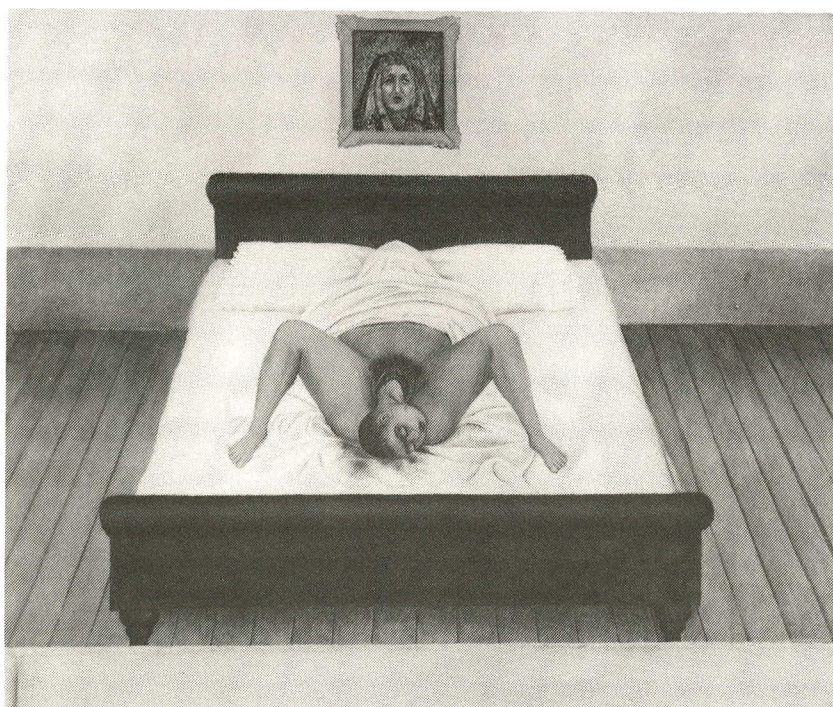


Figure 1. Frida Kahlo. *My Birth*. (1932)

Whereas her mother's dress suitably accommodates her body, Kahlo's gives the impression of being forced to fit like Cinderella's slipper on the feet of her wicked stepsisters. Kahlo clearly sought to identify with her mother by outfitting herself in traditional feminine Mexican costume. In addition to the visual resemblance this produced, the physical sensation of the clothing touching her skin perhaps symbolically created the bodily contact she so longed for with her mother.

That Kahlo's image was, in fact, a condensation of her mother's and her own is best demonstrated in her painting *My Birth* (1932, Fig. 1), which in her own words depicts "how I imagine I was born."²³ The mother lies on a bed with a sheet covering her head and chest as if she is dead. Replacing her head is a painting of the Virgin of Sorrows, the grieving mother, pierced by swords, bleeding and weeping. The baby's head, emerging from between the mother's legs, is unmistakably Kahlo's because the joined eyebrows that became her trademark in her self-portraits are present. Covered with blood, the baby—Frida—appears dead as well. Coming as it did after one of Kahlo's miscarriages, however, this painting additionally alludes to the recent death of *her* unborn child, a scene she depicted in *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), a painting she worked

on at the same time as *My Birth*. In fact, Kahlo explained, “*My* head is covered because coincidentally with the painting of the picture, my mother died (my emphasis).”²⁴ The condensation of her image with that of her mother is significant. Hating her mother for what she did not give her, she kills her off. Nevertheless, she also identifies with her mother’s literal deadness as well as her emotional unresponsiveness and replaces her face with a mask of pain while *she* gives birth to death. *My Birth* is therefore additionally meaningful as a depiction of the act of creation. Kahlo gave birth to her art—the only arena in which she was able to express her conflicts over the derailments in her relationship with her mother as well as attempt to rework and master them. Only in art did she find a positive maternal identification as woman the creator. Indeed, Kahlo was absorbed with maternity in her life and art and she explicitly attributed her creative impulse to her faulty reproductive system: “Painting completed my life. I lost three children.... Paintings substituted for all this.”²⁵

Ana Mendieta (1948-1985)

Like Kahlo, important aspects of Ana Mendieta’s life involved pain and tragedy. Mendieta was born into a well-to-do politically connected Havana family in 1948. Hers was a strong matriarchal family that was dominated by her maternal grandmother, Elvira, the daughter of General Carlos Maria de Rojas, a leader in Cuba’s war of independence (1895-98). Her granduncle, Carlos Mendieta, had been president of the nation in the 1930s.²⁶

Following a difficult pregnancy, the last three months of which required complete bedrest, Mendieta’s mother gave birth to Ana, her second daughter. Mendieta was a sickly child who suffered from anemia and chronic bronchitis. As a result, she was overprotected and indulged, and developed a particularly close attachment to her mother. On the one hand, Mendieta received much attention, warmth, and nurturance from a large extended family and a variety of maternal figures, including her mother, grandmother, nannies, and older sister Raquel. On the other hand, Mendieta’s life, beginning in childhood, involved numerous separations from these figures. Mendieta’s mother, a professor of chemistry and physics worked full-time and left much of the daily caretaking responsibilities to nannies. Nannies came and went, however, including the Chinese-African nanny, for whom Mendieta was the favorite, left for the United States when she was eight. The two Mendieta sisters, along with their two female cousins, spent every summer and holiday at their beloved grandmother’s house. Separations from this powerful and warm woman were invariably accompanied by painful crying fits.²⁷

Mendieta’s father, Ignacio, became unemployed and blacklisted for

engaging in Cuba's impending counterrevolutionary struggle. With the growth of anti-communist trends in Cuba, Mendieta's parents decided to send her at age 12 and her older sister, Raquel, at age 15, to the United States in 1961 through Operation Peter Pan, a program created by the Catholic Church to encourage emigration and preservation of the children's Catholic upbringing. Although Mendieta's parents believed the separation would last only one year, it extended much longer. Mendieta's mother joined the girls after five years. Her father was arrested in 1965 and not permitted to leave Cuba until 1979.

Mendieta and her sister were torn away from their homeland and, following several months in a camp in Miami, were sent to live in an orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa. Although she was initially excited by what she perceived to be an exciting adventure, after several weeks Mendieta cried incessantly upon beginning to realize the reality of her situation. The orphanage housed many adolescent delinquent girls and the Mendieta sisters were often separated and mistreated by the nuns.²⁸ From the orphanage, the sisters were shuttled among a number of foster homes. Mendieta began to regard herself as an orphan.²⁹ She was once again compelled to endure a difficult separation when her sister, the person who had become the sole constant object in her life as well as her primary mother figure, left for college. Mendieta's pain was exacerbated by the fact that her high school classmates teased her with racial epithets.³⁰ At this point, she stopped eating and became so depressed that her foster family sought psychiatric help for her.

In her adulthood, Mendieta followed in Kahlo's footsteps by first getting involved with Hans Breder, an older married art teacher at the University of Iowa, and later marrying the older, physically imposing (Mendieta was a mere 4'11"), well-known minimalist sculptor, Carl Andre. At age 38, as her career was on the rise, Mendieta became the victim of an infamous and unresolved death that resulted from a fall from the 34th floor balcony in the apartment she shared with her husband, who was accused and later acquitted of her murder.

Mendieta's oeuvre is multifaceted. Whereas she produced body art and created performance pieces, she is best known for her earth works built-up with twigs, grass, mud, sand, stone, clay, snow, and ice on riverbanks, beaches, archeological sights, trees, and limestone caves, all of which use her own body or its silhouette. The 1970s feminist movement had a profound effect on Mendieta's self-portrayals. Feminist "body art" offered women a set of aesthetic and ideological tools by which they gave shape to their concerns about gender issues. Women reclaimed sole authority over their bodies and the celebration of woman's sexuality and uniqueness became the purpose and focus of feminist body art.

Mendieta also made petroglyphlike drawings and carvings on fig

leaves and paper. The impermanence of most of the materials she used—soil, sand, gunpowder, flame, fiber—reflects the transient nature of the primary subject of her work: the ephemeral bonding with the mother. Mendieta was clearly aware of the psychological sources of her artwork when she wrote the following:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth ... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs ... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being.³¹

Mendieta's awareness stopped short of the ultimate realization that her work dealt with the undifferentiated state between mother and self. In fact, the need to repeatedly return to the "obsessive" theme of separation and reunion became the *raison d'être* of her art. Although she did not reflect on it consciously, this awareness emerged clearly in her work. Her longing to recreate the *oceanic feeling*, which Freud described as "an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" deriving from the mother-infant merger, is literally expressed in one of her early performance works in which she allowed her body to become one with the water as she floated naked in the ocean.³²

Since prehistoric times, women have been identified with the earth; the earth has been regarded as symbolizing the womb, hence the terms Mother Earth and Mother Nature. For Mendieta, the earth and Cuba, her motherland, became surrogate mothers with which she played out her issues of separation and loss. She treated the earth as if it were her mother's body and used it to repeat and repair her trauma at one and the same time. She accomplished this through a continued exploration of the concepts of figure and ground. Mendieta literally grounded herself in each new site, thereby becoming not only a figure within the ground, but also, a grounded figure. Her need to stay grounded was so intense that she suffered from a fear of heights throughout her life. Mendieta blurred the boundaries between self and object by joining figure and ground, thereby representing the longed-for symbiotic reunion of mother/ground and child/figure.

Mendieta's *Silueta Series*, which she produced in the 1970s, best illustrates the artist's dialogue with her lost mother by way of her art. These "earth-body" sculptures are characterized by the lingering shape of Mendieta's body which had been literally hewed into landscapes, traced in sand, etched in dirt, carved in rock, and at times, covered with blood. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud wrote of how the "shadow of the [lost] object" falls on the ego of the person in mourning and leaves a trace of its existence.³³ Mendieta's title *Silueta*, or silhouette, can be understood as referring to this shadow, or in her own words, the "after-image" of her mother whose imprint had invariably remained in her life and art. Mendieta retraced her connection to her mother through nature by blending herself into the landscape. Incorporating the lost object through a process of identification, she tried to reestablish her place in the world.

Mendieta's anger at being expelled from the warmth of her mother's bosom also found expression in her work. She felt rejected by her parents for having sent her away and her rage permeated her art. Furthermore, although she desired merger, she was also aware of its restraining consequences. Therefore, much of her art simultaneously expresses her wish to reunite with the mother and the anger necessary to separate from an all-encompassing mother. Mendieta once remarked, "Art for me has been a way to sublimate rage. In fact it has been necessary to have such rage to free myself from confinement and the fury of confinement."³⁴ This explains Mendieta's use of explosives in some of her silhouettes. After becoming one with the elements, her forms are set on fire and left to smoke and simmer until all that remains is a blackened cavity filled with the ashes of what had once been a benign union.

Mendieta sought out various sites in Iowa and Mexico for her *Silueta* works. In Mexico, she found a culture that possessed similarities with her own and, for nearly every summer in the 1970s, visited this country which had become her substitute mother/Cuba. She said, "Plugging into Mexico was like going back to the source, being able to get some magic just by being there."³⁵ Incidentally, Mendieta was quite impressed with Frida Kahlo and made certain to visit Kahlo's home in Coyoacan whenever she was in Mexico.³⁶ It is not a coincidence that she chose to work in Mexico's archeological sites. Mendieta traced her roots at the Zabotec burial site located at Yaagul in the Valley of Oaxaca. There, she lay her naked body on the ground of an ancient Zapotec stone grave and covered it with white blossoming flowers. In this first *silueta*, the contrast between the burial site and the fresh flowers demonstrates how Mendieta used her art to generate new life from death through her own body.

Santeria, a New World form of Yoruban religion created by Nigerian slaves who came to Cuba in the 16th century, became a major source of inspiration for Mendieta. Derived from the Spanish *Santo*, Santeria

connotes the worship of saints. Mendieta preferred the teachings of Santeria which proclaimed the earth a living thing from which one gains power over Catholicism's emphasis on distant, and to her mind unattainable, heavenly forces. Catholicism, the religion in which she was raised in Iowa orphanages and that reminded her of the pain of exile and difference, contrasted sharply with Santeria, a religion that connected the natural and spiritual realms, and also brought back memories of her lost childhood. Like Kahlo who found solace in her wet nurse, Mendieta, in her exiled adulthood, sought to reestablish connections with some of her secondary maternal figures from early life. Santeria was the religion of the black servants and nannies with whom she grew up. Mendieta is known to have spent afternoons with these servants, listening attentively to their tales of the powers and magic of the *orisha* gods, each of whom is identified with a force of nature.³⁷ She found affirmation and comfort in Santeria's holistic belief in the harmony of the universe which, in turn, found expression in her art.

Indeed, art was a spiritual act for Mendieta—an act of magic. She was a conduit; the shaman, who left a talisman to work its magic with the elements. In creating her earth-body sculptures, she went through her own rituals. She usually worked alone, prepared the land, claimed her territory, and made it sacred. Appropriating from Santeria what she called its "healing imagery," Mendieta drew on rituals and symbols that affirmed social bonds, connected her to the past, and sought to overcome the limitations of time, place, and mortality. In her *Silueta* series, she created a ritual which she repeated time and time again—that of birth - death - rebirth and separation - reunion. Although her art dealt with matters of loss and death, it gained a transformative power by using human gestures to breathe life into natural materials.

Similar to Kahlo's condensation of her body with that of her dying mother in *My Birth*, Mendieta created an earth-body work in 1977 (Fig. 2) which condensed her body with that of her mother. Executed at Old Man's Creek in Iowa City, Mendieta shaped sand and water into dimensions matching her silhouette which she then pierced with sticks. Years later, she connected the making of this piece with her knowledge that her mother was being operated on for cancer at the time. She claimed that although she had been unaware that sticks were used in African healing rituals in this manner, she was nonetheless subconsciously attempting to heal her mother's physical illness.³⁸

Santeria influenced Mendieta's transition from the personal use of her body in art to the creation of more generalized female archetypes. In 1975, she replaced the actual use of her body with the arrangement of natural elements in the shape of her silhouette.³⁹ In the 1980s, Mendieta abandoned her body shape entirely and replaced it with universal

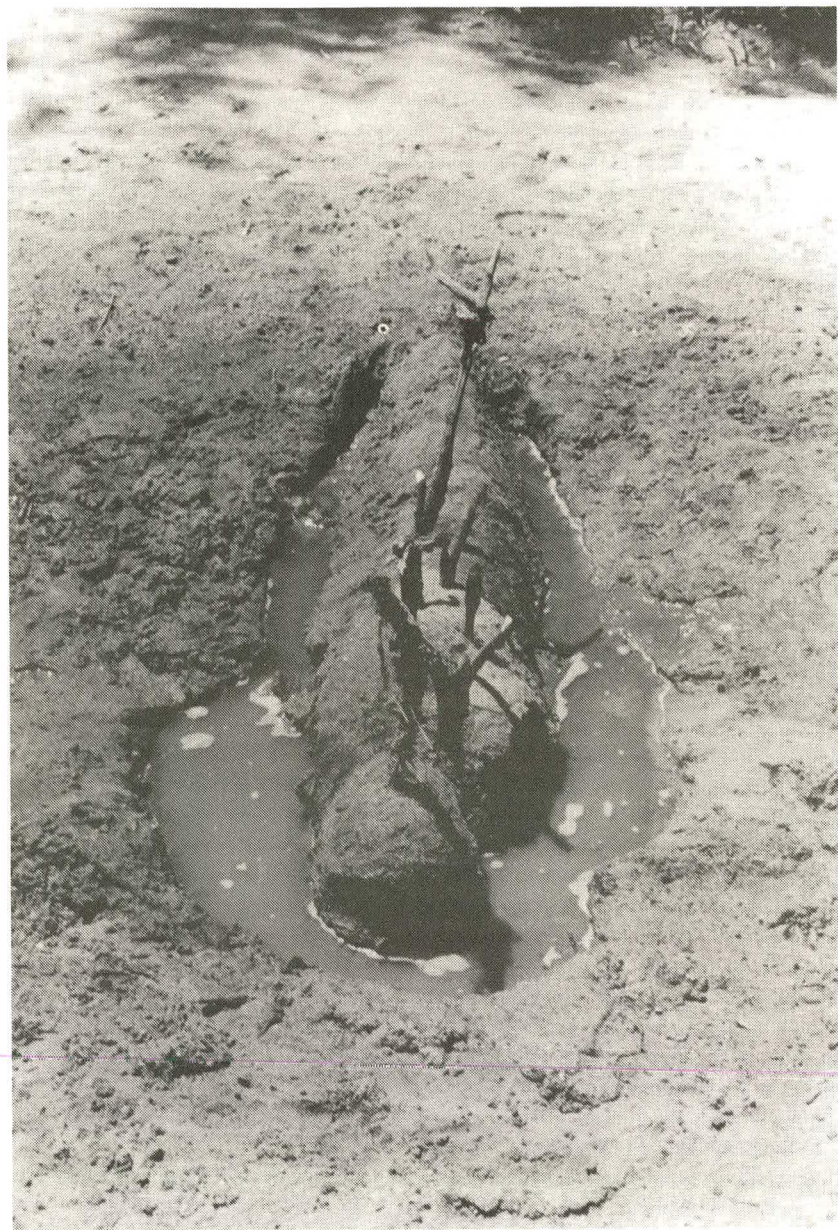


Figure 2. Ana Mendieta. *Untitled* (from the series *Fetish*). (1977) Color photograph. Collection of WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK.

feminine forms, many of which are intended to represent the archetypal mother or goddess. Mendieta was influenced by fellow artist, Mary Beth Edelson, to join the feminist art movement, Reclamation of the Goddess, a movement whose primary aim was to find and use historical images of powerful female forms.⁴⁰

In 1981, Mendieta returned to her native Cuba and carved what she called her *Rupestrian Sculptures* (Fig. 3), feminine images of Taínan goddesses, into the limestone rock of the womb-like caves of Jaruco, a mountainous region west of Havana. She named these images for the pre-Columbian goddesses in the language of the Tíano Indians. It is clear why Mendieta was attracted to the Tíans; she identified with this extinct people whose culture was lost because they had been overpowered by the Spanish and decimated by hunger and disease.⁴¹ Once again Mendieta wished to use her art to give life to what had formerly been destroyed. Unsurprisingly, in her motherland—the land of her mother(s)—the place where she had once been mothered—many of Mendieta's titles refer to the Mother Goddess (e.g., *Mother of Waters*, *Old Mother Blood*, *First Woman*, or simply *Mother*.) The themes of exile, separation, absence, dislocation, and loss infuse Mendieta's work with her personal pain. The parallel focus on reunion, the regenerative, ancient fertility cults, and archetypal mother and goddess imagery point to the healing and mastery of that same pain.



Figure 3. Ana Mendieta. *Untitled (Esculturas Rupestres)* (1981). Photo: Ana Mendieta, Courtesy of the Estate of the Artist and Galerie Lelong.

Discussion: Like Mother, Like Daughter

Over the past century, women's self-representation in art has increasingly confronted viewers with female experiences that had remained invisible in the art of earlier times. As they became both artist and model, women have activated their gaze and directed it upon themselves. By showing what they know of their bodies not only from the outside in, but also from the inside out, they have transformed the previously dominant images of women in art. Redirecting the gaze in art has meant expanding the notion of visual desire. Taking pleasure in the visual is no longer considered to be restricted to men. Women who look into their mirrors not only find meaning in what they see; they also seek the mutual gaze of women as well as men in their quest for self-knowledge.

I have attempted to show how Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta captured the nonverbal relationship with the mother in the form of artmaking. Since she shares the female body with her mother, the woman artist who depicts herself, of necessity, portrays her internalization of and identification with the mother. Because of this identification, a woman's psychological separation from her mother is bound to reveal particular characteristics. The most crucial identification the woman artist has with her mother is in her power to [pro]create. As women artists condense their likeness with that of the mother, they become both maker and image, subject and object, seer and surveyed. I believe the way the mother-child relationship is expressed in women's art has contributed to the uniqueness of female self-representation and explains some of its special features. The emphasis on nature, birth imagery, symbiotic merger, containment, and mirroring all allude to the early tie to the mother. More importantly, relating to the self as an object, like the mother once did, entitles the artist to take over the transformative function of the mother. The artist not only represents what might have gone wrong in this relationship, she also makes attempts at reparation. I propose that this dynamic parallels that which exists in psychoanalytic treatment. The transference repetition and working through that are so visible in the art of Kahlo and Mendieta echo the familiar processes that take place in an analysis. The early mother-child dyad is transferred onto and into the artwork in both form and content through a constant dynamic of externalization and internalization. It is only upon understanding the object relational dynamic that takes place in the creative process that one can truly appreciate its potential for healing.

This paper has focused on the significance of the mother in the art of Kahlo and Mendieta. At this point, I would like to emphasize that I have

largely omitted the father in my discussions *not* because I think the fathers were irrelevant to the lives of these women. Linda Nochlin pointed out that nearly all women artists were either daughters of artist fathers or had a close relationship with a “stronger, ... more dominant” male artist.⁴² Indeed, Kahlo is known to have held her photographer father in high esteem. As a girl, she worked as his assistant and later took after him by becoming an artist herself. Subsequently, Rivera replaced Kahlo’s father as her male model/artist. He not only praised his wife’s art, he also influenced its Mexican content and strong bright colors. Likewise, Mendieta’s father was a “frustrated artist” who made wood carvings in a studio attached to the family home.⁴³ In adulthood, Mendieta found a supportive father figure in the person of Hans Breder, an art teacher at the University of Iowa. Breder exposed Mendieta to a wide variety of performance artists and artists who employed their bodies in their work.⁴⁴ The influence of Breder’s multimedia oeuvre is evident in the evolution of Mendieta’s artistic idiom.

In light of these important relations, I believe that Kahlo and Mendieta conceived of their audience in terms of the Father. Kahlo illustrated her awareness of Rivera as her designated audience when she wrote, “I began to paint things that he [Diego] liked. From that time on he admired me and loved me.”⁴⁵ Throughout the 1970s, Breder joined Mendieta in her annual sojourns and it was he who not only watched approvingly as she joined her body with Mother Earth, but also filmed her during the creation of her works.⁴⁶ Therefore, Kahlo and Mendieta seem to have been working out their relationship to the mother for the visual pleasure and responsiveness of the father.

Throughout this paper, I have stressed the similarities in the art of Kahlo and Mendieta. I have emphasized how the knowledge of their bodies was intimately related to the way they had experienced them with their primary love object. In this connection, I would like to note an important difference which distinguishes their work. Kahlo’s relationship with her mother seemed derailed from the beginning of her life. Due to faulty early mothering, her art attempted to provide her with something she never completely had: adequate libidinalization of the body with the mother necessary for the development of her own body ego.⁴⁷ This lack was further exacerbated by the physical and psychological repercussions of the severe body damage she incurred from her bout with polio in childhood and near-fatal accident in adolescence. The repeated encounter with her reflection, therefore, served as a concrete reminder of her existence—a crucial reassurance for Kahlo, whose sense of herself seemed so precarious she feared losing it at any time. In addition to compulsively painting self-portraits, she surrounded herself with mirrors of all sizes, which she placed at varying angles from her bed (where she

spent much of her time), with an enormous one facing down at her from the underside of the canopy. Kahlo's need to fill a gap in her personality structure explains the compulsive repetition in her work. She once stated, "Nothing seemed more natural than to paint what had not been fulfilled."⁴⁸ This need is also reflected in the observation that her art changed little over time. She is known to have lamented the fact that she was unable to transcend the use of herself as subject in order to represent more socialist concerns in her work.⁴⁹ In the final analysis, Kahlo's art consists of the same exquisite self-portrait: the face, a mask of strength; the body, an emblem of survival; and the total image, a poignant masquerade of female suffering.

Mendieta, on the other hand, experienced mothering from multiple sources in early life, which may explain why her art involved the need to *recreate* what she once had. Since Mendieta's losses seem to have occurred at a later stage in development than Kahlo's, it is possible that they were relatively easier to overcome. This is perhaps most evident by the fact that Mendieta's art evolved over the years. Although the theme of her work remained closely tied to the mother, it gradually became Mother with a capital M.

It is clear, from the analysis of self-representation in the work of Frida Kahlo and Ana Mendieta, that women artists have begun to create an iconography that has empowered the female form. As with psychoanalysis, it has taken the work of women to recover and represent the "shadowy" stage of early development that Freud found so impenetrable. Women artists who have chosen to courageously enter the world of fusion with the object have confronted feelings ranging from bliss to terror, omnipotence to helplessness. Unafraid to represent the archaic union, or what Mahler called the *milieu interieur*, these artists have succeeded in expanding our vision of the female in art and directed our gaze to the crucial significance of early states of merger for the development of one's body ego.

Notes

- 1 George Duby & Michelle Perot, *Power and Beauty: Images of Women in Art* (London: Tauris Parke Books, 1992), 18.
- 2 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon, 1956).
- 3 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Penguin, 1949/1972); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972); Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure in narrative cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), 14-26.
- 4 Estelle Weldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* (New York: Guilford, 1988).
- 5 Sigmund Freud, "Female sexuality," *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth), 21:226. See Andre Green, "The analyst, symbolization and absence in the analytic setting," in *On*

- Private Madness* (New York: International Universities Press, 1986), 30-59; Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), 296; Hans Loewald, "The waning of the Oedipus Complex," in *Papers on Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 384-404; and Janine Chasseguet-Smirguel, "The archaic matrix of the Oedipus Complex," in *Sexuality and Mind: The Role of the Father and Mother in the Psyche* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), all of whom discuss Freud's blind spot regarding female sexuality and motherhood.
- 6 See Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press, 1995) for a more extensive investigation on the implications of Freud's theoretical omissions.
 - 7 It should be mentioned that Otto Rank and Sandor Ferenczi were among the early male psychoanalysts who were alert to the importance of the mother. Significantly, Freud broke off with both men for their differences.
 - 8 All biographical information is based on Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1983) unless otherwise specified, 266.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Herrera, 1991, 3.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: The Paintings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 12-13.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," in *Ecrits*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 93-100; D.W. Winnicott, "Mirror role of mother and family in child development," in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 130-138.
 - 15 Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations to physicians practicing psycho-analysis," in *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth, 1912), 12:109-120; Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press); & D.W. Winnicott, 1971.
 - 16 Danielle Knafo, "Egon Schiele and Frida Kahlo: The self-portrait as mirror," *Journal of the Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 19 (1991), 629-646; Danielle Knafo, *Egon Schiele/ A Self in Creation: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Artist's Self-Portraits* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993).
 - 17 Erika Billeter, "Frida and Maria," in *Images of Mexico* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1987).
 - 18 Herrera, 1991, 14.
 - 19 Danielle Knafo, "The mirror, the mask, and the masquerade in the art and life of Frida Kahlo," *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*, 21 (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1993), 277-299.
 - 20 Frida Kahlo, in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 228.
 - 21 D.W. Winnicott, "Ego distortion in terms of true and false self, in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1960), 140-152.
 - 22 Herrera, 1983, 75-76.
 - 23 Ibid., 156.
 - 24 Ibid., 138.
 - 25 Ibid., 148.
 - 26 Heidi Rauch & Federico Suro, "Ana Mendieta's primal scream," *Americas* (1992), 45.
 - 27 Biographical information is based on interviews with Raquel Mendieta Harrison, January 11 & 13, 1996.
 - 28 Diana Montane, "The rise and fall of TropicAna," *Tropic*, Sept. (1991), 15.
 - 29 Mendieta wrote: "My orphanhood I live," quoted in Nancy Spero, "Tracing Ana Mendieta," *Artforum* (April 1992, vol. XXX, 8), 75-77.
 - 30 K. Horsfield, B. Miller, & N. Garcia-Ferraz, *Ana Mendieta: Fuego de Tierra* (Video recording, 1988).
 - 31 Petra Barreras del Rio & John Perrault, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), 10
 - 32 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and its discontents," *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth, 1930) 21: 68.
 - 33 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition* (London: Hogarth, 1917), 14: 237-258.

- 34 Spero, 77.
- 35 Coco Fusco, "Traces of Ana Mendieta," *Poliester* (Winter, 1993), 61.
- 36 Personal communication with Hans Breder, January 15, 1996.
- 37 Mary Jane Jacob, "Ana Mendieta: The 'Silueta' Series" 1973-1980 (New York: Galerie Lelong, 1991), 4.
- 38 Personal communication, Raquel Mendieta, January 13, 1996.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Recovering her story: Feminist artists reclaim the great goddess," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American of the 1970's, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude & Mary Garrard (New York: Abrams, 1994), 174-189.
- 41 Bonnie Clearwater, "Introduction: The Rupestrian Sculptures," in *Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works*. (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1993).
- 42 Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 169.
- 43 Interview with Raquel Mendieta Harrison, January 11, 1996.
- 44 Personal communication with Hans Breder, January 15, 1996.
- 45 Herrera, 1983, p.95.
- 46 Personal communication with Hans Breder, January 15, 1996.
- 47 William Hoffer, "Oral aggressiveness and ego development," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 31 (1950), 156-160.
- 48 Herrera, 1983, 317.
- 49 Kahlo, 1995, 252.

Please Seat Your-Self: A Winnicottian Reading of the Furniture-Objects of Scott Burton

Larry D. Busbea

“The mind has a root, perhaps its most important root, in the need of the individual, at the core of the self, for a perfect environment.”¹

The furniture forms of Scott Burton have most often been considered within the context of the cultural issues they address. While his work is more complex than this, participating in the discourse of art history, and of the formal aspects of the fine versus the decorative arts, the societal aspects of his gallery pieces and public sculptures alike are most easily read as indicators of the artist's political agendas. This essay, however, will give a closer inspection of the psychological tension implicit in Burton's art—a tension which is often hinted at by critics, but seldom drawn out to its many possible conclusions. More specifically, I will apply D.W. Winnicott's theory of the False Self to the oeuvre of Burton, in order to conclude that he was essentially a False Self personality. This treatment will also incorporate Winnicott's theories of the Transitional object, as well as his thoughts on the transitional space. First, I will give some brief biographical information about the artist, which will be followed by a discussion of Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories. I will then apply those theories to a close formal and theoretical consideration of Burton's art, which will be roughly divided into four categories.

Biographical information on Burton is quite scarce, relating usually to the facts about his birth and exhibits. One reason for this is probably his self assertion as a “public artist,”² which would minimize the importance of deep, psychological biographical research. He was born in Alabama in 1939, moved to New York city at the age of twenty, and died there at age fifty, in December, 1989. More specifically, he was an extremely literate person, having first studied literature, and being a well published art critic. He worked as an editor of *Art in America* for a short time.³ His homosexuality was no secret, but at the same time, he never made overt reference to it in his art. He is known to have shown an interest in

aesthetic matters early in his life, which is often a psychological characteristic of homosexuals. His earliest works were performances, and then he moved on to the sculptural forms which made him famous. His death was caused by the AIDS virus, and living with this illness definitely informed the production of his final work.

Winnicott's theories of the true and false self will be integral to the development of this essay. It is in his famous lecture from 1960, "Ego Distortion in terms of True and False Self," that Winnicott locates the development, and potential over-development of the False self, and its relation to the True self. Like most of Winnicott's theories, the True/False Self distinction occurs during infancy, and is the result of the infant's relation to its mother, or in Winnicottian terms, its "facilitating environment."⁴ This environment, for Winnicott, is one in which the mother/infant relationship consists of a delicate balance between the meeting and denial of infant needs. It is the proper mixture of this provision and denial, that leads to the development of a strong, healthy ego for the infant.⁵ Accordingly, it is imbalance in the mother/infant relationship of this provision and denial that can lead to ego problems, i.e. too much denial at the wrong times, or too much provision for the infant's needs. It is from this model of early childhood development that Winnicott posits the formation of the True and False Self, describing both the importance of each, and the dangers in either one maintaining too much power in the psyche (I use the term "power" not to suggest some kind of struggle in the psyche, but to describe the sway that can be attained by either the True or False self, and how that sway can effect the ego and its relationship to the world).

It can be said that the development of the True and False self, as Winnicott sees it, begins with infant needs. These needs can be expressed as either id-needs or ego-needs.⁶ Winnicott's delineation of these two types of need is not as clearcut, however, as a strictly Freudian understanding of the terms "Id" and "Ego" would lead one to expect:

It must be emphasized that in referring to the meeting of infant needs I am not referring to the satisfaction of instincts. In the area that I am examining the instincts are not yet clearly defined as internal to the infant. The instincts can be as much external as can a clap of thunder or a hit.⁷

He goes on to discuss the way in which instincts are internalized, and the importance, to the development of the ego, of the meeting of these infant needs.

The infant's ego is building up strength, and in consequence is getting towards a state in which id-demands will be felt as part of the self, and not as environmental. When this development

occurs, then id-satisfaction becomes a very important strengthener of the ego, or of the true self; but id excitements can be traumatic when the ego is not yet able to include them, and not yet able to contain the risks involved and frustrations experienced up to the point when id-satisfaction becomes a fact.⁸

Thus, the ways in which infant needs are met or not met can affect the healthy development of the ego.

In the section entitled "The Mother's Part," Winnicott describes in greater detail what these needs consist of and how it is the mother (facilitating environment) that is responsible for the meeting of these needs. The idea of omnipotence becomes important as the tendency which the infant exhibits, and which must be responded to by the mother. The "good-enough mother," maintains Winnicott, "meets the omnipotence of the infant and to some extent makes sense of it." Omnipotence, in this context, is the spontaneous gesture of the infant, directed at an object which the child does not yet perceive as being separate from himself, and therefore completely mutable or controllable. The good-enough mother repeatedly meets this gesture, and "A True Self begins to have life, through the strength given to the infant's weak ego by the mother's implementation of the infant's omnipotent expressions."⁹ Thus, the True Self is linked to a healthy ego. Conversely:

The mother who is not good-enough is not able to implement the infant's omnipotence, and so repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture; instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant. This compliance on the part of the infant is the earliest stage of the False Self, and belongs to the mother's inability to sense her infant's needs.¹⁰

What these two cases lead to (the good-enough, and not-good-enough) is either the development of a healthy ego, or of an overly-developed defense mechanism which is the False Self. In the former case, the child's omnipotent gestures are met repeatedly until, eventually, the infant develops and recognizes the illusory element in these gestures, and thus begins to distinguish the difference between the real, and imaginary realm. "Here is the basis for the symbol," Winnicott says, "which at first is *both* the infant's spontaneity or hallucination, *and also* the external object created and ultimately cathected."¹¹ The infant's omnipotence, when adequately supported by the mother, eventually develops into a strong ego, and the ability of the infant to react to the demands of external reality with the healthy spontaneity and creativity that can only be a function of the True Self.

When the infant's gestures are not met, in the case of the not-good-enough mother, the ego fails to develop the necessary strength, and the easily traumatized True Self requires some other means of protection, lest it die:

...where the mother cannot adapt well enough, the infant gets seduced into a compliance, and a compliant False Self reacts to environmental demands and the infant seems to accept them. Through this false self the infant builds up a false set of relationships, and by means of introjections even attains a show of being real, so that the child may grow to be just like mother, nurse, aunt, brother, or whoever at the time dominates the scene. The false self has one positive and very important function: to hide the true self, which it does by compliance with environmental demands.¹²

Winnicott goes on to describe the way in which this False Self assimilates to its environment.

In the extreme examples of False Self development, the True Self is so well hidden that spontaneity is not a feature in the infant's living experiences. Compliance is then the main feature, with imitation as a specialty. When the degree of the split in the infant's person is not too great there may be some almost personal living through imitation, and it may even be possible for the child to act a special role, that of the true self *as it would be if it had had existence*.¹³

Winnicott's model provides an absolutely fascinating description of the complexities of the ego, and the infant's development, as the infant relates to the world around it. He describes not only the potential danger of the over-development of the False Self, but the extreme importance that the False Self plays, as a function of the ego, in actually protecting the True Self. In other words, compliance, in some degree, to the demands of the world is often the most healthy form of reaction. It would not be in the interest of smooth social relations, or the True Self, to constantly expose one's needs; to "wear one's heart on one's sleeve," as the saying goes.

The True/False self model is not the only Winnicottian development which can be utilized in the interpretation of the furniture-sculpture of Scott Burton. I will briefly examine Winnicott's ideas about transitional objects, and his thoughts on transitional space, both of which are relevant to art and artists in general, and the work of Burton in particular.

The term "transitional object" is especially important to a Winnicottian understanding of the aesthetic experience. It is also

important in terms of the development of a healthy ego in the infant. It is the transitional object which allows the infant to shift from a purely internal realm to the realm of the exterior world. Of course, for Winnicott, the infant (or the adult) will never exist in one realm entirely, but will simultaneously be affected by psychic and objective reality. The healthy manipulation of this dialectical interaction is aided by the transitional object, which Winnicott posits as a teddy bear, or blanket, which can inhabit the world of the infant's id, and ego-needs, as well as being resistant to total omnipotent manipulation. Thus, the transitional object operates in the "space" between the real and psychic worlds, and helps the infant gradually understand its separateness from the objects around it, and the ways in which it can affect those objects.¹⁴ This process takes place, like all of Winnicott's developmental theories, within the infant's facilitating environment. In other words, it is the infant-mother relationship which makes the development of a healthy ego possible. It is the mother's provision for and denial of infant needs that allows the ego to strengthen into a mechanism which can navigate the external world in a healthy, spontaneous manner. It then follows that the implementation of the transitional object is involved in the development of the True and False self.

Just as the transitional object is important as an object, the location of transitional phenomena is equally important. Winnicott, in his 1971 lecture "The Location of Cultural Experience," posits this location in a "potential space."¹⁵ This "space" is the dialectic vacillation between "the subjective object and the object objectively perceived."¹⁶ This space is not only the location of transitional phenomena, but also the infant's use of symbol, and of the very important act of play.¹⁷

The notion of potential space will be developed further as it relates to the art of Scott Burton, as will Winnicott's theories of the transitional object, and perhaps most importantly, the True and False Self. I am using a Winnicottian model not only to develop an original interpretation of Burton's artistic practice, but also to examine the ways in which his art is a reflection of his psychic development, an area that has been systematically passed over by critics in favor of emphasizing the apparent social themes in Burton's *oeuvre*. In order to do this, I will take a comprehensive look at Burton's artistic production, beginning with his performance pieces, from the late sixties and early seventies, and ending with an installation that was completed after the artist's death, to his exact specifications. For this examination, I will separate Burton's work into four categories. These categories may seem arbitrary, because there are no clear thematic or formal boundaries which would allow for neat divisions within Burton's long career. I have established these necessarily artificial but useful distinctions in order to make a psychoanalytic reading

of Burton's art more meaningful by looking at different aspects and degrees of his psychological investment in his art, and what they tell us about his psychic state. These categories are: early performance (tableaux), Furniture objects for gallery/museum context, public art, and *The Last Tableau*. The categories are loosely chronological, with furniture objects and public art being continuing themes throughout Burton's career.

The late sixties were the beginning of Burton's artistic career. The performative "street scenes" from this early date are sparsely documented,¹⁸ but his behavioral tableaux from the early seventies are not only well documented, but represent the first instance of Burton's incorporation of furniture into his art. Works such as *Group Behavior Tableau* (1972) have been described as

performance pieces in which one or more men carried out specific actions in repetition or variation through stylized, rhythmic movement. The performers interacted with each other and with one or more simple pieces of furniture. *The Behavior Tableaux* could be described as performance art, dance, or pantomimic theater, and their austere furniture "props" were essential visual and psychological components.¹⁹

Working only from the extant photographic and written documentation of these performance pieces, one is in danger of unsupported speculation about the meaning and tone created by the *Tableaux*. However, certain basic qualities are self-evident. The furniture seems to have remained stationary, while the human actors were in motion. The motions of the actors were diverse, ranging from extremely subdued to quite kinetic.²⁰ Some if not most of the actors' actions were directed towards or in relation to the furniture "props." Lastly, there seems to be no definite narrative. That is to say, the actors' actions do not denote a distinct beginning, middle, or end, being "stylized, rhythmic movement."

Perhaps the simplest place to begin a Winnicottian reading of these performances is on the common ground of language. Quite obviously, these *Tableaux* created an interactive *environment*. Central to Winnicott's theories of psychic development was the notion of the infant's interaction with the mother or "facilitating environment." Using this rather overt semantic connection as a departure point, it is possible to transpose Winnicott's facilitating environment onto Scott Burton's *Tableaux*. Viewing the actors as developing egos, and the furniture as potential transitional objects, one can come to some conclusions about the nature of the implied "mother," who is disseminated onto the very stage of the performance.

The actors move about within this "environment," trying out different actions, repeating them on and around the furniture "objects." Winnicott

points out that it is the *repeated* meeting or denial of the infant's spontaneous gesture that is instrumental in the development of the healthy ego.²¹ Here, the actors are gesturing, testing out their omnipotence on the objects within the realm of their perception. The objects, however, remain immutable (the furniture does not move, rather the actors are forced to navigate around it). The omnipotence of the gesture has been stilted and transformed into compliance because of the objective hardness of the furniture. The pre-established Facilitating Environment has, in effect, *denied* the gesture of the infant. It is this denial that thwarts the repeated attempts at omnipotence of the actors. The transitional objects fail, because they are located too entirely in the realm of the "object objectively perceived," and thus allow not a transition but only a compliance.

Interestingly, this interpretation allows for a relocation of the sense of tension that is so often an element in Burton's art. Burton's furniture pieces themselves are often credited with a sense of uncertainty; an oscillation between a state of just being furniture, and of being implied presences, capable of becoming "a moving structure of relationships at any moment."²² Here, however, that dialectical existence ceases, and the works becoming filled with an inexplicable tension precisely because of their exact location—a location that dictates and forces compliance to an "infant's" gesture. The objects become *too real*.

If these Tableaux had a conclusion, the Winnicottian model, applied, would dictate that the compliance forced out of the infants' gestures would result in the development of a False Self. There is no narrative, however no climax to the tension-filled futility of the actions being played out. Winnicott addresses this lack of climax in both "Ego Distortion in Terms True and False Self" (1960) and "The Location of Cultural Experience" (1971). What is hinted at in the earlier lecture is more clearly stated in the later one. It is helpful to recall Winnicott's definition of "id-needs" from the 1960 article, where he states that "in referring to the meeting of infant needs I am not referring to the satisfaction of instincts."²³ Instinctual needs, here, can be viewed as id-needs, which would dictate the climatic satisfaction of libidinal or aggressive actions. Winnicott, however, establishes his model at an early stage when id-needs are not necessarily felt as internal drives, and can even be external stimuli, such as "a clap of thunder or a hit," i.e., stimuli which require reaction, but do not dictate the need-followed-by-satisfaction that is implied by a traditional understanding of id-needs. In "Cultural Experience..." he states, with reference to transitional phenomena:

It is to be noted that the phenomena that I am describing have no climax. This distinguishes them from phenomena that have

instinctual backing, where the orgiastic element plays an essential part, and where satisfactions are closely linked with climax.²⁴

Therefore, Burton's *Behavioral Tableaux* are an uneasy depiction of an unhealthy facilitating environment. The "real-world" objects which have the potential to become an infant's transitional vehicles, instead assert themselves far too strongly in their physicality. What could be a healthy exercise of infant omnipotence, is turned into a forced compliance to the objective world. In this case, the facilitating environment must be representative of a "not-good-enough mother." I hold that the projected development of the False Self, which of course finds no representation in these "non-instinctual" behaviors, but which is nonetheless predicted by Winnicott in a facilitating environment such as this, was a psychic reality for the artist during his infantile development, and therefore continued to manifest itself, consciously or otherwise throughout Burton's *oeuvre*.

The actual human bodies which informed Burton's performance pieces are replaced in the early seventies by still more furniture. More correctly, the bodies have simply been removed from the *Behavioral Tableaux*, leaving the furniture objects to interact amongst themselves, and with the environment in which they are placed. Indeed, the early seventies found Burton addressing the found "props" of his earlier works as if they were bodies in themselves. The role played by the furniture, earlier, of potential transitional objects has been transformed. What should have been the infant's ticket to healthy interaction with the world have gained power, and been almost anthropomorphized.

Furniture Landscape (1970) for instance, creates a surreal environment in which found furniture is placed in an outdoor, "field" setting. Trees and branches encircle, enfold and stand next to tables, chairs, and a mirrored dresser. The man-made, wooden furniture seems to be being reclaimed by the natural realm from which it was originally taken. At the same time, however, the empty chairs seem to evoke such an uncanny presence of the human body, that one feels as though the intended reclamation is destined to be thwarted by the irreversible perversions of the natural materials which have been turned to the use of man. Here again, the viewer is faced with the tension that arises from Burton's suggestive placement of ordinary objects, but these "Landscapes," do not seem to be evoking the notion of a facilitating environment, as the *Tableaux* did. One could hardly support the idea that the furniture was representative of the ego, and the woods had become the mother of some kind of strange furniture-children. I stated earlier that it would be more correct to say that the human body had been *removed* from the performance pieces, rather than being replaced by furniture. Indeed, the active ego has been removed entirely (except the artist's and viewer's ego, perhaps) from the

“Landscapes,” which become discourses about the nature of the transitional objects themselves, rather than a pre-conscious reference to the facilitating environment.

Winnicott posits a dialectical type of existence for transitional objects, being simultaneously part of objective reality, and subject to the subjective reality of the infant's omnipotent gesture. What is furniture, if not the exertion of human energy on natural, raw materials, which are transformed by that energy? Following this logic, the *Furniture Landscape* can be seen as a “frozen” dialectic. Burton has attempted to return the residue of the human omnipotent gesture to the objective reality from which it came. The tension in these works arises because that return is impossible. Once a “real” object has been invested with psychic energy, these pieces seem to say, it can no longer occupy the purely objective realm. Accordingly, as the infant's ego develops, its omnipotent gestures are increasingly tempered by reality. The ego, therefore, cannot return to a state of total omnipotence. Once the distance between self and object is perceived, that distance cannot be bridged.

If the infant's facilitating environment is a not-good-enough-mother one, and the False Self assumes its total defensive mode, hiding the True Self, the distance between the ego and the world would become a potentially traumatic thing. A healthy ego, according to Winnicott, is an ego in which the True Self functions of creativity and spontaneity establish a kind of compromise between the ego and the real world. In other words, omnipotence is utilized to a healthy degree, allowing the developing infant and adult to react to the challenges presented by reality. The False Self, however, is an ego informed by compliance. The challenges of objective reality can only be survived by the ability of the False Self to adapt—not by transforming reality, but by changing itself, allowing itself to be molded by the objects it comes across. Of course, this complex series of interactions is not embodied by Burton's Landscapes, but these works are indicative of the artist's fascination with the power of the object, and its apparent superiority to the power of the psyche. He seems to be examining the dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity, in order to examine his own insecurity about his ability to creatively transform the world around him.

A similar work to the *Furniture Landscape*, is *Bronze Chair* (1972/1975). Here a found furniture piece has been bronzed by the artist, and placed in downtown New York, as opposed to the woods. Two contrasts, to *Furniture Landscape*, present themselves immediately. The setting has changed, from natural to urban, and the furniture has been altered by the artist. The assertion of the artist's power (by changing the object) could, and probably should be read as the acknowledgment of omnipotence. It is clearly the gesture of an ego, directed at a “transitional

object." Why then does it not herald a psychic triumph? Why is the viewer still confounded by an uneasiness, as if the chair still has power of its own? This piece can be viewed as marking a shift in Burton's career; one which is important artistically, and psychologically. Whereas Burton's earlier works indicated a distinctly psychological bent, I hold that from the *Bronze Chair* on Burton becomes a "social artist." In this context, "social artist" designates a shift from a concern with inner, psychic states to a concern with outer, cultural states. This is not to say that cultural themes were not present in the performance pieces, or in *Furniture Landscape*, nor does it preclude the possibility of psychological themes in the socially minded works. Rather, the overt emphasis has been changed.

It would seem that the artist came to a conclusion of sorts. I am positing that the shift in emphasis from the private to the public realm of experience metaphorically represents, for Scott Burton, a *cultural conclusion*, arrived at through the examination of distinctly modern dilemmas. (From this point on, I have rather didactically opposed the terms "psychological" and "cultural" or "societal." I have posited this distinction in order to more clearly discuss an important transformation in Burton's oeuvre, not to make any far reaching claims about the self, or postmodernity as it differs from modernity). The dominance of Burton's False Self, in Winnicottian terms, led the artist to conclude, not that some inner, psychic defense mechanism was repressing his True Self, but that there *cannot be* a True Self. Theories of the social construction of reality view the very notion of the human psyche as a True, spontaneous, potentially original force, as a systematically historicizable construct. Thus Burton, placing his found object in the street, is relocating what was once psychological tension into the social realm: the city—that ultimate human construction.

This is not to say that tension is lost. Nor does it imply that Burton is successful at denying a psychologically charged, or romantic conception of self, in favor of the cultural. Actually, one could posit that a new source of tension has arisen, because the chair still *haunts*. Even after being altered by the artist, and placed in the cultural realm, from whence it came (a place in which it would presumably feel at home), the chair still asserts its own presence. This presence could be the absence of a body, or an implicit character in the street scene (one recalls that Burton's earliest performances were done in the street, and in fact this chair itself had been used in one of these performances). The tension might also be one of time, in which the used chair is standing as a testament to its own "use and abuse to which it has been subject and which, standing empty, it witnessed from afar."²⁵ Perhaps it is the very difficulty of pinning this object down that gives rise to its anxious

character. Whatever its source, psychological tension is in fact present. This is not to imply that the artist was trying to eradicate tension, which seems to be an inherent aspect of all his works, rather to establish that, if Burton had in fact reached a culturally informed conclusion, locating his True and False Self as societal constructions, he cannot escape some sense of conflict between an inner and an outer realm, an oscillation between the objective and subjective.

Returning to the issue of omnipotence, we can also see a shift in Burton's *oeuvre* from the found object to the made object. Of course, by bronzing the chair the artist altered the found object. This marks the beginning of his actual furniture production in the mid-seventies. Can this be seen as some kind of vindication? Have the immovable transitional objects from *Furniture Landscape* and *Behavioral Tableau* suddenly become mutable under the now-healthy ego gesture of the artist? Has Burton moved from being a compliant False Self to a spontaneous, creative True Self? This question is irrevocably problematized by the notion of Burton's shift, conscious or otherwise, from the personal realm to the cultural. As discussed before, one aspect of social constructionism locates the notion of self as being constructed by the historical traditions of society. One could make an even more broad generalization, and say that the cultural self (as it is being described here) is a *False Self*. It is False, in a Winnicottian sense, because it is based more on compliance to the environment, than on the satisfaction of True needs. If this is the case, then the creativity and spontaneity that distinguish the Winnicottian True Self are part of the constructed schema of the cultural self. Winnicott tells us that "The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real."²⁶ Earlier, in the same lecture, we learn that "When the degree of the split (between the False and True) in the infant's person is not too great there may be some almost personal living through imitation, and it may even be possible for the child to act a special role, that of the True Self *as it would be if it had had existence*."

This state of the ego, as Winnicott described it, needs only the most minimal linguistic "updating" to be transposable to the theory of the social construction of the self. Contemporary culture values individuality, creativity, etc., and yet, according to these theories, all these things are determined by that culture. Therefore, omnipotence comes to play a greater role in Burton's art because the omnipotent gesture can be viewed as a False Self gesture, or a gesture that mimics creativity, but can never be truly original. "The existence of a False Self," says Winnicott, "results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility."²⁷ I would hold that Burton, on a preconscious level, felt that a creative gesture was now in his repertoire, because the feelings of futility that haunted his earlier works, and

prevented the True self from manifesting, have now become as “false” as he himself feels.

“I feel that the autonomy of the studio artist is a trivial thing by now in our society. Who cares if you paint it blue or red?”²⁸ I have used this quote from Burton himself not only to evidence the preceding points, but also to make a transition into a discussion of the later works of the artist. It is the minimalist forms of his gallery pieces and the utilitarian forms of his public sculpture and parks that mark Burton’s self proclaimed apathy about the exploration of personal autonomy. The cultural notion of self provided Burton with a therapy unavailable to Winnicott’s analysands—it is a therapy of the city, one that says “its OK to feel unreal, because that is the only way you *can* feel.” Proceeding from this point, it is not surprising that the personal preferences of the artist became a mute point, for Burton. It would have been much more interesting for him to explore culture interactions, rather than the interactions that take place in a facilitating environment. The uneasy feeling of unrealness, described by Winnicott, leaves open two options in contemporary culture. One is to treat the feeling as if it is a problem, deeply rooted in the psyche, which originated during childhood development. The second option is to universalize the feeling, relegating it to a cultural construct. This is the option that comes to inform the work of Scott Burton.

The eighties found Burton with a plethora of gallery shows and public commissions, both of which were highly concerned with the making and placement of furniture forms in their respective spaces. Tension, being a specialty of the artist, still exists in these more mature works, but on its most overt level it is a theoretical tension as opposed to psychological. Most often the sometimes bleak forms of the artist form an anxious dialogue between the modern and postmodern, and between high art, and pragmatic forms. Robert Pincus-Witten, who in 1976 posited Burton’s sculptures as “surrogate people,” later modified his interpretation and focused on the social, artistic question raised by Burton’s nostalgic, but progressive works.²⁹

Even this prescription, however, must over-simplify the artist’s extremely diverse production. While the social agenda of Burton is certainly almost always present—whether he is designing a public park, or creating irony by placing a piece of extremely useable furniture in a gallery setting—I would argue that psychological tension is not entirely lost from his works. Indeed, pieces such as *Sling Chair* (1982), which rethinks Bauhaus forms by slinging a piece of leather over and around a tubular metal frame, seem extremely inviting as furniture, and do seem to negate the psychological aspects of his earlier works. Donald Kuspit has charged that the “Inner tension has been lost, and tension with the environment; it was on these that his ‘furniture’ depended for its

contradictory aura of the foreboding and accessible, the sinister and the familiar."³⁰ This view renders the works useless as psychological indicators of any kind, relegating them to pure furniture. I would argue, however, that it is the blatant absence of psychological tension, in these works from the early eighties, that is indicative of Burton's shift from the personal to the cultural, from the inner world of experience to the outer. This aspect, or absence of tension, is evidence of the dominant nature of the False Self, in Burton's psyche, and thus in his work. He seems to be trying almost too hard to eradicate the tension from his furniture, but, in the end, it is this absence that acts as a signal.

Often, his furniture pieces are highly charged with personal considerations, but these seem to become manifest as subtle implications, rather than conscious conflicts. These implications are most readily observed in his works, both gallery and public, in which the artist constructs multiple, identical, or extremely similar pieces, and then carefully places them in a spatial relationship to one another. Burton uses this technique repeatedly, and it is obviously a practice that is investigating interaction itself, both of inanimate objects, and of the living bodies which are invited to utilize those objects. It is this interaction which makes Burton's forms so intriguing, and so complex, when viewed using Winnicottian ideas.

One-Part Chairs is a good example of a gallery work which uses two identical pieces, placed in relation to one another. Here, two roughly "L" shaped, highly polished granite chairs, sit as if in conversation with one another. While these works are obviously furniture (even if one is ignorant of the title), the minimalist form, and hardness of material, hardly makes them desirable as a place of rest. The space between the pieces becomes kinetic as one's eye moves from one to another. The simplicity of each make them instantly consumable as image, so that the mind does not linger on the formal aspects of the chairs, rather, it moves to the other, only to find that it, too, is extremely easy to look at and comprehend. Therefore, if one spends any time viewing this work, just as much, if not more time is spent moving between the two, than on the objects themselves. This electrifies the space, and invests the piece with a tension unheard of in its minimal predecessors. It is just this space which establishes the effectiveness of works such as this in a dialectical mode.

Winnicott posits a similar mode, a similar kind of space, in his lecture "The Location of Cultural Experience." Discussing the infant's use of play, which ties into its use of symbol, and which rests on the use of transitional objects, Winnicott posits a location for this phenomenon, when he states "play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality."³¹ He further develops this space in a comment on the use of symbol:

This symbol can be located. It is at the place in space and time where and when the mother is in transition form being (in the baby's mind) merged in with the infant and alternatively being experienced as an object to be perceived rather than conceived of. The use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness.³²

At the risk of over-extending the semantic connection between the space of Burton's furniture pieces and the space described by Winnicott, it is interesting to view these similar dialectics.

The similarity between the two rests largely in their kinetic nature. Just as one's eye vacillates between the two identical chairs, the transitional object, for Winnicott, vacillates between objective and psychic existence. For Winnicott, this vacillation is a healthy transition which is the foundation for the formation of the strong ego. Burton explores his spaces as though they are confining elements, as opposed to developmental vehicles. One oscillates back and forth, back and forth, only to be confronted with the same thing at one end of the space, that occupies the other end. This, in combination with the uninviting hardness and shape of the chairs creates a stiling quality to the implicit conversation. It is as if the transitional object fails to change—it has the same immovable quality that the found objects had in the *Behavioral Tableau*, only now the actors have been replaced by the transitional object itself. Thus, one finds no psychic existence for the object, only objective reality. Nancy Princenthal has addressed this formal objectivity: "Indeed, weightiness, in Burton's work, must be read as expressive of the artist's intentions in a broadly metaphoric sense. It virtually embodies stubbornness, as well as resistance—not only to mobility, but to style, to historicism and interpretive intervention in general."³³

This "stubbornness" is the objective reality of the object refusing to be affected by the omnipotence of the ego. Even in the act of creation, Burton seems to produce forms that are unwieldy. It is as if he relinquishes control at the moment of design. This is the sense in which the omnipotent gesture is well within the range of a False Self. In the cultural sense, Burton recognizes his ability to create, but in so doing, his creations are not products of his own subjectivity. Not only are they quotations of earlier artistic styles, but once produced they refuse to be moved at all. Just as in his earlier works, Burton's environment is forcing compliance.

This compliance is always linked to the material qualities of the furniture-objects themselves, as well as to the space in which they interrelate. In *Rock Chairs*, a series from the early 80s, Burton simply cuts right angles out of huge chunks of solidified lava rocks. The immutability

of the chairs remains in this series, and is actually enhanced by another dimension, which is not found in the chairs' granite counterparts. By leaving the lava rough, with the actual seat-surface the only smooth part, an effect is created which suggests the immediate extraction of these pieces from their original environment—the ground. Furthermore, the uneven surface, and the sedimented, contrasting layers of the stones' surfaces reminds the viewer of the lava's once liquid state. Not only has Burton arrested the rocks from the earth, but he emphasizes the radical stoppage of the once dynamic fluid by cutting a seat-form into it. Just as *One-Piece Chairs* split Winnicott's notion of dialectical space by their repeated, machinelike precision, and weightiness, the *Rock Chairs* are a frozen moment in the geological history of the Earth itself. This moment is frozen for no other reason than to accommodate a (mysteriously absent) human body. This would seem to indicate a rather profound exercising of the omnipotent faculty. To wrest a massive stone from the ground, and mold it in such an exacting way seems to read as a metaphor for the power of the human will to shape its environment. But as with Burton's other gallery pieces, the omnipotence is hollow—a gesture cast into the void of a soulless culture, resulting in an un-accommodating object. The *Rock Chairs* are invitations for the viewer to place herself in a moment of willfully halted natural development, only to be forced into a compliance by the rough, angular seat-surface.

Other works suggest even more various modes of environmental coercion. In *Hectopod Table*, 1982, an angular, metallic table stands on the points of six triangular legs. This piece, which looks like one of Andre's floor pieces come to gleaming life, seems to efface itself in the reflections of its surroundings. It asserts its own power as abstracted geometry, rather than an object with intrinsic qualities. While this piece posits itself as a metaphor for compliance (compliance to geometrical and environmental laws, as well as the rules of utility), other works embody or demand compliance. An example of these are the Chairs discussed previously. Some works actually seem to resist utility itself. *Plywood Cubes*, 1980, for instance are simply two identical cubes of lacquered wood. Obviously, they could be used as tables, but their overwhelming uniformity suggests that they should not be touched. In this case, the viewer is forced into a state of uncertainty as to the categorization of the piece: is it a minimalist object or an end-table?³⁴

These various examples are symptomatic of a repeated but faithless omnipotent gesture on the part of the artist. In other words, the loss of True Self autonomy is the destination of all of Burton's many different routes through the artistic process. The compliance evoked by the bleak, isolated chair, or the uncomfortably inhabited one, is ultimately a commentary on Burton himself. Choices in material, spacing, and bleak

forms all point towards, without directly alluding to, the artist's psychic states. This is even the case in his public sculpture; works meant to be viewed and utilized by the masses. A good example of this can be found in *Modular Six-Unit Seating* (1985). This work, outside the Mellon Bank Building, is a return to the by now familiar "L" shaped granite chair. Here, however, there are six pieces, all placed in a circle, facing a common center. It is possible to repeat the discussion of Winnicott's "potential space," but this work differentiates itself from *One Part Chairs*, in some interesting ways. The first is the placement of the pieces, which have assumed a highly formal, "meeting" tone, which contrasts sharply to the conversational tone of the *One Part Chairs*. This official atmosphere is especially appropriate, since the piece is outside of a bank. But one still gets the notion that the parties at this convergence are not well versed in diplomacy—they are, in fact, literally and metaphorically immovable, unshakable. One cannot help but think of Giacometti's *City Square* of 1948. The irregularity of the placement of figures, in Giacometti's street scene, however, charges his work with an overt existential anxiety, while Burton's piece is disconcerting because of its obvious lack of irregularity and its obvious impersonality. Where the former worked with abstract, almost tiny, very personal forms, the latter creates a life-size interaction in real space. The granite is perfect in its austere coldness, and the failed convergence of the chairs enhances the space of alienation which surrounds them.

The public nature of this work is also psychologically interesting. Anyone can view or utilize Burton's many public parks and individual outdoor pieces, and the artist's concern with the utilitarian function of his art is apparent in statements such as: "forms of art that are not fine art are the only ones that have a chance of being disseminated into the wider culture."³⁵ This concern for a wider audience informs most of Burton's work. Such commissions as Baltimore's *Pearlstone Park* seem to be the artist's attempt to place subtle pieces of art in the world of the anonymous passerby, thereby quietly enhancing the lives of that "wider audience." This concern is a primary part of the artist's cultural concerns. He wants to put aside the esoteric autonomy of the studio artist, in an attempt to educate and infiltrate popular culture. If we accept the idea that Burton is a False Self, he locates his existence outside of himself. He is unable to feel the psychological realness that is characteristic of the True Self, and is relinquishing control to culture.

With this in mind, Burton's selection of the gallery as his final exhibit location becomes much more significant. *The Last Tableau* was a sculptural installation executed to the artist's specifications, devised on his death bed. Burton died in 1989 as a result of the AIDS virus, at the age of fifty, and his last work is a haunting monument not only to his

artistic endeavor but to the psychological aspects of his work, which he tried so hard to repress.

Four sculptures comprise this installation, which was at the Whitney. Two of the pieces are identical *Guardian Cabinets*, one is a granite *Bench Goddess*, and the other a stainless steel *Slave Table*. Even though some of Burton's works from the eighties suggest human forms, these are by far the most representational.³⁶ Importantly, they still function as furniture. It is difficult to avoid referring to Burton's *Behavioral Tableau* in dealing with this final work. Almost human forms stand, recline, and bow to one another, and have even been given gender. The *Bench Goddess* has been connected with sacrificial images in pre-Columbian art,³⁷ and the *Guardian Cabinets* are a mixture of stick figure and Egyptian mummy cases. The *Slave Table* presents a prostrate individual, which obviously relates to the religious allusions of the goddess, but also has sexual overtones.

Burton, under the duress of his illness, seems to have made a significant return to the psychological tension in his earlier works. His encroaching death possibly forced him to recognize the personal stake he had had in his "cultural" art all along. The "domination, protectiveness and submission" present in the *Last Tableau* are indicative of the artist's expression of real trauma, and therefore can be seen as being reflective of a True Self. This is not to say that Burton's illness cured him of any psychological problems he might have had. Rather, his hand was forced, so to speak. Who could worry about social reform, when on one's deathbed?

Scott Burton's art, then, ended with a return to psychological issues similar to those which informed his earlier work, and which he attempted to avoid for most of his lengthy career. Burton's False Self seemed to be his dominant mode of operation. Art for him, however, was not a therapeutic act of expression, as it has been for many great artists. For Burton, the object was an external phenomenon, as was he himself. Burton once said that rearranging the furniture in his room was like "the reliving of one's childhood in an ideal way."³⁸ He might not have known how right he was. When viewed from a Winnicottian perspective, the psychologically charged aspects of Burton's work come to the fore, and pieces that at first seem stark and meaningless become melancholy testaments to the artist's self.³⁹

Notes

- 1 D.W. Winnicott, in Jay R. Greenberg and Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 193.
- 2 Brenda Richardson. *Scott Burton* (exhibition catalogue), (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1986), 5.
- 3 Elizabeth Baker, "Obituary," *Art in America* 78 (Feb. 1990), 163.

- 4 The term "facilitating environment" is one of general use in Winnicott's theories. I have used, mainly, D.W. Winnicott, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. (New York, International Universities Press, 1965).
- 5 Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 146.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 147.
- 14 Winnicott often discusses space in this sense. See "The Location of Cultural Experience," in Peter L. Rudnytsky, ed. *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 15 Rudnytsky, xii.
- 16 Winnicott, in Rudytsky, 8.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 18 Baker, 163.
- 19 Richardson, 35.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 21 Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 145.
- 22 Donald Kuspit, "Scott Burton" (review), *Artforum* 21 (March 1983), 78.
- 23 Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 141.
- 24 Rudytsky, ed., 6.
- 25 Kuspit, 78.
- 26 Winnicott, *Maturation Processes*, 148.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 28 Scott Burton quoted in Richardson, 10.
- 29 Nancy Princenthal. "Social Seating," *Art in America* 75 (June 1987), 133.
- 30 Kuspit, 78.
- 31 Winnicott in Rudytsky ed. 4.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 33 Princenthal, 135.
- 34 Of course, this dialectic exists in most of Burton's art. But in this case, it is instituted on formal rather than contextual grounds, i.e. because of its composition, not simply its location in the gallery.
- 35 Scott Burton quoted in Richardson, 12.
- 36 Richard Kalina, "Figuring Scott Burton," *Art in America* 80 (Jan. 1992), 98.
- 37 Kalina, 98.
- 38 Scott Burton quoted in Princenthal, 133.

Public Art/Private Iconography: Roger Brown's Transformation of the Myth of Daedalus and Icarus

Mary Mathews Gedo

Roger Brown had been a well-established artist with an international reputation for more than a decade by the time he received his first commission to execute a site-specific work for his adopted city. This oversight was rectified in the autumn of 1989, when he was invited to execute large-scale works for two major new Chicago skyscrapers: the NBC Tower, located in a handsome park-like setting just east of Michigan Avenue, and the 120 North La Salle Street building, situated in the heart of the city's governmental and financial center. Although Brown responded to both invitations by creating compositions that pay homage to Chicago's preeminent role in the history of modern architecture, the resulting works differed radically in style, iconography and, above all, in the emotional reactions they evoked from their creator.

By the time representatives of the Equitable Trust Company, the developers of the NBC Tower, invited Brown to create a painting for the tower's lobby, the structure, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM), was in the final stages of completion, a fact that precluded any real collaborative relationship between patron and painter. The lobby—a richly-gilded lily, clad in the opulent combination of varicolored marbles and metals that seem to be *derigueur* for “important” contemporary interiors—scarcely seemed to require any additional decorative touches. Nonetheless, the developers invited Brown to supply a painting for a space on the rear wall of the lobby, directly opposite the building entrance. The allotted space, six by eighteen feet, dictated the execution of a composition with a strong horizontal thrust. Although the artist, whose oeuvre has consisted primarily of easel-sized paintings, had never worked on quite so large a scale, nor produced a canvas of such unusual proportions, he readily adjusted to the task at hand. Sensibly concluding that the lavish setting required “an unobtrusive painting,” Brown produced

a relatively impersonal canvas, *City of the Big Shoulders*. The uppermost register of the picture portrays the skyline of contemporary Chicago, silhouetted frieze-like against a background of glowing, patterned cloud formations. Two of SOM's proudest earlier achievements: the John Hancock Center (a landmark commercial/condominium of 1970) and the Sears Tower (completed in 1974 and still the world's tallest building) play featured roles in this painted display of Chicago's modern architectural monuments. The remainder of the canvas is divided into five horizontal registers depicting the prairies outside the metropolis. Each segment features alternating brown and green rectangles, enclosed by glowing borders of foliage—an arrangement that both echoes the pattern of the lobby's marble floor and underscores the pervasive horizontality of the picture itself. The first two registers show the comings and goings of trailer trucks, presumably en route to deliver supplies to Chicago. The two succeeding levels represent the open countryside, interrupted here and there by isolated farm dwellings; these structures disappear from the final register, which portrays only empty prairie.

The other commission Brown received that fall presented him with a far greater challenge: Representatives of the Ahmanson Company, the developers of the 120 North La Salle building, invited the artist to execute the painted modello for a mosaic of heroic proportions (twenty-seven feet high and fifty-four feet wide) destined to grace the building's facade. This complex project naturally required far more time and effort on Brown's part than had the execution of the NBC commission. It also evoked a much more personal response from the artist, whose definitive design encoded multiple references to his private past and inner world. The essay that follows focuses on the evolution of this composition and its psychoiconographic significance.¹

Several years ago, I published an essay, based on a series of formal interviews, which explored the autobiographical sources of Brown's creativity.² That study focused on the key role that the artist's enduring relationship with the Chicago-based architect, George Veronda, had played in determining the nature of Brown's artistic evolution from 1972 to 1984, when Veronda's death from lung cancer put an abrupt end to this loving partnership.

During the years immediately following Veronda's demise, Brown poured forth his grief in a long series of heartfelt paintings, which graphically portrayed his inner desolation.³ After 1986, such references gradually disappeared from his oeuvre. As a result of our professional contacts, Brown and I became personal friends, and I kept abreast of his artistic output, which continued to develop in an orderly, predictable fashion. However, intrigued by my growing awareness that the design he was creating for the 120 North La Salle building was evolving into a

votive work that simultaneously honored Veronda and portrayed Brown's own enduring reactions to the death of his lover, I decided to hold another series of formal interviews with the artist in the winter of 1990-91.⁴

The Commission and Its Evolution

The key role that Brown's contribution would play in the over-all design of the 120 La Salle building was underlined by the architectural plans, created by Helmut Jahn of Murphy/Jahn, which called for the mosaic to be housed in a concave niche on the facade, positioned just above the lobby entrance. The location of the building, directly across from the Chicago City Hall and County Building (a massive Neo-Classical building of 1911, designed by Holabird and Root) and a half-block from the State of Illinois Center (a dramatic Murphy/Jahn structure of 1985), underscored the public significance of the mosaic, which would be highly visible to local officials and visiting dignitaries entering or exiting the nearby government centers.

The combination of circumstances made the assignment a particularly challenging one for Brown, who had never before essayed a composition of comparable magnitude. The mosaic had to be clearly legible on a gigantic scale, powerful enough to hold its own within the context of Jahn's soaring tower (a triumph of architectural skill over the restrictions of a narrow site), and iconographically appropriate for its location in Chicago's civic center, with its numerous classicizing structures.

Far from being intimidated by the scope of his new assignment, Brown was thrilled by the prospect of collaborating with Jahn. He had come to know and admire the architect's achievements through Veronda, who had been a colleague of Jahn's at the firm of C. F. Murphy (now Murphy/Jahn) during the years Brown and Veronda had spent together. The contacts Brown enjoyed with Jahn and other members of his firm undoubtedly recalled to the artist his more intimate professional and personal interactions with his dead companion. Associations to Veronda, operative from the outset of this project, played a critical role in shaping the psychoiconography of the work that resulted.

Chicago's proud legacy as the city that gave birth to the skyscraper and nurtured many of the greatest architectural talents of the modern era seemed to Brown to demand a theme alluding to architectural history. He considered, but quickly rejected, ideas such as showing the skyline of the modern city, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of the great fire of 1871. Definitive inspiration came when the artist, suddenly struck by the resemblance between the curving shape of the niche that would house the mosaic and the corresponding character of the sky, began to cast about for a motif incorporating sky imagery. This association led him to recall the myth of Daedalus, "the first architect," and he soon decided to represent the most celebrated episode from Daedalus' legendary career:

his flight—in tandem with his son, Icarus—from the Cretan labyrinth in which the wrathful King Minos had imprisoned them.⁵

The selection of this mythic subject—a favorite of artists from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present—represented a radical departure for Brown, who has typically found inspiration in personal experiences and popular imagery, rather than ancient mythology. In choosing this motif, he joined the ranks of the so-called old masters, whose styles and subject matter he had always disdained—artists like Sebastiano del Piombo, Rubens, van Dyck, and Sacchi, to name only a few of the many earlier painters who had explored the theme.⁶ Uncharacteristic as it may have been, the selection of the Daedalus motif permitted Brown to merge the references to architectural history he deemed appropriate for the site with the depiction of that “inverted bowl,” the sky, which the shape of the niche itself seemed to demand. However, the idiosyncratic character of the modello he ultimately produced reveals that in this instance—as throughout his career—Brown’s psychoiconography recapitulated his autobiography.

In a series of preliminary drawings, the artist briefly explored various interpretations of his chosen theme; early on, he considered showing not only Daedalus and Icarus, but the labyrinth from which they made their escape; one drawing even included the awesome Minotaur, for whom Daedalus had originally designed the maze-like enclosure that later became his own prison.⁷ But by the time Brown created his first painted sketch for the composition, he had decided to focus exclusively on the two “astronauts,” whom he depicted in mid-flight, with Daedalus progressing through the sky in safety, while the hapless Icarus plunged toward the sea.⁸ The quirky, personalized nature of the artist’s conception was underscored by his treatment of the background: the reddish cast and lurid glow of the stylized Brownian cloud masses against which he silhouetted his protagonists recalls the similar treatment of the heavens in the numerous “Apocalyptic” paintings he has produced throughout his career.⁹ As represented in this preliminary study, the fall of Icarus becomes a metaphor for that of Lucifer, expelled from paradise because he—like Icarus—suffered from too much hubris. The pessimistic connotations of this conception did not escape Brown’s patrons, “who felt that the mosaic should be more uplifting in spirit.”¹⁰

In his search for a more “uplifting” interpretation, Brown recalled Joseph Campbell’s commentary on the myth: “People talk more about Icarus than about Daedalus, as though the wings themselves had been responsible for the young astronaut’s fall. But that is no case against industry and science. Poor Icarus fell into the water, but Daedalus, who flew the middle way, succeeded in getting to the other shore.”¹¹ Basing his subsequent revisions on Campbell’s suggestion that the success of

Daedalus' flight should be regarded as "a celebration of technology," Brown decided to focus on the moment immediately after the two "astronauts" had become airborne, while both men were still pursuing the safe middle flight pattern. A subsequent oil sketch incorporated this revision; although this version substituted glowing golden cloud banks for the "apocalyptic" sky of the earlier painting, Brown soon decided that this gold ground should also be eliminated, because it "got a little too religious in feeling." However, this sketch introduced another feature which the artist retained in the definitive modello: the trompe l'oeil representation of the H-shaped architectural detail that enframes the completed mosaic on the building's facade, then continues across its front, to soar triumphantly to its summit.¹² Brown felt that this addition solved the problem of making explicit the connections between his mythic theme and architectural history. To him, this detail seemed much more appropriate for the modern building that would house the mosaic than representing the labyrinth or some other ancient monument, fanciful or real.

The artist's definitive modello represents the toga-clad astronauts gliding over the sea in parallel flight, silhouetted against blue cloud banks, backlit by the golden rays of the sun, whose lower quadrant can be glimpsed in the light-filled aperture at the tops of the canvas. Mindful of the fact that his small-scale painting would be magnified to heroic dimensions in the course of its translation into the full-scale mosaic, Brown executed this oil with meticulous care.¹³ In the process, he refined the features of his two protagonists, rendering them as ideally handsome youths. Costante Crovatto and members of his studio (located in Spilimbergo, Italy), translated Brown's small modello into the enormous mosaic. The artist collaborated closely in this process and personally approved the quality of the full-scale drawings used to guide the mosaicists in their work and made a trip to Italy to see the completed mosaic before it was shipped to Chicago for installation. Shortly before the mural was officially unveiled on July 29, 1991 Brown had a bronze plaque installed next to it, listing its title: *Arts and Sciences of the Ancient World: The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus*, along with a summary of relevant incidents from the myth composed by the artist himself.

While the design for the exterior mosaic was still in process, Brown's patrons invited him to execute a second work for the lobby of the building, to fit a smaller niche (nine by six feet) located in a prominent spot directly opposite the entrance. Although the terms of his new commission required that Brown execute a painting for the niche, he countered with the suggestion—which the committee promptly accepted—that he design another mosaic for it instead.

Determined that the formal and iconographic character of the interior



Roger Brown. *Arts and Sciences of the Ancient World: The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus* (1989-90). Oil on Canvas. Fine Arts Services Commission. Photo by William H. Bengtson, Courtesy of Phyllis Kind Gallery.

mosaic should correlate closely with that of the facade, Brown again considered depicting the Cretan labyrinth, or, alternatively, representing “a classical Chicago structure” (an idea perhaps suggested by the appearance of the City-County building opposite), before concluding that such historicizing references seemed inappropriate for the contemporary structure in which the composition would be housed. Ultimately, he produced a vision of contemporary La Salle street with its canyon-like skyscrapers (complete with their tiny, silhouetted inhabitants) shown in dizzying perspective tilting inward toward the Board of Trade Building (Holabird & Root, 1930), a handsome Art Deco structure, complete with the statue of Ceres, Roman goddess of the grain (John Storrs, 1930), that crowns it. The Board of Trade Building forms the focal point of this composition, just as it dominates and closes off the southern end of the real La Salle street. (One might add that the artist’s allusion to the Board of Trade Building also constitutes a witty homage to Murphy/Jahn, whose much-admired addition to the original structure was erected between 1979-92.¹⁴) The background of the lobby mosaic, with its patterned clouds and radiant sun, mirrors that of its larger sibling on the exterior.¹⁵ This thematic interconnection is further underscored by the appearance of the two planes pictured circling overhead in the lobby mosaic, contemporary metaphors for the legendary astronauts depicted on the facade. An adjacent plaque provides the title, *Arts and Sciences of the Modern World: La Salle Corridor with Holding Pattern*, and a commentary, again composed by the artist, which concludes: “At any moment a plane may be seen circling overhead, waiting its turn to land at O’Hare Field, the

former myth of human flight now a reality. Daedalus, the mythological architect, probably would have felt at home here. He certainly foreshadowed the art and technology that brought this beautiful city into being."¹⁶ But *La Salle Corridor with Holding Pattern* incorporates symbolism far more personal than allusions to the triumph of modern technology; like its larger counterpart, the smaller interior mosaic also encodes references to Brown's late companion, and—via the planes circling above O'Hare Field—to the artist's enduring response to his lover's death.

A Comparison of Brown's Interpretation with Other Representations of the Myth

Brown is far from the only contemporary artist to reexplore the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, which is enjoying renewed popularity today.¹⁷ But if his subject is fashionable, Brown's interpretation is quite atypical. Alone among his contemporaries, he treats the motif with real conviction, portraying his protagonists as though men equipped with wings of feathers could really fly. In adopting this attitude, he aligns himself with masters of the distant past, rather than with his artistic peers.¹⁸ As Herwarth Röttgen has demonstrated, depictions of the flight motif by contemporary artists typically reflect their inability to suspend disbelief, to free themselves from reality, as the myth demands. Consequently, they represent the flight of Icarus, not as the essence of freedom (as their ancient and medieval counterparts did, and as Brown also does), but as a "pipe dream," predestined to failure.¹⁹ The most radical artistic expressions of this skepticism and melancholy not only deprive Icarus of his fleeting glory, but reduce him to the status of an inanimate object. For example, *The Fall of Icarus* (1981-2) an installation by Giovanni Paolini featured in Kassel's *Documenta 7*, included a hodgepodge of objects—overturned chairs, plexiglass pedestals, canvases, and drawings—strewn about in disarray. Icarus, personified—or perhaps more accurately, depersonalized—as an empty suit of clothing, appears to have been "flung" into the setting, as if his fatal plunge had disarrayed its arrangement.²⁰ It has been suggested that in Paolini's reinterpretation of the myth, Icarus no longer represents the fate of a unique individual, but the status of contemporary Art and Culture in the process of upheaval.²¹

Although Panamarenko has not given titles to any of his fantastic "fly objects" that would specifically identify them with Icarus and his fate, Röttgen interprets the artist's various Aeromodeller constructions from 1969-71 as metaphors for the stranded, earth-bound Icarus—the prototypical anti-hero, whose dreams of glory are foredoomed to disappointment.²² This interpretation applies with particular forcefulness to Panamarenko's Aeromodeller of 1971, which resembles a gigantic, man-made butterfly, with its huge, transparent wings joined to a fragile "body,"

shaped like the cabin of a dirigible. Photographs document the failed flight of this fantastic machine, pictured half-destroyed, as though it had crashed to earth during its maiden effort to become airborne.²³ If Röttgen's interpretation is accurate, Panamarenko's smashed Aeromodeller, like Paolini's installation, reduces Icarus to the status of a wrecked object.

Unlike Panamarenko, Paolini, and other artistic peers, who emphasize only the social implications of the myth, Brown reaffirms its time-honored moral-ethical significance. In so doing, he recapitulates the attitude that dominated Medieval and Renaissance representations of the story, and that may already be implicit in third-style Roman wall paintings.²⁴ Like these artistic predecessors, Brown cautions viewers against dangerous excesses: only by following the safe middle course can we ensure survival.

The contrast between Brown's initial oil sketch, showing the fall of Icarus, and representations of this same incident by his contemporaries seems particularly telling: Hubris, Brown suggests, can lead not only to one's physical destruction, but to eternal damnation. Although Brown, acceding to the wishes of his patrons, eliminated these overt Apocalyptic references from *The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus*, the deeply personal (and religious) tone that imbued this project from the start persisted throughout its evolution, to find its ultimate expression in the enormous mosaic, which equates success—and salvation—with prudent behavior.

As I suggested earlier, the designs Brown developed for the two mosaics not only honor Chicago's role in architectural history, they also pay homage to his own special architect, George Veronda.²⁵ One of the most unusual characteristics of the exterior mosaic consists in its presentation of Daedalus and Icarus as twinned beings: equally idealized, youthful, and indistinguishable from one another. Although the ancient Etruscans also represented Daedalus as a handsome, beardless youth, who closely resembled his offspring, they differentiated father from son by showing the legendary inventor and craftsman with the tools of his trade.²⁶ However, the Greek and Roman visualizations of the myth, which contrasted the generations of father and son, soon became the norm.²⁷ Indeed, artists of the Baroque and Neo-Classical periods tended to exaggerate the age difference between father and son, representing Daedalus as a bearded, grandfatherly type, while portraying Icarus as a comely adolescent, who not infrequently appears as an androgynous "pretty boy," reminiscent of Roman portraits of Antinous.²⁸

Although Brown, like the Etruscans, portrays father and son as equally youthful figures, he fails to provide Daedalus with any of the concrete signs (Brown prefers the term "emblems") these ancient artists used to distinguish him from Icarus. As idealized as they are indistinguishable, Brown's protagonists might more readily be misidentified as the Dioscuri,

Castor and Pollux, or those other celebrated mythic twins, Romulus and Remus, legendary founders of Rome, than as Daedalus and Icarus.²⁹ But Brown's mosaic might also be interpreted as showing a single individual depicted in continuous narration as he flies across the sky, a stylistic device that the artist has often employed, in emulation of the similar practices of the Italian "primitive" painters he so admires.³⁰ Relatively late in the evolution of the composition, Brown briefly considered eliminating one of these two figures, to focus on a single astronaut, a fact suggesting that—whether consciously or not—the artist really did perceive his twin protagonists as manifestations of a single being.

In my earlier study of Brown's autobiographical oeuvre, I suggested that, although Veranda and the artist were actually close in age, Brown's relationship with his companion may have involved a father-son component, as well as more age-appropriate feelings of love.³¹ Brown's depiction of Daedalus and Icarus as twinned personages reinforces my previous hypothesis concerning the double-sided nature of his relationship with Veronda. But the identical character of Brown's astronauts undoubtedly also reflects the intense feelings of unity or fusion that bound—and continue to bind—the artist to the memory of his beloved companion: in his heart, Veronda and he are forever merged.

Although ostensibly soaring through the blue heavens, Brown's Daedalus and Icarus seem strangely immobile: Neither their wings nor their togas suggest movement; moreover, their wings are attached to their arms by ties so flimsy that the slightest gesture would surely detach them.³² The static nature of the protagonists' togas seems all the more surprising, in view of the fact that Brown based their design on an illustration from Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, which depicts the race between Atalanta and Hippomenes.³³ The latter's vigorous pose and flowing robe as make him appear to be in full flight, a fact to which Brown himself called my attention, adding, "But I didn't want to get into too much flowing movement." In fact, the poses of Brown's protagonists, with their tautly-extended arms immobilized against their dark wings, seems far closer to images of the crucified Christ than to depictions of manned flight. As a fervent admirer of Giotto, Brown is familiar with the many large crucifixes created by this pre-Renaissance master.³⁴ The much damaged Giotto crucifix now housed in the Temple Malatestiano in Rimini, which shows Christ's arms silhouetted against a plain black crosspiece, seems particularly close to Brown's depiction of his astronauts, with their arms stiffly extended against their dark brown wings.³⁵ In response to a recent written inquiry I sent the artist (who now spends the winter months in California) about the correspondence between his figures and Giotto's crucifixes he replied: "I did become aware of how much the outstretched arms resembled crucifixions, and

though I didn't think of any particular painter—of course Giotto or some other artist of that period would come to mind first." After listing his practical reasons for adopting the stiff poses in which he portrayed his protagonists, Brown added, "[B]ut in late medieval and early renaissance art, these very stiff poses make for a wonderfully mysterious mood ... I'm sure my gravitating towards paintings with this mysterious religious iconography has its psychological reasons too, just as you suggest."³⁶

Brown's astronauts recall yet another of Giotto's most celebrated compositions: the depictions of *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, which show the saint kneeling in adoration before the vision of Christ, who appears to him in the form of a winged, crucified seraph. Giotto's panel painting, now in the Louvre, which represents the Savior hovering motionless in the air, with his dark wings completely masking the horizontal bar of the cross, seems closer to Brown's conception than Giotto's frescoed version in the Bardi Chapel, which portrays Christ's wings aflutter.³⁷ It should be noted that the similarity I perceive between Brown's figures and Giotto's Christ-as-seraph did not consciously occur to the artist while he was working on the commission. However, he did not dismiss the idea when I inquired about the possibility of such a connection.³⁸

Associations between love and death, devotion and martyrdom, implicit in the crucifixion imagery encoded in Brown's *Flight of Daedalus and Icarus* occurred in a number of earlier works the artist created at critical junctures in his relationship with Veronda. The decision of the two young men in 1972 to commit themselves to one another precipitated the first transformation of this type in the artist's psychoiconography, a change reflected in a group of pictures he dubbed the "disaster series." In these works, Brown, for the first time in his career, omitted the depiction of the ground plane (which had functioned as the anchor point for all his previous paintings), to focus entirely on "backgrounds, sky and stuff." However, the consistency with which these oils portray contemporary skyscrapers disintegrating and trapping their doomed inhabitants, suggests that they symbolize Brown's apprehensions that his new relationship would lead to disasters for one or both participants. Gauguin's sardonic advice had been "Be in love and you will be happy;" Brown's sincere warning might read "Be in love and you—and your beloved—will be punished."³⁹

In the winter of 1975-76, Brown spent three months alone in New Mexico, while Veronda remained behind in Chicago. This sojourn gave rise to the artist's "crucifixion series." As he pointed out in retrospect, the numerous crosses dotting the New Mexico landscape undoubtedly played a role in this stylistic innovation. However, the uniformity with which these cruciform canvases depict scenes of suffering, martyrdom, and

sudden disappearances suggests that his physical separation from Veronda triggered the reemergence of the Apocalyptic themes with which Brown had responded to the initiation of the relationship.⁴⁰ Both in form and content, these cruciform canvases anticipate features that would reappear during the evolution of *The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus*.

In my earlier essay, I offered few speculations about the etiology and significance of the numerous images symbolically linking Brown's relationship with Veronda to suffering and death. In view of the artist's current more open policy about discussing his life, it now seems possible to suggest that these apprehensions constitute the residue of conflicts the future artist experienced during adolescence, as he became aware of his homosexuality while coming to maturity in a rural, Southern-fundamentalist culture that regarded homosexuality as a sin against God and nature.⁴¹ Although he has long since come to terms with his homosexuality, his intellectual reconciliation evidently has not completely conquered the deeply-ingrained guilt imprinted on his mind and character by the fundamentalist teachings to which he was exposed during his formative years. These emotions periodically resurface in images implicitly linking punishment and impending doom with his homosexuality. As the artist himself observed during his recent interview with Kristine McKenna:

I'm sure the mood of threat and apocalypse in my work can be traced to my Southern fundamentalist upbringing ... The church had a lot to do with shaping the weird way I see things and though intellectually I've rejected those beliefs, you can never really get rid of that kind of childhood programming.⁴²

On a deeper—perhaps unconscious—level does Brown perceive his homosexuality as a kind of divine stigmatization? The hypothesis that his interpretation of the Daedalus myth was influenced by Giotto's *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, if accurate, would support the speculation that he experiences his sexual orientation as the psychological equivalent of the mystical wounds suffered by the medieval saint.

At first glance the mosaic Brown designed for the interior of the building, *La Salle Corridor with Holding Pattern*, seems more neutral than its external counterpart—a quintessential Brownian composition. But appearances deceive; references to the artist's relationship with his dead companion are embedded in the detail about the planes circling above O'Hare Airport, waiting to land, for Brown's memories about the early phase of his relationship with Veronda are intimately connected with this airport. At the time the future companions met, Veronda was acting as project manager for the Hilton Hotel complex, then under construction at O'Hare Airport outside Chicago. Brown frequently visited his friend at the

site, experiences memorialized in *Curtain Wall Going Up*, 1972, the first canvas in which the artist referred symbolically to Veronda and their growing intimacy. The two planes depicted in the lobby mosaic, circling as they wait to land at O'Hare, function not only as modern analogues of the ancient astronauts—they also represent Brown's current situation. In his private reenactment of the myth, it is not Icarus (Brown), but his Daedalus (Veronda) who has fallen into the wine-dark sea of death. The artist's punishment consists in enduring life alone: Like his mythic hero (and the latter's inanimate alter ego, the modern airplane) Brown remains in a holding pattern, following the sensible middle course and continuing to create art, while waiting to be reunited with Veronda in death.

Conclusions

This study illustrates the preëminent role that an artist's private experiences and personal responses can play in shaping his oeuvre, even when he creates a work designed to perform a highly public function. Such private associations determined the character of the mosaic Roger Brown designed for the facade of a new skyscraper located in the heart of Chicago's governmental center. The new classicizing style and mythological subject he adopted for this modello, *The Flight of Daedalus and Icarus*, would seem to contradict the principles and practices that have guided him throughout his career. These radical innovations reflect the artist's heartfelt response to the experience of collaborating with members of the architectural firm for which his deceased lover, George Veronda, had worked while Brown and he lived together. The composition that resulted functions both as public monument and private memorial. On the manifest level, the mosaic (in tandem with its smaller counterpart in the building lobby) pays homage to the prominent role Chicago has played in the history of modern architecture. But on a more personal level the two works function as a funerary monument that simultaneously pays homage to Veronda and recapitulates the history of his relationship with Brown. That the artist himself is well aware of this private symbolism is demonstrated by a statement he recently made for publication: "Now when I look at the mosaic, I sometimes think of George and me soaring side by side into some new adventure, as we often did during our twelve years together."⁴³ I believe that this nostalgic confession encodes an unspoken, and even perhaps unconscious, subtext: the artist's underlying conviction—rational, intellectual beliefs to the contrary—that Veronda and he will spend eternity together as fellow angelic beings.⁴⁴

Notes

My thanks to Roger Brown for the cooperation he extended to me during the creation of this essay. As is my custom when writing about a living artist, I sent a copy of the completed article to the artist, who responded with real enthusiasm. I have incorporated

the few notations he made into relevant places in the text or footnotes. My gratitude also to artist Fritz Janschka for his very helpful input.

- 1 I became an art historian in mid-life, following an earlier career as a clinical psychologist. I have combined techniques derived from both disciplines in my studies of artists and their oeuvres. My methodology, which I have dubbed "psychoiconography," merges formal, iconographic, biographical, and psychological elements to examine an artist's oeuvre. For a more detailed discussion of my method, as well as additional examples of its application, see M. M. Gedo, *Looking at Art from the Inside Out: The Psychoiconographic Approach to Modern Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 2 Two versions of this essay have been published. For the original version see M. M. Gedo, "An Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama: The Art of Roger Brown," *Art Criticism* 4:3 (1988), 37-49. For an expanded version, with illustrations, see M. M. Gedo "Interviews with a Living Artist: The Art of Roger Brown," in John E. Gedo and Mary M. Gedo *Perspectives on Creativity: The Biographical Method* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1992), 151-88.
- 3 *Ibid*, 182-4, Figs. 10, 11.
- 4 The artist and I met several times in his studio; following the installation of the mosaics, we also discussed them as we viewed them together. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of statements by Brown cited in this essay occurred during these contacts, which were recorded. Our interviews were supplemented by numerous telephone conversations as well as by letters exchanged while the artist was in California during the winter of 1993-4. I had the opportunity to examine virtually all the preparatory drawings and sketches for the two mosaics, as well as to study the definitive painted modellos. These works subsequently became part of the collection of the Ahmanson Company.
- 5 Although accounts of this myth are reported in many literary sources, Brown relied on the popular summary supplied in Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, 14th printing, (New York: 1961), 139-40 and 151-2. For a detailed list of the ancient literary sources referring to the story, consult the entry on "Daidalos et Ikarus," *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologie*, v. 3, pt. 1 (Zurich, 1986), 313-14.
- 6 For an extensive, albeit incomplete, list of artists and works inspired by this myth from medieval times to the present, see "Icarus and Daedalus," in Jane Davidson Reid, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s*, v. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 586-93. For the preoccupation of the Surrealists with aspects of the myth, consult Whitney Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929-1939* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980), 40-5 and *passim*. Although Picasso had also responded to a commission to create an enormous public mural by representing *The Fall of Icarus* (Conference Hall, UNESCO, 1958), Brown (who has never shown much interest in Picasso's career) had been unaware of the existence of this mosaic until I mentioned it to him during our interviews. Picasso's pessimistic interpretation provides an interesting contrast to Brown's idealizing composition.
- 7 Brown toyed with the notion of adding the Minotaur to his composition, even though well aware that Theseus had dispatched the dreaded beast before Daedalus and Icarus were imprisoned.
- 8 In our original discussion of this sketch, Brown commented that he had shown Icarus as "more or less falling—but I was thinking that it could be circling, or it could be falling, 'cause I added little feathers in it. I was trying to rationalize that it was more circling than falling, 'cause I knew that a falling Icarus would not probably be desirable [to the artist's patrons]." However, the account that he composed in 1993 for an autobiographical essay, scheduled to appear in a future issue of *Private Arts*, was more equivocal: "My initial idea for the mosaic, 'Daedalus and Icarus,' was not the traditional fall of Icarus, though it [the first painted sketch] was designed so that Daedalus was angled upward, while Icarus was angled downward. The effect met with resistance from the owners, who felt that the mosaic should be more uplifting in spirit." The latter quotation comes from an undated letter from the artist (written in December, 1993), which included a copy of the comments he composed for *Private Arts*.
- 9 In an interview with Kristine McKenna, the artist offered the following explanation for

his Apocalyptic works: "I'm sure the mood of threat and apocalypse in my work can be traced to my Southern fundamentalist upbringing. I remember as a child traveling by car to visit my grandmother, who lived 200 miles from us, and sometimes we'd be returning late at night, and I'd see the glow of the cities on the horizon, and I'd wonder if the world was ending, because that's what I heard all the time in church ..." For the complete text of this interview, see McKenna, "California Dreamer: Chicago's Roger Brown finds inspiration on the West Coast," *Chicago Tribune*, (January 2, 1994), sect. 13, 10-11.

- 10 This quotation comes from the text the artist prepared for *Private Arts*.
- 11 Brown had been very impressed by the observation Campbell had made about the myth during interviews Bill Moyers conducted with him on public television. Brown owns the book based on these interviews. See Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers, B. S. Flowers, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 131-2.
- 12 According to the architectural critic Paul Gapp, "Jahn calls this detail 'the ladder' (which it resembles) when it is in a vertical position and 'the trellis' when it is horizontal." See P. Gapp's, "It's Jahn Again," *Chicago Tribune* (March 1, 1992), sect. 13, 24-5.
- 13 Brown laughingly commented that he had painted the definitive cartoon "like Jim Nutt," another prominent Chicago painter (and chum of Brown's) noted for his meticulous technique and correspondingly low productivity.
- 14 This addition would not be visible from the vantage point Brown represented, and he did not show it. The architectural firms of Shaw and Associates, and Swanke, Hayden, and Connel also acted as architects for the addition.
- 15 For this observer, the treatment of light in both mosaics conveys a supernatural quality, recalling similar depictions of divine light in Renaissance altarpieces.
- 16 This quotation comes from an undated, printed copy of Brown's text, supplied by the Phyllis Kind Gallery.
- 17 For a detailed study of the changing iconography of the myth, with numerous illustrations of contemporary representations, see Herwarth Röttgen "Daedalus und Ikarus: zwischen Kunst und Technik, Mythos und Seele," pts 1 and 2, *Kritische Berichte* XII/2 (1984), 5-35 and XII/3 (1984), 5-26. See also Dirk Kocks and Peter W. Kallen, "Alta vola—Unsterbliche Hausse für Ikarus: Künstler der Gegenwart im Banne des Mythos?," *Weltkunst*, LIII/16 (Aug. 15, 1983), 2072-5. For additional references to twentieth-century interpretations, consult J. D. Reid, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts*, 590-3. See also W. Chadwick (as in n. 6).
- 18 For a summary of the broad changes in depictions of the myth over the centuries, see H. Röttgen, "Daedalus und Ikarus," pt 1, 5. For a catalogue of surviving representations by Etruscan, Greek, and Roman artists, consult the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologie*, v 3, pt. 1, 313-20 and v. 3, pt. 2, 237-42.
- 19 Röttgen, "Daedalus und Ikarus," pt. 2, 5.
- 20 For a photograph showing a detail from Paolini's installation, see *Documenta 7 Kassel*, v. 1 (Kassel: Wenderoth, 1982), 258.
- 21 For this observation, see D. Kocks and P. W. Kallen, "Alta Vola Unsterbliche Hausse für Ikarus," 2072.
- 22 See H. Röttgen, "Daedalus und Ikarus," pt. 2, 10-1.
- 23 *Ibid.*, figs. 4 and 5.
- 24 Consult Röttgen, "Daedalus und Ikarus," pt. 2, 5. Both sections of his two-part study include numerous illustrations documenting the chronological changes in the iconography to which he alludes. For a catalogue of surviving examples from antiquity, see the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologie*, v. 3, pt. 1, 313-21 and, for the corresponding illustrations, v. 3, pt. 2, 237-42.
- 25 As the commentary Brown composed for *Private Arts* (quoted below) demonstrates, at least in retrospect, he consciously associated his depiction of Daedalus and Icarus with Veronda and himself.
- 26 See the catalogue, illustrations, and commentary in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologie*, v. 3, pt. 1, 313-21, and v. 3, pt. 2, 237-42.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 H. Röttgen, "Daedalus und Ikarus," pt. 1 provides numerous illustrations of this type.

Anthony van Dyck, who based his Icarus on a self-portrait, represented himself as a beautiful youth of this type in *Daedalus and Icarus* (c. 1630, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto). For the reproduction of this picture in Röttgen, as well as his accompanying commentary, see p. 13, fig. 4.

- 29 These legendary twins were as celebrated for their devotion to one another as for their heroism. In one of the numerous versions of the myth, only Pollux is the son of Zeus, and hence immortal; when his brother dies, he begs his father to let him die too, so Zeus permits him to spend alternate days on Olympus among the gods and in the lower world with Castor. In another variation, Zeus, as a reward for their brotherly love, sets them in the sky as the constellation of the Twins, or the morning and evening star. For a brief summary of this complex tale and its variations, consult Oscar Seyffert "Dioscuri," *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, rev., ed., add. by Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (Cleveland and New York: W. Glaiser, Ltd., 1969), 194.
- 30 For numerous examples of paintings by Brown involving continuous narration, see Sidney Lawrence, with an essay by John Yau, *Roger Brown*, exh. cat. (New York, 1987). Although Brown's use of this device reflects his admiration for modern comic books, many of these pictures also owe a debt to late Medieval and early Renaissance altarpieces and frescoes. For a particularly clear-cut example, see *Giotto and His Friends: Getting Even*, n. 34, pp. 60-61, 84.
- 31 See J. E. and M. M. Gedo, *Perspectives on Creativity*, (as in n. 2), 185-6.
- 32 The artist himself called my attention to the unconvincing character of these bands while we studied the mosaic together. Brown is far from alone in treating this detail in a cursory fashion, as the illustrations provided by the sources cited in n. 24. demonstrate. To my knowledge, the only artist who made a serious attempt to resolve this difficulty was the 14th-century sculptor Andrea Pisano. His marble relief depicting Daedalus in flight (created for the Campanile of the Florence Cathedral, but now in the Museo del Duomo) the artist symbolized Daedalus' bird-like character by clading him in a feather "body suit" and attaching his wings to his torso by two stout bands, as well as by handles near the wing tips, which Daedalus grips tightly.
- 33 See Steele Savage's illustration for the race between Atalanta and Hippomenes in Hamilton, *Mythology*, 177. According to Oscar Seyffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, 78-9, only the Boetian version of the myth describes this contest, which Hippomenes wins with the aid of Aphrodite. In punishment for Hippomenes' carelessness in forgetting to render thanks to the goddess for winning the race—and the maiden—the goddess punished the lovers by changing them into lions.
- 34 The artist owns several books about Giotto that contain copious illustrations of his work.
- 35 The severe damage the Rimini crucifix has suffered through the centuries has had the effect of making it appear more simple and austere, and thus closer to the images in Brown's mosaic, than Giotto's better preserved (and more ornate) crucifixes would be. For a discussion of the Rimini crucifix's condition, as well as a good color reproduction of it, see *All the Paintings of Giotto*, intro., Andrew Martindale, notes and cat., Edi Baccheschi, cat. no. 113A, p. 111 and Pl. XLII. See also Pl. LXIII, which illustrates the more intact crucifix in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, for a comparison that underscores my point.
- 36 This quotation comes from a letter from the artist dated February 3, 1994.
- 37 For black-and-white illustrations of both works, consult *All the Paintings of Giotto*. For the Louvre panel, see no. 46, p. 95; for the Bardi fresco, see no. 138, pp.116-7.
- 38 In his letter of Feb. 3, 1994, Brown responded: "I don't remember specifically Giotto's [*Stigmatization of*] *St. Francis*, though as I read your reference to it, I do have a vague recollection of it. It may be in one of my Giotto books."
- 39 For a more extensive discussion of this series, as well as illustrations of two of these paintings, see J. E. and M. M. Gedo, *Perspectives on Creativity* (as in n. 2), 168-71.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 175-6.
- 41 During his interview with McKenna, "California Dreamer," 10-11, The artist discussed this period in his life very frankly. About his decision to move to Chicago at age 19 to attend the School of the Art Institute, he remarked:
Part of my reason for going [to Chicago] was because I realized when I was 15 that I was gay, and I knew that wasn't acceptable in the small town [Opelika, Alabama] I lived in. I

struggled with this realization throughout my teenage years, then when I was 19 I told my parents, and they insisted we talk to the church elders about it. The church advised me to go to this clinic in Columbus, Georgia and see a psychologist. At that point I agreed with them that this was a 'problem' we needed to solve—I still sort of half-believed the Bible at that point, so this was a very painful time for me. The psychologist told me I should move to a big city, because he understood that this wasn't an aspect of me that was going to change. I've never wanted my art to be about my sexuality, because my life is not about being part of the gay culture."

42 Ibid., 10.

43 This quotation comes from the statement the artist prepared for publication in *Private Arts*.

44 Brown responded to my hypothesis that he may anticipate being reunited with Veronda after death with the following statement "I'm not sure about this, since I consider myself a non-believer with doubts. But you end it by saying so." He did not, however, ask me to modify or omit this hypothesis.

It should perhaps be noted that angel iconography plays a prominent role in several recent works dealing with the AIDS epidemic. Illustrations advertising Tony Kushner's two-part drama, *Angels in America*, regularly depict the angel of death carrying off a dying victim. See also Lawrence Block's short story, "The Merciful Angel of Death," in *The New Mystery*, ed. Jerome Charyn (New York, 1994), 136-49. As its title indicates, Block's story, which deals with dying AIDS patients, also makes prominent use of angelic symbolism.

Dialectic Negation and the Unpresentable Object of Nihilism in the Painting of Sigmar Polke

Lara Ferb

“What is the meaning of art?” What does art mean?”¹

“The will to truth which will still tempt us to many a venture, that famous truthfulness of which all philosophers have spoken with respect—what questions has this will to truth not laid before us! What strange, wicked, questionable questions!”²

Sigmar Polke has always wrenched meaning out of art. Not as content but as question, a question of opposition, a question of dialectics, a question that becomes itself a questionable question. From the banalizing demotion of Art in his early work to his anti-epic history paintings to his occultist, Dionysian abstractions, he may refute possible answers to his question, but never responds with an affirmative. He delights himself with paradox, obscurity, ephemerality, refusing to attribute meaning to his work and cultivating a persona that makes this question of meaning equally elusive, reticent, seductive.

Referred to by critics as a “clown, gambler, anarchist, idealist;”³ a “malignant genie,” or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde;⁴ a “joker: the wild card that changes meaning at the player’s whim;”⁵ both “royal buffoon” and “aspirant shaman;”⁶ a “Mephistophelean daemon,”⁷ he is the prototypical Dionysian poet Nietzsche wrote of: “Only a fool! Only a poet! ... compelled to lie, willingly, knowingly ... that we are banished from all truth.”⁸ Polke is reputedly hard to grasp, to get a handle on, to get a hold

of. His mask of persona defies recognition. "Is he the deceived or the deceiver?" asks critic Annelie Pohlen, "Does he signify himself, us or art? In an interrelationship structure without causality, everything remains a question."⁹

This is perhaps why Polke has been so successful. In playing the court jester, he pleases everyone from the most hard-line Marxist to the old school formalist to the psychoanalyst. The more Polke himself denies there is any meaning in his work, the more we search for it. We follow him like detectives obsessed with clues. The elusiveness of meaning in his paintings becomes seductive, addictive, and his paintings become battlefields for the negotiation of meaning itself. By Polke, however, it is not just a matter of subjectivism, *but of the subject itself*.

In its enigmas and ambiguities, Polke's work is strongly rooted in the traditions of German Romanticism, traditions from which Bruno Hillebrand has traced what he calls the nihilistic aesthetic through the history of modern art and literature. Hillebrand suggests that, as a function of the nihilistic vacuum that constitutes Modernity, engendered by the failure of Enlightenment positivism and Christianity, the nihilistic aesthetic provides for the renegotiation of an individual's being when faced with this crisis of meaning: "Man erlebt das Nichts und erlebt sich selbst dabei."¹⁰ Hillebrand presents nihilism in 19th and early 20th century art as a corollary of the medieval algeodoric metaphor of interpreting pain as a metaphysical existential affirmation: "Where there is pain, there 'I' shall be."¹¹ The reification of "das Nichts" in art is a means of control and reconciliation for the subject faced with the abyss of Modernity. Following the Nietzschean aphorism "Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich starker," meaninglessness as an absolute is interpolated as a *relative* value, a nihilistic object over and against which the subject places himself. The nihilistic aesthetic, Hillebrand suggests, was thus therefore essentially a narcissistic aesthetic of ego affirmation, not the will to meaning or meaninglessness, truth or untruth, but the will to power.

Drawing on Lyotard's distinction between the modern evocation and the post-modern presentation of the "unpresentable,"¹² Hillebrand asserts that with the post-modern, post-avant-garde, the nihilistic aesthetic has become a commodity, "Munze," a token of posture.¹³ Polke's work—existing in post-modern, post-avant-garde time and space—does indeed present the unpresentable, "express the inexpressible" objects of philosophy as Adorno might put it.¹⁴ But his painting is informed by a conception of dialectics that deliver his paintings to the effects of the modern as Lyotard conceives it: "to present the fact that the unpresentable exists. To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen or made visible."¹⁵ In his

presentations and expressions, Polke effects a negation of the negations of presentation a dialectic double negation that opens up a Derridean *Klage*, which is both an infinite abyss and a hermetic labyrinth, but nonetheless a labyrinth which contains its own exits.¹⁶

In so posing the question of meaning and value in art, Polke, siding for the moment with Lyotard, reveals art in the post-modern age to be lacking in this fundamental characteristic of its conventional nature. But this lackingness itself gives rise in turn to the “unpresentable” of an abyss. It is a double affirmation of lack, a double negation. In Lacanian theory, it is precisely such a “lack” that is said to be the touchstone for both desire and the constitution of a subject’s identity. Lack is a mirror reflection, a reminder of a subject’s own insufficiency that gives rise to a desire to efface that reflection, and thereby deliver the subject back to its delusion of wholeness.¹⁷ Sartre illustrates this same point, without the phallic implications of Lacanian theory, as the first principle of existentialism:

If man as the existentialist sees him is not defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself ... he is what he wills ... Before that projection of the self, nothing exists.¹⁸

In presenting a lack, a void, an abyss, nothing—by metonymic equation and metaphoric transposition—Polke’s paintings give rise to an opportunity for the ego to reconstitute itself and therein lies their attraction—the questionable question of meaning.

In his analysis of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Adrian del Caro makes the distinction between passive nihilism, resulting in despair, absolute loss of values, paralysis, anarchy, and active nihilism, engaged not only in the “*Entwertung*” (nullification) but the “*Umwertung*” (transvaluation or inversion) of meaning.¹⁹ As a philosophy of the future, active nihilism seeks annihilation for the sake of rebirth—“Nur wo Graber sind, wird Es Auferstehungen,” says Nietzsche. Polke’s paintings negate, produce, and gratify such a yearning in spite of themselves. Because they present this lack of meaning and value so as to reinscribe meaning itself as myth and fiction, the myth of meaning becomes compensation for its own lack. This is the melancholic’s gratification of passive nihilism, where consolation is found in nostalgia. The question-as-lack of meaning in Polke’s work can be taken up as a matter of metaphysics, of nihilistic philosophy, that is itself just “waiting to be injected with meaning.”²⁰ This is the fetishist’s gratification of active nihilism, where a certain idealism is inscribed in the power of avowal and disavowal. “The totum is the totem,” Adorno writes, in that it allows the subject to reconstitute his own

ideality over and against the abyss.²¹

Polke himself is essentially a nihilist, but not a pessimistic nihilist wallowing in despair and angst over a loss of values like the German Expressionists nor a utopian nihilist bent on destruction to redeem the present like the Italian Futurists, but a Dionysian nihilist whose drive toward nothingness is only a symptom, a result of his own narcissistic gratification in the processes and procedures of aesthetic practice. Polke's own nihilism is different in that it neither reinscribes old values in lamenting their demise nor seeks to propagate new ones. He neither negates the value of meaninglessness itself in Hillebrand's paradigm of it in the post-avant-garde/post-modern nor hails meaninglessness as a value itself like Dada. Polke plays the game of the active nihilist, whose "Lust an Vernichten" is a process of sublimation, an aesthetic surrogate by which he refuses to deal with the real world.²² He takes narcissistic pleasure in negation as the self-deifying, self-reifying creation of an abyss as egotistical affirmation. For Polke, to use the words of Gottfried Benn, "Nihilism ist ein Glücksgefühl."²³

What really interests Polke, he says, are not the paintings themselves, but the processes and procedures involved, "how you can make gold from shit,"²⁴ more than gold or shit in and of themselves. Harald Szeemann reports that "he leaves his pictures sagging for months on end in a horizontal position, using them as containers for whole lakes of varnish."²⁵ Polke approaches painting as *Homo Ludens*. He attributes intention in his work to telekinetic higher powers of the occult or to the inherent properties of his media. He paints with toxic, often mind-altering pigments like yellow arsenic powder, formerly used as a depilatory, and the infamous Schweinfurt Green, whose fumes are said to have killed Napoleon, precisely because they pose such risks, because they reinvest the artistic act with a significance it no longer has. "Painting is an Ignominy ... Poison has consequences. Art has none,"²⁶ he says.

In the meantime, critics declare Polke an alchemist. But alchemy is a "science" concerned with creating something of value out of something lacking value. This requires, from the first, maintaining a concern for value and the willingness to attribute value—both of which Polke, like Nietzsche, blatantly refuses to do. As far as Polke is concerned, it is the critic who is the alchemist. And in the critics' hands, gold his works do indeed become. It is only in the eyes of the spectator, staring into an abyss, standing before a pile of shit, that Polke's elusive, illusory nihilistic gesture is delivered unto meaning.

Polke's Capitalist Realism was a three-fold negation of the recent and current history of art. It was a satiric subversion of both Socialist Realism, a system entrenched in the Eastern-bloc country of his childhood, and Pop

Art, the latest successor in the hegemony of American painting. Almost a kind of prototype for the samizdat of Komar & Melamid, Polke refuted the value of art and its institutionalized systematization in both East and West by combining Pop subject matter with the official Soviet style. By the time Polke enrolled as a student of Beuys at Dusseldorf in the mid-'60s, however, painting was increasingly being displaced as a pre-eminent art form, especially in Europe, by movements such as Fluxus and body art, by Nouveau Realisme and process-oriented, assemblage-type work like Arte Povera, and cerebral conceptualism like that of Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. To paint at this time was retrogressive, decadent, deceitful. Polke embraced the credo "Painting is dead. Long live painting." in the midst of its down-going. But Polke did not paint retrogressively or decadently, but spitefully, satirically, simultaneously celebrating his own arrival and painting's demise at the latter's expense.

Polke's Capitalist Realism paintings, paintings such as *Kekse*, *Socken*, *Plastikwannen*, *Schokoladenbild*, reproduce themselves as the mundane commodities of their content: trivial conveniences of everyday life. Just as Magritte severed the link between representation and reality in works such as *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, in Polke's works from his Capitalist Realism period, he goes a step further to negate the relationship between representation and picture. If they are at all representations, they are of pictorial representations themselves as they would appear in advertising, reproduced reproductions, increasingly self-identical, self-referential, detached from life. It is an ironic procedure of dialectical negation, for it is in spite of their representational character that these reproduced reproductions degenerate into flat and meaningless abstractions. Above all, they refer to their own pictoriality—often emphasized with the suffix "Bild" in their title. When Katharina Winnekes asks of these paintings, confessing that she has spent far more time with them than she would like: "Sind sie sie selbst oder Abbild eines Anderen? Existieren sie einfach im Medium Malerei oder zeigen sie etwas vor?"²⁷ she suggests that the question has become the content, that the very status and stature of the painting as art object is being called into question, and that this indecidability, this "bothness" and "neitherness" which scripts the question of meaning is enough to gain our attention.

Trying to answer the question of meaning in these paintings leads us only to further negation. These paintings are "realist" only in so far as they mimic the dead paint of Socialist Realism, and "capitalist" in so far as that they represent iconic examples of the commodity fetish. Each term is intended to cancel the other in oxymoronic negation. Unlike his American Pop counterparts who doubly affirm the fetishistic principle, fetishizing the notion of the commodity fetish, Polke negates the fetishistic principle twice over in unmasking the commodity object's

banality and exposing its theoreticization by refusing the possibility of the fetishistic connection at the level of art. Indeed, these paintings themselves are excruciatingly boring, leaving us with an unsettling "That's it?" Instead of choosing luxury items of fashion or more sophisticated delicacies conventionally more associated with the commodity fetish for their more overt libidinal appeal, Polke paints infantile or juvenile desires: candy bars, packaged pastry, washtubs. As the aura of the represented commodity object is deflected into the mundane, the "reality" of the capitalistic object as a fetishized commodity is deflated, negated. The objects appear empty, flat, meaningless. As "flat and unsexuctive"²⁸ pictures themselves, they do not offer a surrogate for the degraded objects of representation, but become mirror reflections of their object. The spectator also comes to stand before this mirror, not at all the reflection we anticipate from art, but a cracked and warped reflection. Polke's Capitalist Realism thus signals the insufficiency of art, parallel to the commodity, to fulfill what we desire from it, indeed to fulfill desire at all. This revelation of insufficiency, invoking and mocking the desire for its reciprocal, creates a margin of demand for the attribution of meaning to these works.

Contemporary with Polke's Capitalist Realism are his Rasterbilder—hand-painted appropriations of Lichtenstein's Benday-dot screens. The female figure—as the "masculine" gendered fantasy of the Playboy bunny (*Bunnies*), the lesbian couple (*Girlfriends*), the Asian geisha (*Japanese Dancers*)—is presented as an elusive object of desire whose scopophilic captation is precluded by the Raster screen. For a woman, it is difficult not to engender these paintings with the significance of a feminist protest, to see them as something more than the negation of art as a soft-porn fantasy that would only reinscribe that fantasy. Nor would it be at all productive here to undermine that judgement here by referring to the Lacanian argument that woman signifies lack, an insufficiency doubly affirmed in her elusive presence here, inevitably producing a crisis of the ego in the male spectator, simply for the sake of an argument. Let the insufficiency of the argument here then suffice as testimony to the argument: faced with a crisis of meaning, meaning is generated as a function of ego.

Also contemporary with Polke's Capitalist Realism pictures and the Rasterbilder are his paintings referring to the history of modernism, at that time in the midst of its apotheosis as defined by Greenberg's tenets in American Minimalism. Like the Capitalist Realism paintings, these works appear as dull and uninspired machinations of convention. They point more directly to the insufficiency of art to gratify the viewer with a perfect mirror. They in fact take negation a step further by suggesting that such a notion itself is an irrational delusion.

By flatly duplicating high modernist paintings, these paintings mock the notion of a logical linear and immanent progression of art, its rationale of truth or beauty, and the notions of such notions themselves. The appropriated gestures of *Akt mit Geige* and *Konstruktivisch* (both 1968) are in no way deferential homages to Picasso or Mondrian and Lichtenstein, but ciphers of degeneration. *Moderne Kunst* (also 1968), the most infamous of these works for its inclusion of what appears to be a swastika in its pictorial arrangement of abstract element that seeks (so they say) an analogy between modernism and fascist doctrine, gives us, more to the point, modernism as a Polaroid snapshot. Pictures such as *Losungen V* (1967), referring back to Mondrian's work in pluses and minuses during the early 'teens, present irrational solutions for mathematical equations in a sly condemnation of the Greenbergian notion that a picture works itself out according to any immanent logic. The "wrongness" of the equations is indeed a repudiation of the notion of logic itself. *Carl Andre in Delft* (1968), reproducing Dutch Delftware tiles in a Minimalist grid using acrylic on fabric, is equally absurd, but no more willing to offer an alternative to the object of its laughter. *The Picture that was painted on the order of Higher Beings* (1967), an order to "Paint the Upper Right Hand Corner Black," results in a similar mockery of Malevichian reductivism.

In spite of their persistent negativity, these paintings all have a sense of humour. They negate the value of art as a mirror of perfection, of sufficiency, of totality, but because their object is, in a sense, an autonomous art, of little consequence for life itself, they engender negation as a "Glücksgefühl," a kind of "Schadenfreude." The viewer sides with Polke in the conviction that it is laughable that history would have held such a significance for such a petty thing as art. In other words, Polke presents art as abyssal, a meaningless over and against which the viewer laughs and therefore is.

Adopting Nietzsche's credo adopted from Voltaire, these paintings of the 1960s seek to "Ecrasez l'infame," to mock the notion of art as an Apollonian projection, as a Platonic revelation of essences, as optimistic, Socratic rationality. For Polke, just as for Nietzsche, art as such functions as a cipher of degeneration.²⁹ If it is true, as Nietzsche wrote, that "Wir haben die Kunst, damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit zu Grunde gehen. Kunst bejaht. Hiob Bejaht," Polke's art becomes negation itself by way of rejecting false affirmation, negation of negation.³⁰

At this point in his career, it is possible to see a glimmer of utopian nihilism in Polke's work, especially in consideration of the contemporaneous Capitalist Realism and his involvement with alternative art forms the likes of Beuys, his teacher. Exemplary of the avant-garde in Europe during the 1960s, Beuys, like Fluxus and the body art movement,

advocated that art be transposed into life, opting for action rather than painting, seeking to evade the institutionalization of art in corrupt and degenerate (capitalist) systems. In spite of the negation that takes place in Polke's painting, in other spheres he maintained an interest in developing an alternative to high modernism. Polke was active in Beuys' "actions," but refused to renounce painting. It is unlikely that Polke's continuation to paint was a function of the failure of these extra-pictorial art forms in the 1960s to transcend the commercial object orientation of art. More to the point would be that Polke takes *pleasure* in painting itself, a point quite clearly signalled in the coprophilic metaphor implied in his statement that he is concerned with "how you can make gold from shit."

In Renato Poggioli's theory of the avant-garde, he asserts that such a moment of antagonistic negation as is evidenced in Polke's work during the latter 1960s is the precursor of nihilism, futurism, and decadence.³¹ For Nietzsche, these latter three were epitomized in the figure of Dionysus, the god of pleasure. From Polke's negation of Apollonian modernism, he proceeds to Dionysian decadence. Paintings such as *Flamingo Picture*, *Sunset*, *City Picture* (all 1969) are sensational neon mirages, spectacular displays of paint that foreshadow his Dionysian abstractions of the 1980s. Here, Polke does not replace the lack of meaning he finds in art in his earlier works with anything but sensual pleasure. Other paintings, such as *Alice in Wonderland* (1971), a celebration of drug culture, *Ohne Titel* (1971-73), featuring figures of decadence imprinted on decorative textiles in a barroom haze, and the quasi-pornographic imagery of *Akt mit Salamander* (1971) and *Untitled* (1976), embrace decadence more overtly.

The decadence of Polke's paintings in the '70s invokes the same nihilistic aesthetic signalled in the "Big City Expressionism" of Kirchner in Dresden and Berlin or the New Objectivity of Grosz and Dix, where pleasure and apocalypse go down hand-in-hand. Whereas for these historical avant-gardes such a nihilistic aesthetic that had already been recuperated from Romanticism by Symbolism could be recuperated yet again as a response to the condition of Europe around the first World War, for Polke in the '70s it must be acknowledged with a self-conscious, post-modern sensibility. The subject matter is silly, trite, embarrassing—trivialities and clichés. Polke is presenting the apocalyptic aesthetic itself up front as a Lyotardian "unpresentable." The knowing and overt presentation of such an aesthetic idea as a flatly abstract object promises only its unattainability not its gratification, opening an abyss even as it closes us off from it. Does one create and go down into the abyss for the intoxicating metaphysical transcendence of being itself? Or so that he may reaffirm his own ego, his own power to construct a framework, a

ladder by which he will raise himself out of the abyss? For the illness itself or the cure? Commenting on Polke's 1991 retrospective exhibition in Chicago, Karl Holmqvist writes

A giant ladder 14 metres high had been made of aluminum ... The ladder came to represent something of a link between the works and their various styles, a giant ladder—larger than life ... From here to eternity in Polke's work. Or might it be the opposite direction?³²

The moot unanswerability of these questions presented by Polke's work presents the nihilistic aesthetic itself as a questionable question. Doubt itself is negated as a cipher of meaning and value in the infinite negation of negation.

If the nihilistic aesthetic in the modern period provided for the reconstitution of the artist's or spectator's ego-ideal over and against the abyss, in Polke's post-modern work the abyss is set up only as a distant impossibility, but delivered back to us through double negation. In infinitely inscribing the Romantic dialectic of opposites, ultimately of being and non-being, of meaning and meaninglessness, in his pictures, he refuses to provide for the relativity that would permit one to transcend this circle. For Nietzsche, the Romantic principle of transcendent simultaneity, the lack of a structuralist logic of relative referentiality, gave rise to a sensibility beyond conventional meaning: a dionysian "Rausch," a moment where individual subjective identity is left behind, where it enters the sublime of the unknown and unknowable as metaphysical meditation. In forestalling the nihilistic aesthetic it invites the spectator to participate in, in deferring its gratification, Polke's work becomes again vertiginous. Adorno writes of such an effect as one of utter displacement of the subject: "A dialectics no longer glued to identity" that "will provoke either the charge that it is bottomless [the abyss] ... or the objection that it is dizzying [the labyrinth]."³³ Polke creates a crisis of meaning over the crisis of meaning itself. The vertigo of the *Klage*, the unresolved "dialectic," is caused by "the shock of inconclusiveness, the negative as which it cannot help appearing the frame-covered, never-changing realm, is true for untruth only."³⁴

In the latter 1970s and '80s, Polke began unpacking the picture as a closed entity unto itself. His paintings from this time are complex lyrical admixtures of many media, techniques, and sources, really more assemblage or collage than painting in many cases, reproducing his own concern for processes and procedures on the side of the spectator. Like the Dada collage in which the techniques are rooted, these paintings involve both destruction and creation, the Dialectic of the Dionysian aesthetic. The effects of such superimposition serve, Polke says, "to

prove a very simple gimmick, to know that everything is in flux.”³⁵

Polke’s ability to inscribe opposition in his paintings, to signal the dialectic bonds between apparent opposites, a notion inherited from German Romanticism that becomes manifest content in his later work, is what renders this post-modern painter capable of resuscitating the effects of the modern. This is the operative dialectic in Polke’s work, manifest early on: a “reconciliation,” though not a resolution, of thesis and antithesis, like the interminable flipping of a coin or sway of a metronome. It is not the resolution of “either or” but the *Verwirrung* of “both and neither,” the bending of linear polarity into a kind of circular infinity. The reciprocal constitution of entities nullifies the notion of opposition, of the constitution of meaning as a function of relativity, and value, meaning and truth are dissolved.

Polke’s understanding of this principle is quite clearly signalled by his 1969 *Tibersprungtuch diptych*:

BERLIOZ HATTE VERGEBLICH	DER TIBER HATTE
NACH EINER MELODIE ZU EINEM	VERGEBLICH NACH
TEXT GESUCHT. PLOTZLICH SUMMTE	EINEM KOPFSPRUNG
ER DIESE GESUCHTE MELODIE VOR	FUR SEINEN TEXT GESUCHT.
SICH HIN ALS ER BEIM BADEN IM	PLOTZLICH SUMMTE ER DIE
TIBER NACH EIN EINEM KOPFSPRUNG	MELODIE. ALS DIE OBERFLACHE
WIEDER AN DIE OBERFLACHE KAM.	NACH DEM BADENAN BERLIOZ
KAM.	

The text reciprocally unsettles meaning as both absolute and subjective value that are eternally inverted, subverted, repressed and reborn.

“There is an old Chinese adage,” says Polke, “which says that a superposition never lasts eternally and that which finds itself below cannot stay below forever ... What interests me, is knowing if one finds oneself above or below.”³⁶ In other words, where one stands as a subject in relation to this fluctuating universe. Bernard Marcade writes that Polke’s interest in mysticism and the occult “permit him to remand, back to back, a reigning positivism as well as a rampant irrationalism,” and that he uses such oppositions as a “point of flight from the world itself, as they vie with one and other for the opposing positions each occupies, catapulting them against one another to the point of rendering them unrecognizable.”³⁷

Polke’s pictures from the later ‘70s to the present often present themselves at first as a unified and organic wholes, each a logical totality made up by the sum of its parts. But they also invite the formal deconstruction of the picture, an inverted corollary of the creative act on the part of the artist—the painting seems to ask us to break it down, make sense of it. In many paintings, Polke shows us both structure and surface,

front and back, inside and outside. We become fully cognizant of the picture as construction, become participants in the creative act by naming this body in bits and pieces.

The construction lies beneath a “pre-appearance” of the painting as a unified and organic whole, however. And it is this illusion of the “unpresentable” that first captivates the spectator. Polke often imprints the structures with figures or narrative, stamping them with an alleged subject matter that is both friend and foil for the viewing subject. Narrative and figuration are elusive illusions, incandescent dreamwork laid over the scaffolding, a point most clearly signalled by the 1983 *Opiumraucher*. In contrast to his work dating from the ‘60s and early ‘70s, the works begin to be *beautiful*. Annelie Pohlen writes:

In an era in which beauty is shunned by facts or where this, which one generally calls beautiful pictures, belongs into the spheres of Kitsch and deceit ... The yearning for the beautiful and true, the intelligent and sensuous picture is reflected in the pre-appearance of the painted ‘surface’ where it produces an inkling and gives away something of the creative mania, to push forward into a depth that does not exist in the constructed picture.³⁸

Just so do Polke’s pictures begin to directly invoke the beautiful or the sublime, to produce such a yearning in spite of the knowing degradation of its object as pictorial construction. But they begin to evoke such “truths” only as they deny them. The paintings reveal the lie of the sublime in their direct Lyotardian presentation of it as trivial object. “Art is a lie and the lie is art, Polke has said, “The lie in itself can never become truth.”³⁹ but in delivering art as such an untruth, he also signals its dialectic reciprocate, a perverse Tantalus giving us the apple via the core. Pohlen goes on to point out this reciprocal dialectic inscription:

The trivial and the sublime are both children of [the creative] mania. Such pictures are deceitful and true because they do not explain the pre-appearance as existence and do not sacrifice the utopia and the existence of beauty to deceit. By revealing the non-identity between world, model, and painted picture and by simultaneously giving form to the yearning for identity and beauty without fulfilling this, the energy of vision remains unharmed by deceit ... Who would claim that this is truth or myth; beauty or facade; both or nothing?⁴⁰

However, with regard to Polke’s (de)constructivist work, I believe she is incorrect in her assumptions about the pre-appearance of the existence of utopia and beauty and “the energy of vision.” By Polke, the manifest

revelation of the picture as construction, whose ultimate revelation underneath the beautiful screen or veil is its identity as a structural, constructed identity.

The narrative and figurative elements in these works are executed in a strategy similar to that which Polke used to negate modernism in the '60s. They have the quality of appropriation rather than representation. Polke's strategy here is what Benjamin Buchloh has termed the "allegorical procedure," something which has nothing to do with allegory, history or signification, but rather involves fracturing the signifying chain that constitutes the meaning in allegory itself.⁴¹ It is a hermeneutic machination, a semiotician's annihilating gesture that severs the analogical bridge to reveal an abyss. Polke exploits the iconic image to expose the lack of meaning found in such iconicity. Imagery that should function as a cipher of meaning—allegory, iconography, facticity of historical material—is irreverently displaced into meaninglessness.

The lure of history and its material as a vessel of truth is strong, for where else are truth and meaning to be found if not there? Polke feigns sincerity with this web of history, a ruse for the obfuscation of the painting's very lack of truth. A prominent theme in these history paintings refers back to the birth of nihilism itself in the early nineteenth century when Romantics disillusioned with Enlightenment rationality in the wake of the French Revolution embraced the unconscious, the occult, and the mysterious. Like his earlier presentations of decadence and death in paintings such as *White Obelisk*, imagery testifying to the failure of the French Revolution itself appropriated imagery from Goya's terrifying anti-rational *Caprichos* are again used as blatant symbols. The allegedly figurative or narrative imagery is hand-painted to resemble mechanical processes, suggesting the Benda screen or graphic procedures. Its status on the picture's surface is precarious—is it superimposed or materializing from the surface itself? Is it concrete or abstract? "What is dream, what is reality? What is appearance, what truth? Worin unterscheidet sich das Urbild vom Abbild?"⁴² Bernard Marcade proclaims that

C'est en effet dans ses trebuchements, ses begaiements et ses disfonctionnements que s'imisce et qu'affleure une forme de verite de l'image Parce qu'il veille a Ce que toujours l'image laisse percer ses hesitations, ses faiblesses et ses balbutiements, Polke ne peut que Se mefier d'une peinture qui ne renverrait plus qu'a elle-meme. Meme dans ses dernieres oeuvres aux matieres envahissantes, IL y a toujours UN detail, UN fragment qui fait basculer la toile du cote de l'image. C'est guide par cette exigence qu'il utilise avec une volupte et une frenesie sans pareillees toutes les formes de surimpression, de superposition, de double-exposition."⁴³

Floating aimlessly on and between dionysian surfaces, history is depleted of its materiality and severed from its signifying function.

Polke uses these symbols as cartouches of the critical consequence of art, as ciphers of meaning that reveal its absence. With the exception, one hopes, of his paintings using Holocaust imagery, such appropriation of historical imagery is one of Polke's most successful ruses. They are based on pre-appearance, expectation, anticipation of meaning—both in terms of the metaphysical promise of their dionysian milieu, and the material consequence of their “subject matter,”—inducing a sense of melancholy, of “memento mori ... a sort of nostalgia for the future catastrophe that has already happened, leaving only the prospect of ruins.⁴⁴ In keeping with Polke's compulsion for and against the lie, to deceive untruth itself, the presentation of *vanitas* as a projected screen, as the embarrassing cliché that it inevitably will be in a post-modern world, reproduces a crisis over the absence of the absence of meaning that again gives rise to the vertiginous abyss, all the more discomfiting because this time it concerns the time and space in which the spectator would be able to constitute being itself. History becomes a lifeboat, the last hope of meaning, for the spectator who is sucked down with it, and we end of negating history for the sake of subjectivity.

That Polke began his “epic” history paintings, around the same time as he began his grand-scale abstractions is not insignificant. The substances of the latter provide a “background,” insofar as we value narrative and figuration, or perhaps more precisely a milieu, for the former and introduce a “pre-appearance” of the sublime, Dionysian immateriality that forms the surfaces of the abstract works. Conversely, the monumental abstractions—*The Spirits that lend strength are invisible*, *Negativwert*, *Wir Sind Durch, Irgendwo Ganz Oben*, *Lingua Tertii Imp*, *Schnee und Hagel*, all 1982 or '83—are rendered all the more metaphysical, all the more producers of yearning, because of their insistence on the absence of history, rendered null in the history paintings, an absence of meaninglessness, of nothingness, an absence of an unrepresentable absence.

In Polke's large-scale abstract works, he comes closer to approaching Pohlen's analysis of truth and beauty in painting, but also even closer to a purely Dionysian aesthetic whose frank presentation in turn again sets them up only at an unattainable remove. Adrian del Caro analyzes Nietzsche's work in terms of what he calls Dionysian esthetics, “the transvaluated worldview of the future.”⁴⁵ Chaos and enigma are central as oppositions to the Apollonian notion of systems, rationality, order that constitute a logic of values. The nature of the dionysian is implicitly fractured: bliss and negation, ecstasy and destruction, Eros and thanatos. Dionysis is the originary Doppelgänger hailed by German Romantics to

Expressionists for the dialectic of his mask, ego and alter-ego. The decadence of the dionysian aesthetic stems from its excess, its lack of closure, its infinite insistence on the nothingness in anticipation of the infinite future.

In the grand abstractions, Polke does away with the ruses of narrative and figuration that open the double-edged question of meaning. The structural apparatus that deceived the illusion of the pre-appearance is far more obscured. And the Dionysian milieu in which he painted them as pure surface. The chaos and enigma central to the notion of a dionysian aesthetic as a vehicle for the egotistical libido takes over the entire surface of the picture. We never know if they are Blake-like "becomings" or Nietzschean "down-goings," genesis or apocalypse. That they are very mortal paintings, painted with varnish, oil, acrylic, organic plant pigments and metals, and often toxic substances, that pose a mortal threat leans toward the latter, but we can never be sure. Based on appearances, one could surmise that they are to be taken as seriously as Color Field painting. That "The Sublime is *Now*," is, of course, as impossible a notion as the presentation of the sublime to which Polke purports in these paintings.⁴⁶

These paintings look like hallucinations, but are as much agents of delusion as objects of illusion. The illusion is one of dionysian rapture, ecstasy, the sublime itself. But there is no such metaphysical "truth" in these paintings. Polke puts up the metaphysical sublime as if he were again projecting a slide on a screen. Polke reminds us of the metaphysical abyss toward which a nihilistic aesthetic drives motivated by the egotistical urge to conquer the abyss, but his frankly material presentation pushes it beyond our reach. Polke dangles the nihilistic object of desire—the abyss as well as that which would fill the abyss—before the spectator, mocking our desire for such truth or untruth, the meaningless we would have deliver us unto meaning.

Donald Kuspit writes that we view these as "pictures of the unconscious in formation, of the unknown coming into being," further noting that they "create their aura of profound meaningfulness in part because they convey the meaninglessness of the idea of completeness while tempting us with it."⁴⁷ Ironically, it is in the invocation of desire for the abyss and the infinite deferral of gratification in the absence of the abyss that these paintings actually give rise to a *Klage*—the absence of the absence of meaning itself. In so again presenting a Lyotardian "unpresentable," Polke's grandiose abstractions reproduce a notion of the unpresentable in a suspended state. Adorno writes of philosophy as being in such a "suspended state" with regard to Heidegger's treatise on "Being," which is according to Adorno:

nothing but the expression of its inexpressibility ... The suspended character of thought is thus raised to the very inexpressibility which the thought seeks to express. The nonobjective is enhanced into the outlined object of its own essence—and thereby violated. ... the inexpressible becomes explicit and compact in the word 'Being,' while the protest against reification becomes reified, divorced from thinking, and irrational.⁴⁸

Polke's great abstractions are likewise nothing but the presentation of an unrepresentable, reified and degraded in the mundane concretion of an object flatly existing in time and space. Polke does to the notion of the sublime of abyssal nothingness and meaninglessness what Adorno argues Heidegger has done to "Being." Both are essentially nihilistic endeavors which end up reproducing meaninglessness. Adorno writes of Heidegger:

The well he wants to excavate dries up. It is a buried well, in his conception, oozing a scantier trickle than ever came from the insights of the allegedly destroyed philosophy that inclines indirectly to the inexpressible The direct expression of the inexpressible is void; where the expression carried, as in great music, its seal was evanescence and transitoriness, and it was attached to the process, not to an indicative 'That's it.' Thoughts intended to think the inexpressible by abandoning thought falsify the inexpressible. They make of it what the thinker would least like it to be: the monstrosity of a flatly abstract object.⁴⁹

By Polke, the direct presentation of the unrepresentable as an indicative "The Sublime is Now," likewise opens up the void it closes.

Polke's work—"a Metaphysical Junkyard" where "everything is broken, then broken again"⁵⁰—resuscitates the possibility of the nihilistic aesthetic on the side of the spectator. Katharina Winnekes suggests that as these highly volatile works "shatter the spectator's position with their changeability, possible to the point of self-destruction,"⁵¹ they not only provide for but demand his re-creation, his reaffirmation. All of Polke's works somehow achieve a metaphysical disclosure in spite of their avowal of its lackingness, of the untruth of metaphysics itself. The role of the nihilistic aesthetic as an existentialist aesthetic, as involving the question of a subject's being and identity, in Polke's work is further clarified by Adorno's statement that

Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and every possible character which an entity may possess. Being is the *transcendens* pure and simple. And the transcendence of Dasein's Being is distinctive in that it implies the possibility

and the **necessity of the most radical individuation**. Every disclosure of being as the *transcendens* is transcendental knowledge,⁵²

The metaphysical abyss—of meaningless, of nothingness, of untruth, of lack, of void—is bound up in a dialectic with the being of an individual subject. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche advocates “niaiserie:” artifice, of false judgment, fictions of logic, invention and falsification as imperative necessities of life itself. The recognition of “untruth as a condition of life” is a *causa sui* for life itself.⁵³ Just so is it for Polke that through the lie, the pretense of the metaphysical abyss itself, that an abyss and the analogical bridge Derrida asserts that such an abyss requires is created.⁵⁴ In implicating deceit as the fundamental vehicle for the spectator’s narcissistic will to ego in his work, Polke perhaps effects the most nihilist gesture of all.

Notes

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- 4 Tosatto, Guy. “Sigmar Polke, Le malin genie de la peinture,” *BeauxArts*, vol. 62 (November 1988), 67
- 5 Kuspit, Donald. “At the Tomb of the Unknown Picture,” *Artscribe International*, 68 (March/April 1988), 38.
- 6 Gibbs, Michael, “Sigmar Polke: How to make gold from shit,” *Perspektif* 42 (October 1991), 28.
- 7 Schjeldahl, Peter. “The Daemon and Sigmar Polke,” in *Sigmar Polke* (exhibition catalogue, San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 18.
- 8 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Dythrarnbs to Dionysus*.
- 9 Pohlen, 66.
- 10 Hillebrand, Bruno, *Aesthetik der Nihilismus von der Romantik zum Modernismus*. (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche, 1991), 19.
- 11 Theweleite, Klaus. *Male Fantasies* (vol. 2). (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 164.
- 12 Lyotard, Jean-Francois. “What is Postmodernism,” in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1008-1015.
- 13 Hillebrand., 7.
- 14 Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics*. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 108-09.
- 15 Lyotard, 1013.
- 16 c.f. Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 104.
- 17 c.f. Lacan, Jacques: “The Mirror Stage,” *Ecrits: A Selection*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), and “Ego-Ideal and ideal ego,” *Seminar of Jacques Lacan I: Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-54*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.
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- 19 del Caro, Adrian. *Dionysian Aesthetics: On the Role of Destruction and Creation in the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1987).
- 20 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 377.
- 21 Ibid., 379.
- 22 del Caro, 55.
- 23 Gottfried Benn, quoted by Hillebrand, 17.
- 24 Gibbs, 34.
- 25 Harald Szeemann quoted by Reiner Speck in "On the difficulty of approaching Sigmar Polke," *Sigmar Polke*, 24.
- 26 Sigmar Polke interviewed by Bice Curiger in "Sigmar Polke: la peinture est une ignominie," *Art Press* 91 (April 1985), 6
- 27 Winnekes, Katharina, "Schein und Sein, Kunst als korrektiv," *Kunst & Kirche*, 3 (1989), 162.
- 28 Caldwell, "Sigmar Polke," *Sigmar Polke*, 9.
- 29 cf. Friederich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* as interpreted in his regard by del Caro, 65.
- 30 Nietzsche, *Samtliche Werke*, Giorgio Colli & Mazzino Montinari, eds. (Munich: Taschenbuchausgabe, 1980), Bd. 13, 499.
- 31 cf. Renato Poggioli. *The Theory of the Avant-garde*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University, 1968).
- 32 Holmqvist, Karl, "Art+Life=Truth," *Siksi* 1. (1992), 18.
- 33 Adorno., 31.
- 34 Ibid., 33.
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- 36 Marcade, Bernard. "Sigmar Polke au dessus du Volcan," *Beaux Arts* 105 (October 1992), 45
- 37 Ibid..
- 38 Pohlen, 65.
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- 41 Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21 (September 1982), 43.
- 42 Winnekes, 165.
- 43 Marcade, pp 42, 45
- 44 Gibbs, 33.
- 45 del Caro, 24
- 46 cf. Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 572-575, originally published in *Tiger's Eye*, 1: 6 (December 1948), 51-53
- 47 Kuspit, 38.
- 48 Adorno, 109.
- 49 Ibid., 110.
- 50 Schjeldahl, 18
- 51 Winnekes, 164.
- 52 Adorno, 107 (bold-face mine).
- 53 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 12.
- 54 Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 36.

Anonymity, Artistic Brotherhoods and the Art Market in the Fin de Siècle

Laura Morowitz

In an 1891 letter written to a friend and fellow Symbolist painter, Emile Bernard described his dream of founding a communal brotherhood of artists.¹

The goal of this group, called the Anonymous Ones, is thus art for art's sake. Not glory, not commerce, not reputation: the edification of an idea, of a work. Each member contributes his effort to the whole project. Each one could no more be taken away from the group than could a stone from a house, a beam from a wooden framework. Thus we aim for appreciation of the ensemble, and not the individual parts, which would falsify the goal of our efforts, and which would be the negation of our ideal. I thought that it would be interesting to refer to our group in formation by entitling this project to which I was destined, "Les Anonymes."²

In his glorification of artistic anonymity, Bernard was joined by many other Symbolists. Indeed, many Symbolist paintings of the early 1890s are marked by a strong similarity of style, which render them anonymous to the uninitiated viewer. Modelling themselves on the medieval monastery, artistic groups like the Nabis and the circle of Pont Aven lived and worked closely together, engaging in communal projects.³ Drawing upon the same sources—medieval art, Japanese prints, images d'Epinal—and motifs, their finished works bear a sharp resemblance.

Their strive for anonymity, however, was not only the result of shared contact, but was also a deliberate strategy of resistance to developments within the art market. It is precisely in this period that dealers began to

cultivate the powerful appeal of individual style. Instant recognizability, the possession of an unmistakable signature style, became a crucial marketing tool within the art network.⁴ By fostering interest in anonymous art, the Symbolists signalled a lack of compliance with the new values of the art marketplace. The following paper explores one aspect of the Symbolists' attempt, and ultimate failure, to resist the inevitable commodification of art in the late nineteenth century.

As many recent studies have shown, by the *fin-de-siècle* the French art market had grown astonishingly complex and developed.⁵ The rise of the individual dealer network wrought changes in the production, exhibition and consumption of all art created in the second half of the 19th century.⁶ As the State abandoned its supportive function for artists,⁷ painters were increasingly dependant upon attracting a bourgeois market. To appeal to buyers, artworks, like all other goods for sale, now had to possess the special attributes of the fetishized commodity.⁸

One such important attribute was exclusivity. In order to obscure the economic function of the work, it had to be presented as the unique, inspired product of genius. In opposition to the mass-produced, or industrially created commodity, the "fine" artwork embodied the skills and talents of a singular creator. These attributes were seen to be located in the formal style of the work. Dealers thus emphasized the unique style, the distinguishing "touch" which characterized the artists in their stable.⁹ This strategy naturally fostered competition among artists. Their work increased in (relative) value as it became more distinct from their competitors. The tendency of critics to single out and privilege one artist at the expense of others lead to a divisive attitude as various styles came to be "pitted" against one another for material gain.¹⁰

While very much a part of the larger artistic network, the Symbolist artists attempted to deny the impact of such economic realities on their work, obfuscating their own contribution to this phenomenon. Their writings and declarations are rife with scorn for the art market, and for the artist who would sacrifice his "ideal" mission for the sake of economic prosperity. At the 1891 opening of the *Exposition des Peintres Impressionnistes et Symbolistes* at the Barc de Bouteville, Gaston Leslaux claimed that the new generation of Symbolist painters would "chase the money changers from the Temple of Art."¹¹ "The moment the artist thinks of money," claimed Maurice Denis, "he loses the sentiment of beauty."¹² Moreover, in his 1934 memoir the critic Francis Jourdain portrayed the Nabis as completely indifferent to the monetary worth of their paintings:

Never—I repeat—never did I hear at the Barc de Bouteville, these young artists discussing the price of their works, ratings, upward or downward trends, neither did the few buyers talk

about good or bad investments. I do not claim that all these men were saints; but I can say the best painters of that generation were of no mean quality.¹³

In their illusive retreat from the marketplace, the Symbolists turned to artistic sources “untainted” by economic motivation. Medieval art, and the folk/popular art of French and non-Western cultures represented examples of pure, organically developed work. In their quest for ideal, symbolic art,¹⁴ they were especially drawn to work of a spiritual nature.¹⁵ (Ironically, by the second half of the 19th century, these very sources had been thoroughly exploited for bourgeois consumption.)¹⁶

Of all the artistic “sins” resulting from the fixation on profit, none was more heinous to the Symbolist than the corrupt appropriation of “style.” For them, style was not an economic end-product, but was inseparable from the *meaning* (content) of the work.¹⁷ Moreover, the competitive, divisive spirit encouraged by the focus on individuality was anathema to their notion of the artistic brotherhood. Groups within the Symbolist movement were characterized by such brotherhoods as the Nabis and the circle of Pont Aven, which often engaged in collaborative projects such as communal theatre productions, etc.)

One tactic to thwart the increasing importance of individual style was to challenge its privileged status. If the “bourgeois,” “entrepreneurial” artist aimed for unique distinction, then certain Symbolists would glorify the opposite property: anonymity. The Symbolist would model himself on the humble, anonymous artist who sacrificed recognition for the advancement of his community and the ennoblement of art. Idealization of the anonymous artist, and the desire to revive anonymous artistic societies became a frequent trope in Symbolist art and literature.

Emile Bernard believed his *Association des Anonymes* could serve as an antidote to the petty rivalries spawned by competition within the art market. In his list of rules for the society, Bernard insisted that their be “no popularity, no jealousies, no dishonest plagiarisms.” Members would be sworn to “incognito absolu” and forced to abstain from “individual literary critique.”¹⁸ All individual ego would be sacrificed to the needs of the group: Members would “renounce all personality in order to contribute to the total project, which would be the synthesis of all the combined efforts.”¹⁹

Furthermore, according to Jan Verkade, who joined the Nabi circle in 1890, a similar motivation lay behind the formation of this group:

This would have been the goal of those whom I called Nabis.
But the search for personality, the invention of a journalist,
spoiled this beautiful force.²⁰

By singling out and comparing the various Nabi artists, critics had

shattered the harmony of the group.

In a letter to J.K. Huysmans, Bernard provided further indication that the Nabi group was intended to function as an anonymous brotherhood. He wrote of founding, along with Maurice Denis, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Paul Sérusier and Eugene Boch "a mystical association of artists, who work only for art, renouncing the idea of making themselves well known and striving only for sincere production. The title of this association was : *Les Anonymes*."²¹

The comments of Verkade and Bernard go a long way towards explaining the stylistic similarities shared by members of the Nabi circle, and other artists with whom they lived and worked. The paintings of Verkade and Charles Filiger share a precise neo-byzantine stylization.²² The early works of Gauguin's disciple, Paul Sérusier do not hide their stylistic derivation from the master. The development of styles such as cloisonism²³ functioned to obliterate distinctions of palette, form and texture in the work of different painters.

If the Symbolists admired a wide variety of anonymous artists, they privileged two paradigms in particular: the painter-monk and the communal cathedral builder. Both participated in anonymous groups dedicated solely to art produced out of spiritual devotion. In his novel *La Cathédrale* (1898), J.K. Huysmans repeatedly praised the simple "workmen" who erected Chartres.²⁴ Bernard envisioned his "Anonymes," "like the glorious artists who made the cathedrals and loved only art"²⁵

The monastery served as the ideal model for the production of communal art. Living as a harmonious unit, the painter-monks (or so the Symbolists believed) produced works without the least concern for monetary profit.²⁶ Van Gogh wrote of his aim to found a community of artists in which Gauguin would "serve as the Abbot."²⁷ Huysmans attempted unsuccessfully to establish an artistic community modelled on a monastery. He described to Bernard his hope of "beginning a Christian artists colony, benedictine lay brothers, in the shadow of the old cloister which exists there."²⁸ Prior to the formation of the Nabis in late 1888, Maurice Denis recorded his dream of leading a group of religious artists who would participate in communal church decoration:

And then--oh it will be beautiful—I will erect in the middle of profane Paris a sumptuous chapel, where my brothers and I will dedicate ourselves to adorning paintings, frescoes, panels, predellas, lunettes ... And each year our artistic-religious society will come hear mass with their canvases held in their arms ... The exhibition ends with a second mass in our church.²⁹

As an antithesis to the ambitious, worldly Salon artists, the painter-monk was deeply admired in the Symbolist milieu. Both Maurice Denis

and Joséphin (Sâr) Péladan, founder of the Knights of the Rose & Croix, professed the most profound love for the art of the fifteenth century Italian painter, Fra Angelico.³⁰ Their attention was also drawn to the contemporary painter Charles Dulac, who had joined the Third Order of Saint Francis in 1890. Dulac, claimed Huysmans, "was nothing like a man of our time; he cherished poverty, scorned fame, nourished himself like a hermit."³¹

Disgusted by the rampant materialism of the *fin de siècle*, many Symbolists were strongly drawn to monastery life. The Nabi Jan Verkade became a noviciate at the Beuron monastery in 1897, spending the rest of his life producing church frescos.³² On several occasions Sérusier considered joining the monastery as well.³³ Huysmans's literary alter-ego, Durtal, finds repose in the monastery of La Trappe. Even Symbolists who did not take monastic orders, occasionally portrayed themselves in the guise of a monk.

In fact, many of the Symbolist "brotherhoods" served as pseudo-monasteries, isolating their members from the cold values of the marketplace. The paradigm of the painter-monk also functioned for artists who were not particularly religious but possessed a humility, a self-abnegating quality opposed to the self-aggrandizing nature of the Salon artist. It was precisely in such terms that Romain Coolus described his friend Edouard Vuillard.

Among painters of modern life, none is more sophisticated—more voluptuous, some would say; yet there is something paradoxically religious about him. It is not just that he has always lived in a way that is sober and dignified, almost to the point of austerity. The apartment in which he lives, the studio in which he works, have always had something monastic about them. One has only to watch him, as he prepares his colors *à la colle* on a little stove and in the humblest of sauce pans to realize that he is no more concerned with the outward surroundings in which his spiritual activity goes forward than were the artisans of the Middle Ages or the God-fearing painters of the Renaissance who worked in the service of the Church.³⁴

While Vuillard's early work closely resembles that of his Nabi peers, his individual style quickly asserted itself, and his paintings can hardly be described as "anonymous." Indeed, this pattern is characteristic of many other Symbolist painters as well, whose distinct styles emerged in the course of the *fin de siècle*. Such evidence reveals the ambiguity that lay at the heart of the Symbolist project and the impossibility of "escaping" an art network of which they were very much a part. As Robert Jensen has noted:

The conception of the avant-garde as a continuing resistance to the commodification of art is fundamentally tautological. Until we live in a transformed society art is going to remain a commodity; it is just as much a part of its character as any designation for "art."³⁵

Although they feared that participation in the market would "falsify their goals and negate their ideals,"³⁶ the Symbolists had no choice but to comply; alternative systems of support did not yet (and still largely do not) exist through which the artist could financially survive.

While they detested the rivalry encouraged by market strategies, the Symbolist milieu was hardly free of internal jealousies and battles. Emile Bernard, who was determined to demand "absolu incognito" of his "Anonymes," grew outraged when critics and artists failed to recognize his unique contributions to the Symbolist movement.³⁷ His jealousy of Gauguin is legendary. Symbolist history is full of other battles and ex-communications.³⁸ Neither in their work, nor in their hearts, could the Symbolists extinguish their ego and thoroughly "abdicate all vanity, all glory."³⁹

Nor would the genuine adoption of an anonymous style, even that of the humble "painter-monk," have succeeded in locating Symbolist practice outside the marketplace. For the "primitif," the "monk-artist," the "painter-priest" had already been packaged for presentation to the public. Charles Dulac, the "modern-day Angelico," was given a successful one man show at Vollard's Gallery in 1899. The dealer described this "monk-artist": "following the example of Fra Angelico, before taking up his brushes he would kneel in prayer awaiting inspiration."⁴⁰ The very "anonymous" sources beloved by the Symbolists—medieval woodcuts, Japanese prints, "primitive" sculptures—had begun to find a successful and appreciative audience.⁴¹

In their very struggle to "escape" the conditions of the art market, the Symbolists were deeply marked by them. Their insistence on form as a carrier of meaning can be seen as a response to the glorification of style-for-profit's sake. Indeed, their very formal language—"pure" colors, simplified forms—may have been chosen, in part, for its accessibility to *all* artists, encouraging the spread of an anonymous style. Yet the variety of styles characterizing the Symbolist movement, indicates the limits of their project to remain anonymous. Despite their dream of an isolated artistic cloister, the cash register had already begun to drown out the tolling of the church bell.

Notes

- 1 For editorial comments on drafts of this paper I thank Susan Rosenberg, Maura M. Reilly, and Françoise Lucbert. I also thank my advisor, Professor Robert S. Lubar, for encouraging me to develop the ideas in this paper, and for his valuable insight on these, and many other, issues.
- 2 Letter from Emile Bernard to Emile Schuffenecker, 19 January 1891. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, n.a. fr.14277.
- 3 There was a great deal of interchange amongst various Symbolist sub-groups. Members of the Nabi circle travelled throughout Brittany with artists from the Pont Aven group, and contributed to journals and exhibitions lead by members of the Rose + Croix Salons. See Wladyslawa Jaworska, *Gauguin and the School of Pont Aven*, (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1972); Marie Amélie Anquetil, "Le Sentiment religieux et l'art chez trois peintres du groupe de Pont Aven: Charles Filiger, Jan Verkade, Mogens Ballin", thèse, Paris, Sorbonne, 1976.
- 4 Henri Matisse, for example, caused his dealers a great deal of worry with his simultaneous appropriation of numerous styles. See Roger Benjamin, "Fauves in the Landscape of Criticism", *The Fauve Landscape* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1990.)
- 5 For the best studies on the French art market see: Raymonde Moulin, *Le Marché de la peinture en France* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.); Robert Jensen, "The Avant-Garde and the Trade in Art", *Art Journal* (Winter 1988); Nikolas Green, "Dealing in Temperments: Economic Transformations of the Artistic Field in France during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century", *Art History* (March 1987); Malcolm Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting: Aspects of the Parisian Art Market between 1910 and 1930* (New York: Garland Press, 1981.); Ambroise Vollard, *Recollections of a Picture Dealer*, trans. Violet MacDonald (Dover Reprint, 1968). C.A. and H.C. White, *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. New York: Wiley, 1965. Also see Patricia Mainardi, *The End of the Salons: Art and the State in the Early Third Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Sharon Adler Davis, "Fine Cloths on the Altar; The Commodification of Late 19th Century France", *Art Journal* 48 (Spring 1989).
- 6 This applies also to art produced for public display or sale to the State. As Mainardi, op. cit., has explored, the character of the national salons was irretrievably altered by developments within the private art market. For example, the Triennale (the government sponsored Salon), borrowed aspects of display and decor from the private commercial gallery.
- 7 See Mainardi, op cit.
- 8 The artwork functioned as fetish by focusing attention on its conditions of *production* (i.e. its heavy impasto assured the viewer it was handmade) while denying it's conditions of distribution. By possessing such an object, the buyer both participated in, and concurrently seemed to reject, the dominating conditions of the capitalist art market.
- 9 On style as a marketing strategy see Moulin, op. cit.; Gee, op. cit; Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*. Moulin notes that concentration on individual style also lead to increased speculation in the art market during the late nineteenth century. On this practice, Robert Jenson notes that it "migrated to the commercial gallery, where the dealers sought to make history through the artist's exclusive presence while confirming the value of the artist's work for the marketplace" (361).
- 10 On this see Christopher Green's discussion of the marketing of the Cubist school. Green, op. cit.
- 11 Gaston Leslaux, introduction to the first Exposition des Peintres Impressionnistes et Symbolistes, 1891, Galerie Le Barc de Bouteville. Reprinted in Theodore Reff, ed., *Modern Art in Paris 1855-1900: Exhibitions of Symbolists and Nabis* (New York/London: Garland Press, 1981).
- 12 Maurice Denis, *Journal* 1 (Paris: Éditions du Colombier, 1957), Sept. 5 1885.
- 13 Francis Jourdain, *Bonnard et Son Époque* (1943). Quoted and translated in Claire Frèches-Thory and Antoine Terrasse, *The Nabis: Bonnard, Vuillard and their Circle*. (New

York: Abrams, 1991), 24.

- 14 For Symbolist definition of "ideal art" see André Mellerio, *Le Mouvement Idéaliste en Peinture* (Paris: H. Floury, 1896) and Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin", *Le Mercure de France* (March 1891).
- 15 For example, byzantine icons or Breton crucifixes. For discussion of Symbolist sources see Julian Phillippe, *Dreamers of Decadence: The Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (1971); Ursula Perruchi Petri, *Die Nabis und Japon: Die Frühwerke von Bonnard, Vuillard und Denis* (Munich: Prestal Verlag, 1976.) Also see the bibliography in Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perruchi-Petri, eds. *Nabis: 1888-1900*. Exhibition catalogue. Zürich Kunsthaus/Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 1993.
- 16 On this see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Gone Native: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives," *Art in America* 79 (Feb. 1991); Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, "Les Données Breton: La Prairie de Représentation", *Art History* 3 (Sept. 1980.)
- 17 Denis, in particular, stressed the notion of formal style as the carrier of meaning: "Ils ont préféré dans leurs oeuvres l'expression par le décor, par l'harmonie des formes et de couleurs, par la matière employée, à l'expression par le sujet." "Preface de la IX Exposition des Peintres Impressionnistes et Symbolistes" (1895). Reprinted in Maurice Denis, *Théories 1890-1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique*. 4th edition, (Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin, Editeurs, 1921), 27.
- 18 See Bernard's letter to Schuffenecker, 29 January 1892, *op cit*. Bernard regretted that Schuffenecker has already disqualified himself from the group by his recognizable style.
- 19 Letter to Shuffenecker, January 19, 1891, *op cit*.
- 20 Letter quoted in Carolyn Boyle-Turner, *Jan Verkade, Disciple hollandais de Gauguin* (Quimper: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1990), 38.
- 21 Emile Bernard, unpublished letter to Huysmans, 9 January 1899, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, fonds Lambert.
- 22 Charles Filiger, a member of the Pont Aven circle, also exhibited works at the Salons de la Rose & Croix. On Filiger see Jaworska, *op cit*. and Anquetil, *op cit*.
- 23 First coined by the critic Edouard DuJardin, "Aux XX et aux Indépendants", IV (17 March 1888), the cloisonist style, with its patches of pure color outlined in black, was thought to have been inspired by medieval stained glass and cloisonné enamels. For the literature and bibliography on cloisonism see Bogomilia Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*. (Art Gallery of Toronto/Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, 1981.)
- 24 "Was there a guild, a brotherhood of image makers devoted to holy work, built for God, who went from place to place to be employed by the monks as helpers of the masons and laborers?" J.K. Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, trans. Clara Bell (Daedulus, 1989): 177.
- 25 Bernard letter to Schuffenecker, *op cit*.
- 26 This belief is, of course, completely false. For the actual conditions/practices of the monk artists see J.J.G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and their Methods of Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
- 27 Jaworska, *op cit.*, 59.
- 28 Letter from Huysmans to Emile Bernard, 3 January 1899, reproduced in *À Emile Bernard: Lettres de Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin* (Belgium: Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Belgique.)
- 29 Maurice Denis, *Journal* 12 August 1885.
- 30 On Péladan see Robert Pincus-Witten, "Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons of the Rose & Croix," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1976. In 1884, Péladan published a laudatory article on Fra Angelico: "Introduction à l'histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles depuis les origines jusqu'à la renaissance: l'Angelico," *L'Artiste* (March 1884). Drawing formal influence from the frescos of Fra Angelico, Denis repeatedly praised him in his writings. See for example, "Notes sur la peinture religieuse," *L'Art et la Vie* (Oct. 1896). Reprinted in *Théories*, 30-44.
- 31 J.K. Huysmans, *Marie-Charles Dulac 1865-1898*. (Paris: Imprimerie Georges Petit, 1899), 8. Also see Henri Cochin, *Exposition Charles Dulac, Barc de Bouteville. May 11-June 4, 1899*. Huysmans devoted several pages to Dulac's lithographs in his novel *La Cathédrale*.
- 32 For Verkade's conversion to catholicism and his entrance into the Beuron monastery see

- Dom (Jan) Willibroed Verkade, *Yesterdays of an Artist's Monk*, trans. John Stoddard (New York: P.J. Kennedy and Sons, 1930), 25.
- 33 For evidence of this see Carolyn Boyle-Turner, "Paul Sérusier," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1980.
- 34 Romain Coolus, "Vuillard", *Le Mercure de France* (Jan. 1934). Translated in John Russel, *Edouard Vuillard 1868-1940*. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971-2.)
- 35 Jensen, 366.
- 36 See quote from Bernard, p. 1.
- 37 Bernard attempted everything possible to insure that history would recognize his primary role in Symbolism. In addition to "pre-dating" his work, he was fond of quoting positive reviews which credited his achievements. For discussion of Bernard's career and personality see *Emile Bernard 1868-1941: A Pioneer of Modern Art*. Exhibition Catalogue. Mannheim: Stadtische Kunsthaus, 1991.
- 38 Péladan, in particular, was fond of banishing artists from his circle. See Pincus-Witten, *op cit*.
- 39 Emile Bernard, letter to Schuffenecker, Jan 19, 1891.
- 40 Vollard, 202.
- 41 On the reception of Japanese art see Gabriel Weisberg, *Japonisme: Japanese influence on French Art 1854-1910*. (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum, 1975.)

The Post-Modern, Avant-Garde Enigma:

Who and What is Killing Art?

Elaine A. King

(Circle the Correct Answer)

a). Art Schools as the New Academy—home of the Academic and PC Artist, b). Revisionist Art History & Deconstruction Theory, c). Museum Boards, Economics and the Lack of Curatorial Conviction, d). The Salon of the 90s—Block-Buster International Exhibitions-celebration of the ‘Top 40’ Artists, e). the Lemming Syndrome—follow, accept, don’t question, f). the confusion of Political Correctness and Multiculturalism in the New World Order, g). The Art World’s Love of the Emperor’s New Clothes, h). The Art World’s acute case of historical amnesia, i). Media & Technology, j). The Avant-garde in the ‘90s—you can’t have it both ways k). Patronage & Acceptance—the collector, dealer, & investor, l). Arts Management Programs—more bureaucracy, m). The Struggle of High Art & Mass Culture, n). Television, o). All of the above—I’ll circle “o”!

As this century draws to a close, its entire artistic production has strangely become classified into bipolar camps—art is either Modern or Post-Modern. Modernism (1913-1966), which laid the foundation for the arts in the United States, has come to be viewed negatively by some critics, by revisionist theorists, and by PC artists. It is referred to, in the Kenneth Burke model, as a “devil-term” because of its reductive aesthetics, Greenberg formalist dogma, elitist ordering of culture, and its relatively docile message lacking social concern. In contrast Post-Modernism, a first cousin of the Modern (1970s to the present) is assigned the “god-term” because its art claims to convey a social message, relinquishes the artist’s identification with either a particular style or a medium, supposedly grapples with multicultural issues, and transcends the utopian sublimity of Modernism.

Curiously both Modernism and Post-Modernism assumed from their inception that the artist possessed a special view of society and had the moral authority to criticize its foibles. The criticism of the Modernist artists, often aroused anxiety—exemplified by Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) or *Olympia* (1863)—but the aesthetic power of the work was never sacrificed for the sake of pontificating contents. Furthermore, until the 1950s, the majority of Modernist artists worked outside the traditional social system—the United States didn't have a powerful art world or market place until the 1970s. The Impressionists and their refusal to exhibit works in the Salon for nearly 12 years represent an early example of artists renouncing tradition and its economic support systems. In contrast, much of what has come to be called late Post-Modern art, particularly the vintage from 1985 on—the J. Koons, P. Halley, M. Barney, M. Kelly, and R. Gober variety—appears in the “hottest” exhibitions, is represented by the “coolest” art galleries, and is shaped by popular culture and trendy critical theory. One need only examine the elaborate bookstores set up to coincide with exhibitions. Unlike the early Modernists' works, much of Post-Modernism is funded by public and private grants, so that these Post-Modern works appear in the collections of the very systems these artist attack.¹

Art classified under the umbrella of Post-Modernism in the 1990s intends to reach a large mass society, but that audience has been fed on T.V. and consequently is characterized by blip, sound-bite attention spans. Artists pander to this audience, viewing culture as a universal commodity, driven by market-place entertainment and spectacle appeal.

Unlike “PM,” Modernism was the arena for the avant-garde artist, individual thinker, and celebrant of originality; the history of modern art is the history of the avant-garde until the mid-1970s. In reaction against high art ideals, PM artists refute Modernism's concept of standards and specialized audiences; many favor producing a new brand of 1990s Quasi-Social Realism or visual encyclopedic pastiches parading under the label of multiculturalism or new chaos theory. To connect art with the rest of the world, some brands of Post-Modernism randomly incorporate snips of history, trivialist clichés of popular culture, and appropriately kitschy shopping mall material debris. Yet strangely, in their quest of a shared artistic freedom and rejection of tradition and “rules,” PM artists appear to be returning to the 19th century model, when an artist's survival depended on acceptance by the Academy and Salons (which reflected the taste or lack of taste of the bourgeoisie and its institutions).

Our museums have become the Salons of yesteryear. Have not many of the mega-international exhibitions of the past decade with their checklist of the worlds “Top 40+ artists” become a spin-off display of the 19th century salon? And what about the instant artist's retrospective? Jeff

Koons is currently being celebrated in such an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art after his short/long career of some seven years! It didn't take him very long to shift from Wall Street to Art Street. Shortly the Whitney Museum of American Art will organize a retrospective of Native American, Jimmie Durham, who made his art debut very recently indeed. In the academic sanctuary, if one takes the time to review the panel sessions at the annual CAA meetings, it is interesting to see how the "fashion of thought" has rapidly shifted gears to topics primarily of gender, race, and identity.

Unlike the generation of early American Modernists (Abstract Expressionists) most late Post-Modern artists are formally trained, possessing either a B.F.A. or a M.F.A., and have been exposed to the "right" art formulas. According to the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, the total number of degrees conferred at the bachelor and masters level at membership institutions, between 1991 and 1992, was approximately 12,457. Many of these artists then go into teaching, recycling information and observing the latest art fashion waves celebrated in the primary journals. Their training can be observed in their artistic output as well as in their classrooms. When Neo-Expressionism was in, this brand of art was celebrated from coast to coast. At the onset of the 1990s, painting is again viewed as dead or passe, as it was in the 1970s.

While Neo-Conceptual art and installation art came to the forefront quickly, underlined with activist and PC/Multicultural messages, this fashion too is already shifting.² Writing this calls to mind a memorable incident: in the fall of 1988, when I was completing the Barry Le Va retrospective, a colleague (who has since shed his formalist roots to become a captain in the PC faction) asked me, "How did you know that installation art was going to become hot again?" Ho-Hum! Today the halls of many art schools are filled with littered objects called installation or "content art."

In 1979, the French writer Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote

The Post-Modern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solaces of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.³

Furthermore he declares

A Post-Modern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher; the text he writes, the work he produces are not in

principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the test or to the work.⁴

Lyotard's assessment of art was accurate for the 1970s but in the 1990s his evaluation of Post-Modernism no longer applies because the world has twice turned upside down; the manifestations of what we call Post-Modern art at the close of the 20th century. Since its birth in the 1970s, Post-Modernism has evolved into a brand of art divorced from its early abandonment of form and traditional presentation. The new Post-Modern, sees life and the world as an extension of television, a xerox copy of culture, society, and the economy.

Today Post-Modern art, although claiming to exist outside of all boundaries and definitions, is dictated by specific theories and rules. Volumes have been written on Post-Modernism during the past decade and these have become the texts of most art school curricula and have formed the aesthetic foundation for many 1990s Post-Modernist artists. This is a testimony to the reclassification of this brand of art and its legitimation within the larger art infrastructure. Time and time again, this has been the case of true "cutting edge" artists; as soon as the theories are written, the art dies! Funny, that the celebrants of late Post-Modernism haven't figured out that we might perhaps be dealing with art corpses! A contradictory condition now prevails; fueled by accelerated technology, art school training, and technologically advanced methods of communication, Post-Modern artists in their spirit of cultural freedom appear to have relinquished their individual voices and visions to march in social conformity in a crusade to liberate society from the restraints of Modernism. However, it is not simply an issue of we, the elite vs. them, the masses. It is a far more complex situation involving our increasingly interdependent systematized (business, art, education) social structure, sophisticated media, and a prevailing affluent upper middle class in urban centers around the country who control the purse strings of all the art systems, from schools, to museums, to magazines. All these factors have had an impact on the structure and nature of the art system.

As Modernism collapsed in the mid-sixties from its exhaustion of stylistic modes and formal newness, the manifestations of Post-Minimalism heralded what was to become known as Post-Modernism. Chance, indeterminacy, and variable installations became regular features of this art, which attempted to escape from traditional objecthood and commodity. Amongst its pioneer practitioners were Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Eva Hesse, Mel Bochner, Richard Serra, Barry Le Va, Bruce Nauman, Lynda Benglis, Keith Sonnier, Douglas Huebler, Robert Morris, and Alan Saret. As they explored material processes, linguistic theory, and new art environments, these artists laid the foundation for Post-

Modernist thinking, eliminating the critic and returning to Marcel Duchamp and conceptual theory.

In its early stages, Post-Modernism, under the label of Post-Minimalism, with its mapping out of a new structure and re-definitions of art, released artists from the stranglehold of Clement Greenberg's formalist dogma. But having been released, they set out to usurp conventional art issues and sabotage categorical distinctions of drawing, painting, and sculpture. These artists focused primarily on questioning all aspects of art, creating in the process a new set of formal and moral values based on personal exploration and need. Whenever one is suppressed and limited, the logical response is to respond with extreme, drastic, and disconcerting behavior. In 1968 early Post-Modernism provided the appropriate answer, with artists opening up and taking art into multiple directions of questioning and exploration.

Artists no longer needed to prove to the world that they had created a valid American style, an art owing nothing to European Modernism; Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism had provided a firm international foundation for these Americans to build on. In the 1970s, as this new generation traveled abroad, the artists found Modernism's rejection of history inappropriate—they needed to find a new approach and language. Under the banner of freedom and no-style, a synthesis of style, fiction, ambiguity, and contradiction developed.

The initial Post-Modern artists called into question established assumptions about the whole of the Modern movement and its optimistic celebration of newness and technology. Their synthesis of modern styles and their mimicking of past styles, signaled a rejection of Modernist stylization. Art history for artists became a form of available debris from a collapsing era. Instead of attempting to create something "new" or grapple with the notion of an original, they seized pieces from the past and tried to reinvent a personal expression. They were primarily obsessed with finding their own identity and freeing themselves from tradition and Modernist, linear progression. However, unlike the creators of the politically charged art that has been prevalent at the onset 1990s, filled with moral authority and social mission or extensions of critical theory, many early Post-Modernists forged ahead as individual thinkers rather than reactionaries and global saviors.

A sense of purpose, fueled by a passion for discovery beyond studio concerns, flourished in the art of the 1970s illustrated by the Earthwork artists. Contents—in Panofsky's sense of a basic attitude vs. subject matter—informed this art. So much of the art work executed at this time did not easily fit a pattern; much had to be interpreted anew, casting off all the old critical formulas yet revealing an aesthetic orientation. In the varied experiments of the Post-Minimalists, and Conceptual and Process

artists, a highly volatile and arbitrary transitional boundary developed between Modernism and Post-Modernism.

Examining the past seven or eight years of artistic output in the United States, it appears that culturally we are caught up in Andy Warhol's world of sensation and spectacle. Many fail to recognize the achievements of the Post-Minimalists while artists today continue to fight dead, Modernist formalist battles under the banner of innovation, contents, moral self-righteousness, and multiculturalism. When artists live in a constant reactionary state they trap themselves in the timewarp of adolescence. In the 1990s we are led to believe that no dominant style of art exists; in essence, "much ado about nothing" informs much of art today, whether it is activist art or a celebration of banality.

On November 3, 1992, I voted for the *Clinton/Gore* ticket because I felt it was crucial to pull this country back to some necessary middle ground. The outcome of the recent presidential election signaled that our government must begin to address urgent national issues concerning health, jobs, and the environment with concrete measures rather than by evasive rhetoric. The prevailing economic condition has taken its toll on the art market, but the demise of contemporary art far transcends the art market crisis because economics, power, and politics continue to make an impact on the larger art equation.

Over the past several years signs of this grim state of affairs have been observed in multiple places and ways: key examples include 1) *DOCUMENTA IX*, a pointless extravaganza where so much added up to nothing; 2) the 1991 Carnegie (Cerebral) International, where art was used to serve critical theory (remember, On Kawara took the prize); 3) the endless parade of pointless, pretentious, political activist exhibitions at the New Museum (purporting to educate and raise social consciousness but most often leaving the viewer more confused than informed); 4) the tidal waves of weak ethnic-based exhibitions organized under the banner of equality and multiculturalism, flooding art in museums and galleries from Maine to California; 5) and the endless array of vapid and trendy shows filling most galleries (often you find plenty of confusion and are left asking "Where's the Art?").

It is curious that at the close of 1992, the talk of the art town is about those fuddy-duddy Modernists: Matisse, Magritte, Rauschenberg, and Martin, or the inventiveness of Jackie Winsor whose retrospective recently closed at Boston's MFA! It is also important to note that very few museums opted to take the Jeff Koons retrospective organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art which opened on December 10, 1992.

There is no denying that the expanded definitions and boundaries of art over the past twenty years have provided artists with vast freedoms, yet this "new" untraditional art seems to be devoid of a vision beyond

cynicism or moralist pontification. Much contemporary art is made by MFA'd, academically trained, T.V.-saturated artists who are equipped with the "right" references, buzz words, and recipes for "success." The majority read the same books and art magazines, attend "canned lectures" by traveling cultural eminences, and pay close attention to the blockbuster exhibitions showcased at the "right museums" with the same artists. These prevailing influences make it difficult for artists to find their own voice and to withstand the pressures to follow the formulae. As we have learned, there is very little nutritional value in Wonder Bread, despite its creative packaging.

Perhaps it is the very homogeneity of the current institutional environment in which artists train, exist, and later practice their art that contributes to the present condition of meager artistic creativity. The notion of allowing a young artist to "naturally" evolve has become a thing of the past. As Jan van der Marck said several years ago, "We no longer put a premium on invention, on careful planning, on taking chances, on nurturing talent, on letting young artists grow into mature artists ... I find it an ominous sign that museums will put as much money into boosting or promoting an exhibition as they put into organizing an exhibition."⁵ In a recent article in *The New Republic* Jed Perl wrote, "There is simply no longer a support structure that nourishes these incremental developments. This is what you hear if you talk to the artists. Living in the midst of this overinflated art world, the artists no longer know where to turn. Fewer and fewer shows get reviewed; fewer and fewer galleries are willing to make the commitment to an artist's gradual development."⁶

Ultimately visual art must communicate visually; unfortunately, late Post-Modern art relies heavily on vast volumes of theoretical rationalization which sustains complex academic research, tenure promotion, and the critical jargon of art magazines, as well as the financial networks of the expanded art and museum market. The many answers appended to the question raised by this essay's title may strike some as amusing as well as disturbing; however, they carry a serious message—they demonstrate the interconnectedness of the art system and its agenda. They signal that the relationship of the contemporary artist to his or her audience has changed—artists have become overtly dependent on institutions. They appear to be returning to a 19th century model when the Academy and Salon structure served as the authority and the Academic tradition persisted. Today artists are at odds with the Modernist notion of the avant-garde yet they readily embrace the culture they appear to attack.⁷

Until the early 19th century, the reputation and livelihood of artists depended on the acceptance of their art into official exhibitions, a goal

that might be accomplished by presenting the "right" compositions tuned into established mainstream values. In the future, instead of the French Academy, perhaps it will be institutions like the Guggenheim Museum, with its increased omnipresent, global satellites, that will chart the international definition of all art. Thomas Krens, its Director, has embarked on a highly ambitious museum packaging venture—he is using the Guggenheim's economic and political resources to intensify status and to intensify the interchangeability of art objects and museum formats. "He is obsessed with deal-making and with courting high profile businessmen, collectors, curators, and politicians who can help him pull off those deals."⁸ The powerful economic network extending out from that institution and its multinational museum concept, parallels the patronage exercised by the church, the aristocracy, and the academy in earlier centuries.

The avant-garde artists of the 19th and early 20th century worked outside traditional systems and institutions; they did not aim to please either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat but the literati. Even the spirit of the avant-garde manifested in the metaphorical works of J. L. David at the close of the 18th century, the bastardized manifestations of Neo-Classicism by J. A. D. Ingres, and Theodore Gericault's blatant display of a contemporary event, using actual survivors as models in his *Raft of the Medusa*—opened the floodgates for an aberrant, out-of-line art: Eugene Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, as well as the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists laid the foundation for an outrageous and explosive art by renegade avant-garde artists. The Dadaists were, perhaps, the most extreme in reacting against a society they saw as corrupt and morally bankrupt; however, for their extreme performances and rebellious antics, they sought neither museum recognition nor support from collectors, nor official state patronage. Since the rise of Abstract Expressionism, the adversarial relationship between the avant-garde artist and the mainstream culture has broken down. The artist and bourgeois society and its complex systems have increasingly grown to be more interdependent.

Perhaps the early Post-Modernists can be viewed as the last of the avant-garde artists struggling at the fringes of the recognized culture. Today happenings, performance art, installations, and other manifestations closely aligned to the works of the Post-Minimalists are accepted but references to their origins or clarification of the cultural context in which this art first appeared are absent. Cady Noland is celebrated as the queen of scatter art and explorer of chaos but what about Barry Le Va and his felt in 1966, and Richard Serra's lead scatterings in 1967? The situation in the 1970s was very different, fueled as it was by the social upheaval of the exploding 1960s. That art was

created in a different context and was neither a market system plaything nor an outgrowth of the art academy with its multicultural polemics and critical theories of Revisionist Art History, Feminism, Deconstructivism, and Political Correctness. The diverse manifestations of Post-Minimalism are considered to have been the harbingers of Post-Modernism. Yet in the United States, Post-Minimalist art, which shares the same confusing label, was largely rejected and ignored by both the academy and arbiters of the art world—museums, collectors, critics, and educators—all of whom were largely troubled by this work.

Unlike the Post-Modernist artist of the 1990s who follow art school recipes, make art to fit trendy critical theories and PC multicultural polemics, and work on strategies to capture the art market, the early Post-Modernists were suspicious of the complex institutional structure art that had traditionally supported art. Their aim was to work outside endorsed institutions! They conceived the notion of artist-run alternative spaces. Concept was the essence of much to their art. The art was the idea and the idea was their art; implicit in all of their work was the elimination of the critic and the insistence that the artist perform both the critical function and the interpretation of the art. Their art baffled most critics outside of their inner circle of artists and writers, and their audiences were not equipped to deal with the bombardment of this pluralist expression which overturned a whole system of categories.

Much of the art that came out of what is referred to as the Pluralist Era, remained outside the accepted system—it was not culturally assimilated and validated in the heroic sense that characterized the absorption of Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism and, more recently, the Neo-Expressionism painting of the 1980s. However, contemporary artists recognize that the larger culture comes with the territory of art and the bourgeoisie represent an important element. For them there simply is no escape, and no special value associated with escaping from the culture surrounding art. In this they are at odds with the Modernist avant-garde artists. The Post-Modern artists of the 1990s totally embrace their culture and society and attempt to bring all facets of that world into their art.

There is something very disturbing about the term Post-Modernism; it remains a troubled catchword derived from architecture at the onset of the 1970s. It is an ambiguous term, when applied to the art produced by artists between 1968 and 1993. Why is the term Post-Modern applied to the art and artists of the 1990s or even the 1980s? Have not issues changed greatly during the past twenty-five years? Since 1970 the world has twice turned upside down and we are now living in not only a post-industrial but also a post-Cold War age of accelerated information and technology—an international atlas printed only one year ago is now

obsolete. Moreover, during the past twenty-five years the arts in the United States have become so well organized that they function as their own entertainment and investment industries. A trip to MOMA's successful Matisse retrospective or an analysis of the tally sheets of the even so depressed Auction Houses are testimony to this. Art has become burdened and buried in economic bureaucracy. The art-school trained artist of the 1990s is a very different creature from the MFA'd innocent of the 1970s who blazed the original Post-Modern trails.

Many of the artists of the 1990s come from a very new generation—I refer my reader to Neil Howe and William Strauss's insightful article, "The New Generation Gap," appearing in the *The Atlantic*, December 1992. Influenced by the Age of Information, new technology, shifting social attitudes, Revisionist Art History, and Critical Theory, and a disdain for the Baby-Boomers, the "Thirteeners," as they are referred to by Howe and Strauss, march to the beat of Camille Paglia despite their moralizing parents and teachers who pontificate "political correctness" and social redemption. As Howe and Strauss put it

The generation gap of the 1990s is different from that of the 1960s. It features a smoldering disdain between Americans now reaching mid-life and those born just after them. This time the moralizing aggressors are on the older side. And this time no generation stands in between ... It's a carnival culture featuring the tangible bottom lines of life, money, bodies, and brains—and the wordless deals with which one can be traded for another. A generation weaned on minimal expectations and gifted in the game of life is now avoiding meaning in a cumbersome society.⁹

For this generation the arts are increasingly assimilated into the entertainment business and the artists raised on MTV, are finding ways to cash in on the limited but hopeful profits. At the cost of abandoning artistic criteria, they champion an "I don't give a damn attitude" in their art. Yet, much of this "content"(less) art that has increasingly lost sight of aesthetic considerations or its power as visual communication, is also referred to as being Post-Modern. In the 1970s something happened—everything and anything had a chance of becoming art if the right supporters and networks were harnessed. This trend has accelerated beyond belief in the 1990s.

The flagrantly cynical new generation of artists and dealers who belong to the "Thirteeners," who live for today, love T.V., suffer from historical amnesia, and have very little self-esteem, claim to be "avant-garde," while simultaneously partaking of the fruits and benefits of the art establishment.

When they look into the future, they see a much bleaker vision than any of today's older generations ever saw in their own youth. Polls show that "Thirteeners" believe it will be much harder for them to get ahead than it was for their parents—and that they are overwhelmingly pessimistic about the long-term fate of their generation and nation. They sense that they're the clean-up crew, that their role in history will be sacrificial—that whatever comeuppance America has to face, they'll bear more than their share of the burden.¹⁰

What is now known as perhaps late Post-Modernism is more closely aligned to Mannerism, which displays a neurotic disquiet. Although it claims to celebrate content over style, much of this late 20th century art evinces an obvious and often simplistic, social message devoid of aesthetic quality, metaphor, mystery, or humor; instead this art trumpets moralist platitudes and responses. On the one hand, much of the Politically Correct/multicultural art of the 1990s reminds one of political cartoons in 19th century newspapers—Daumier, for example—but devoid of his irony and invention. Many of these artists set out to provoke their audiences with their critical statements against a morally corrupt society, yet simultaneously seek financial support and acceptance from the powers that be. On the other hand, the new proponents of nihilism and "I don't give a damn art" rely on the powerful aura of the art market and its structure, on art audiences, and on trained professionals to abdicate all responsibility to aesthetic taste.

Audiences viewing contemporary art bring with them the visual and intellectual baggage of the art market—if the work is shown in the "right" gallery or institution, is approved by the "right" curators and critics, and is collected by the "right" collectors, then what is presented must be valid contemporary art. Work by talented "unknown," artists is viewed with great skepticism because it doesn't have the "Good Artkeeping Seal of Approval." And, if an artist is over 35, according to the new rules, he/she missed the boat, (unless they are not of a white, Eurocentric heritage). Only young artists are "with it" and have something to say! To criticize or to question is to demonstrate one's philistinism. It is curious how many flock to ill-conceived displays but leave under the illusion that they have had a "profound experience" as long as the work and exhibition have been modishly packaged.

There is no denying that power, politics, and money have affected and always will affect all facets of life. It comes as no surprise that genuinely intelligent beings can neither function nor survive in a compounded, layered bureaucratic systems. When the majority of the elements in the question/answer list at the beginning of this article factor strongly into the art equation, what can we hope for? Perhaps, what is showcased and

celebrated in contemporary art is only the logical byproduct of an exhausted technologically surfeited Post-Modernism society? Perhaps because I am unable to only focus exclusively on apocalyptic associations, I don't accept that. If one is willing to look beyond "center-stage," with all of its money and whistles, there is a lot of good art waiting to be discovered and shown. However, I am in agreement with Arthur Danto, when he concludes that the arts are in trouble.

(1993)

Notes

- 1 One needs to only read the list of contributors and supporters of major contemporary exhibitions and catalogues. The list of artists to be included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial provides further evidence.
- 2 Read Roberta Smith, "An Installation Art, a Bit of the Spoiled Brat," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1993, 31.
- 3 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 81.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 5 Jan van der Marck, "Jan van der Marck," interview with Suzy Farbman, *Shift*, #3 (1988), 26.
- 6 Jed Perl, "The Art Nobody Knows," *The New Republic*, October 19, 1992, 33.
- 7 Hilton Kramer's candid essay discusses the early evolution of Post-Modern political activist art of the 1980s and the systems surrounding this art. It was first published in *The New Criterion* 2: 8, (April 1984).
- 8 Michael Kimmelman, "At the Guggenheim Bigger May Be Better," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1992.
- 9 Neil Howe and William Strauss, "The New Generation Gap," *The Atlantic*, 270: 6, December 1992, 68.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 75.

In the Name of Peirce: Art Criticism and the *October* Circle

Barbara Jaffee

In his preface to the 1983 anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, critic and art historian Hal Foster sketches a concise history of the idea of the aesthetic from its metaphysical autonomy in idealist philosophy to its political necessity (as negation) in the work of critical theorist Theodor Adorno. Foster is careful to distinguish his own rubric, “anti-aesthetic” from possible confusion with this (final) negative moment: “Anti-aesthetic,” he writes, “signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question ... anti-aesthetic also signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic (e.g., feminist art) or rooted in a vernacular—that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm.”¹

Although his name does not appear explicitly in Foster’s introduction (Foster associates his “strategy of interference” with the work of Marxist Antonio Gramsci), the German Walter Benjamin is the theorist evoked most often in such anti-aesthetic contexts.² Benjamin’s prominence rests specifically on his argument against aesthetic autonomy as outlined aphoristically in the oft-quoted final paragraph of his 1936 essay on art (translated into English in 1968 as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”):

Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.³

I call attention to this passage in part to acknowledge its figurative power in the literature of art history and criticism. Benjamin’s concluding remarks have been and are cited often (and often uncritically) by historians, critics, and artists in order to support various and conflicting

intentional practice = conditioned experience

prescriptions for artistic activity. They reemerge in recent discussion (I have in mind here the discourse initiated in 1976 by the self-described journal of art, criticism, theory and politics *October* and the work of its co-founder and editor Rosalind E. Krauss in particular), as an emblem of an optimistic vision of the role of an art of technical reproducibility (sometimes film, the actual subject of Benjamin's analysis, but more often photography, in a generalized sense not entirely reconcilable to Benjamin's discussion), in securing an objective foundation for meaningful communication.

Krauss, as editor of *October*, has labored long to promote an ontological "difference" in photography as the basis of a Benjaminian political art. However, to characterize Benjamin's distinction between aestheticized politics and politicized art as a distinction between modes of practice that are aesthetic (i.e., subject to judgments of taste) on the one hand, and documentary (i.e., subject to causal association) on the other, is not sustainable: Benjamin's is not an argument about intentional practice but about conditioned experience. This suggestion, that Benjamin's logic is, necessarily, *ideologic*, should come as no surprise. Employing the dialectical strategy of inversion, Benjamin made an historical argument in hopes of intervening in history. Motivated by historical circumstance as well (the service into which Benjamin's essay recently has been pressed), I propose to complete Benjamin's move by collapsing his distinction under the logic of the interpretive gesture and to insist instead on the complementarity of aestheticization and contextualization (the object of either procedure is always available to appropriation by the other).

Touchy Subjects

The transformation of meaning from Krauss's use of Benjamin in her "Notes on the Index" of 1976-1977 to her reference to him in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde, a Postmodernist Repetition" of 1981, suggests something of the breadth of the "Benjaminian" metaphor in American art criticism. In the 1976-1977-essay, Krauss conflates an idiosyncratic reading of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce with an equally selective reading of Benjamin in order to reinscribe the conditions of a new avant-garde. From Benjamin, Krauss gleans that the techniques of mechanical reproduction reveal an entirely different nature than was available previously to the human eye ("The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses").⁴ Benjamin defined film as a tactile medium, the fulfillment of a demand first raised by Dadaist activities which "hit the spectator like a bullet."⁵ However, where Dada painting invited a reactionary attitude (because of its resistance to collective viewing), film, Benjamin

concluded, predisposes its audience to progressive response.⁶ Finally, because of its technical structure, film is able to exploit the potential raised by Dadaism, that is, to interrupt the viewer's empathetic escape into the artwork and to insist instead on a reception that occurs in a state of distraction.

It was this feature of Benjamin's theory, what might be called his elaboration of the American Charles S. Peirce's semiotics, that appealed to Krauss initially.⁷ Peirce's principles of philosophy and his elements of logic, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are accessible most readily in the volumes of the *Collected Papers*, compiled, edited and published in 1931 by Harvard University.⁸ Peirce identified three categories of thought that he linked to three categories of representation:

Those whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality and these may be termed likenesses ... Those whose relation to their objects consists in a correspondence in fact, and these may be termed indices ... Those whose relation to their objects consists in an imputed character, which are the same as general signs, and these may be termed symbols.⁹

Later Peirce refined his system:

A sign is either an *icon*, an *index*, or a *symbol*. An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence ... An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant ... A *symbol* is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant.¹⁰

Into his modification Peirce inserted a variable, the interpretant, which seems to grant some autonomy to the indexical sign. This slippery concept accounts for much of what is written about photography in the name of Peirce (certainly by Krauss), but it is far more complex than it first appears. To suggest that an index would not lose the characteristic that makes it a sign if there were no interpretant, is not necessarily to say that an index would not lose its character as a sign without an interpretant. As Peirce is careful to point out, "icons and indices assert nothing," only symbols determine their own interpretant.¹¹

On interpretants in general, Peirce had this to say:

A mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which this mediating representation itself represents. Such a mediating

representation may be termed an *interpretant* ... In this sense, a word represents a thing to the conception in the mind of the hearer, a portrait represents the person for whom it is intended to the conception of recognition, a weathercock represents the direction of the wind to the conception of him who understands it, a barrister represents his client to the judge and jury whom he influences. Every reference to a correlate, then, conjoins to the substance the conception of a reference to an interpretant.¹²

In other words, an indexical sign is significant only to the mind of one acquainted with a concept of causation (and an array of causes). Similarly, Benjamin makes clear in his essay that the art of technical reproducibility requires a particular audience, i.e., the technically attuned sensibility of the proletarian class. The problem for Krauss's theory, then, is that for her twined authorities, Benjamin and Peirce, photography has no greater claim on nature than any other culturally constructed representation (except conventionally, of course).

Krauss's "Notes on the Index" was a call for a return to photographic conditions as the underlying principles of art. Like Benjamin, she locates the origin for such an approach in Dadaism. However, unlike Benjamin (who focused on the scandalous success of Dadaist activities), Krauss points to an isolated instance, Duchamp's painted *Tu M'* of 1918. Krauss's interest in this work has little to do with viewers and everything to do with her sense of inherency. Duchamp, Krauss says, intended his painting to function as a kind of photograph, and thus exploit the photographic condition which is, according to Krauss, a guarantee of meaning through indexicality. "Every photograph," Krauss writes, "is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object."¹³ Finally, Krauss argues, "the depleted power of the painted sign" has forced artists (including some painters) to appropriate photography's vital form, a vitality inherent in photographic technique:

It is the order of the natural world that imprints itself on the photographic emulsion and subsequently on the photographic print. This quality of transfer or trace gives to the photograph its documentary status, its undeniable veracity ... The connective tissue binding the objects contained by the photograph is that of the world itself, rather than that of a cultural system.¹⁴

At the same time, Krauss contends, "this veracity is beyond the reach of those possible internal adjustments which are the necessary property of language" so that the artist working in a photographic mode must make

use of the strategy of succession, internalizing, as a narrative, the need for an explanatory supplement.

In 1970s painting, Krauss concludes, this need for narrative supplement manifested itself in a physical contingency: painting which assembled itself in response to immediate physical phenomena, so as to be infused with meaning in relation to a "real" presence, rather than referring only to (what Krauss describes as) the "empty" context of a exhausted pictorial tradition. But Krauss, in her desire to forge an intellectually credible defense of avant-garde activity aided by a theory of the photographic sign, was not blind to the threat posed by earlier failures. Thus she carefully distinguished her sense of photographic indexicality from other possibilities, especially painted traces that could be thought of as indices of a painter's gestures in abstract expressionism. The essential (what else could it be?) difference between the two, Krauss insisted, lay in the "gulf" between pictorial and photographic models.¹⁵ Still, Krauss's theory is vulnerable to a credible argument for painted indexicality, such as Richard Shiff has been attempting to mount since the late 1970s.¹⁶

In 1981 Krauss moved closer to the kind of deconstructive agonistic that prevents someone like Douglas Crimp, for example, from conflating photography's indexical realism with reality itself.¹⁷ In "The Originality of the Avant-Garde" Krauss reinvokes the authority of Benjamin as she leads her reader through a critique of the idea of originality (with its attendant notions of authenticity, originals and origins), an idea that for many epitomizes modernity. Museums, historians, and makers of art alike are implicated by Krauss in a shared conspiracy designed to mask the "ever-present" reality of the copy which precedes every "original." In a nod to Crimp, Krauss points to the emergence of a new practice, one that anti-heroically, anti-aesthetically, acts out the "discourse of reproductions without originals."¹⁸ Needless to say (although Krauss says it pointedly) this practice can in no way be assimilated to any that might remotely be described as avant-garde.

But must Krauss's word be final on this subject? In other words, are readers (and viewers) to be persuaded, simply through vehemence of tone, that no nostalgia for avant-gardism animates the practices of those artists named by Krauss (Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Cindy Sherman, etc.) or in Krauss's writing itself? Can it also be the case that Hal Foster's term anti-aesthetic, applied by him to many of the same artists as Krauss (*pace Crimp*), is something new? The answer lies in how these terms, avant-garde and aesthetic are defined by each. To ascertain that, I offer a somewhat willful rereading of the critical projects of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, the writers whose names have become synonymous with a formalist definition of modernism in the United States.¹⁹ For critics of Rosalind Krauss's generation, Clement Greenberg's formalism defined

the discourse of art criticism. Once a follower of Greenberg, Krauss found her voice at a prescient moment, as fifteen years of debate over the momentum and the direction of avant-garde artistic practice shifted from parochial issues of anti-formalism to an embrace of highly politicized and philosophically sophisticated systems of explanation.²⁰ For the generation of Krauss's student, Douglas Crimp, Michael Fried's 1967 "Art and Objecthood" became the despised model of reactionary dependence on the failed standards of the past.²¹ What makes a comparison of Clement Greenberg with Theodor Adorno and Michael Fried with Walter Benjamin tempting is that it goes against the grain of the rigid position each has been forced to occupy under current dictates. What makes such a comparison compelling, finally, is the way in which it might serve to illuminate the subtexts of those imperatives.

My repositioning of Greenberg and Fried argues against the reduction of modernism to any absolute polarization of competing modes. Not only do Fried's and Benjamin's essays offer unexpected and mutually illuminating moments of congruence, but a cataloguing of these moments has the surprising effect of eliminating the apparent differences (restoring the continuity?), between Fried's and Krauss's projects. And the case of Greenberg and Adorno is central to our understanding of the development of postmodernist theories of the visual arts in the United States. A great divide has been created here between Greenberg and Adorno, a divide that is necessary for the maintenance of Adornian theories of postmodernism that are quite simply negations of the content of Greenberg's later, undialectical formalism. To negotiate this divide might reveal the continuity between Greenberg and his critics, that is, their dependence on the afterglow of 19th century beliefs.

Forced Reconciliations

Walter Benjamin, the ardent collector of books, has been described by the philosopher Hannah Arendt as "probably the most peculiar Marxist ever produced by this movement, which God knows has had its full share of oddities."²² His essays of the 1930s reflect the perverseness of his growing commitment to the "literalism" of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, and to the realities of a present bent on destroying tradition. Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," on the other hand, written fast on the heels of his successful debut as curator of the exhibit "Three American Painters" at the Fogg Art Museum in 1965, was the product of his enthusiasm for some recent art and an expression of his concern about emerging possibilities for future practice. Where "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (like Benjamin's famous description of the angel of history in a painting by Paul Klee)²³ propels the reader inexorably into a future towards which his back is turned, Fried proposed

to intervene in history, marshalling his critical insights in order to foreclose options that might misdirect or waylay progress. For Benjamin the storm on the horizon that represented progress promised to cleanse the soul of humanity, even as it sacrificed the beautiful illusions that had provided comfort to earlier generations. For Fried, progress occurred not through catastrophe but through logical evolution: each stage must contribute a necessary component. The danger that Fried saw on the horizon (and hoped to avoid) was the possibility that the contribution of the “genuinely” necessary art of the present might be overlooked in favor of the fleeting insights of the “merely interesting.”

The notion of an art for art's sake is central to both Benjamin's and Fried's essays, and marks the widest point of disagreement between the two. Simply put, Benjamin can only conceive of the autonomy of art as negative, because it is a false autonomy. The artwork, for Benjamin, exists in the economic superstructure, and, like other objects, is affected by changes in perception resulting from changes in production. The false autonomy of art can lead only to one end for Benjamin, and that is a fascistic glorification of war. Fried, in contrast, follows a Kantian model: an art for art's sake is necessary for the progress of enlightenment because, as Kant proposed, the object of aesthetic judgment, unlike any other, allows the individual access to his (collective) humanity. Thus, where Benjamin's polemic is directed towards the advancement of an art of reproducibility (wherein the new apperception will receive its best exercise), Fried is committed to the search for quality and eloquence, the highest values to be found in art. For Benjamin, the enemies are creativity, genius, eternal value, and mystery, as categories that enable fascistic thinking to flourish. Fried's mission is inspired by what he perceives as the threat to art posed by practices that celebrate (mere) objecthood, which, in Kantian terms, can mean only the negation of art.

Despite the obviously crossed purposes to which each attends, Fried and Benjamin interpret modern developments in remarkably sympathetic ways. Benjamin's notion of the withering away of aura for example, parallels Fried's understanding of the emergence of an object-art: Benjamin insists that a public sensitized by technology will increasingly accept reproductions (an expression of its desire to bring things closer spatially), and soon the unique object will be replaced by a multiplicity of objects and images. These multiples, in turn, reactivate the original by increasing its accessibility. Thus the reproduced work of art becomes the art work of reproduction. What is significant about this progression for Benjamin is that as the criterion of authenticity fades, art sheds its ritualistic origins and begins to be based on the values of political practices, exhibition and documentation for example. Paradoxically, the viewer is challenged to respond to the “literalness” of the new art of

reproducibility, precisely because it no longer offers him an object of contemplation. Fried insists as well that a latent naturalism lurks at the core of recent artistic practices which, knowingly or not, obfuscate their own conventionality. However for Fried, this literalness is emanating not from the viewer's willing acceptance of the unauthentic, but from his naive or sentimental acceptance, and thus from an illusionism incurably theatrical.

Here then, is the point at which Benjamin and Fried's essays cross paths in their headlong rush past each other. The reality effect of unauratic art results in the public's demand for captions, says Benjamin. These are internalized in the art of film by the implied narrative of successive images. Further, film is the ideal art of reproducibility because the audience's apparent identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Film is never a perfect illusion, according to Benjamin, despite the best efforts of the film industry to suggest otherwise. Finally the film, a work of reproduction without an original, offers the audience insights available in no other way:

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by men ... the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.²⁴

For Fried also, film represents an inherent escape from theatricality. Yet because this escape is inherent (and thus unconscious as Benjamin would agree), it is only a refuge from, and not an overcoming of theatricality. Truly modernist art is that which has flirted with literalness (in the form of flatness in painting, for example), and remained resolutely (recognizably) Art.

Another and telling moment of congruence between the two are their references to Bertolt Brecht. Here is Benjamin describing Brecht's procedure in his essay, "What is Epic Theater? [1939]":

The art of the epic theater consists in producing astonishment rather than empathy. To put it succinctly: instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function. The task of epic theater, according to Brecht, is not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions.²⁵

Fried accomplishes a formalist appropriation of Brecht on similar

grounds, that is, the need to establish a new relationship with the spectator. Brecht's modernism is not the result of his Marxism, Fried argues; more properly, Brecht's Marxism should be seen as the result of his modernism. Fried cites the following early statement by Brecht:

When I read Marx's *Capital* I understood my plays. Naturally I want to see this book widely circulated. It wasn't of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole pile of Marxist plays; but that this man Marx was the only spectator for my plays I'd ever come across.²⁶

While Fried's appeal to Brecht might be dismissed as a reminder of the dangers of surface similarities, I find it fascinating as an illustration of the power of so-called "pure" form to function conventionally, in this case as a sign of self-reflexivity (a sign whose meaning, it goes without saying, differs radically in different circumstances, yet on some level remains always a consoling gesture).

This is not to suggest that Fried's and Benjamin's projects are reconcilable in their details. Benjamin links aura to the traditionally ritual value of the work of art, a condition which demands a contemplative mode, leaving the viewer defenseless against fascistic machinations. For Fried, a distinction exists between the uniqueness of presence embraced by some (literalist) art, and the "presentness" of the best modernist art. Presentness, Fried explains, is what is wholly and at every moment manifest in great art, and amounts to a perpetual experience of creation cum revelation. It is tempting to invoke Benjamin's Hegelianism against Fried's Kantianism to explain their differences. However, the irreconcilability of the clearly related theories of Karl Marx and the "Young Hegelian" Ludwig Feuerbach is instructive in pointing to the complexities that such an explanation might efface. In Feuerbach's striking defense of an unqualified humanism, his major work *The Essence of Christianity* published in 1841, he argued that humanity is distinguished above all by its self-consciousness. This unlimited capacity for self-consciousness was developing progressively, dialectically Feuerbach said, towards the recognition of the subjective essence of religion—that is, towards man's recognition of God as the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself. Marx, once a disciple of Feuerbach's, devoted his study of *The German Ideology* (1845–1846) to a renunciation of such idealism in favor of a materialist conception of history, one that would not only refuse to sacrifice sensuous satisfaction to the spiritual, but would insist on man's active intervention in history as well. To bring the comparison back to Fried and Benjamin, consider Benjamin's prefatory description of his theory as a weapon on the one hand, and Fried's theology of art on the other.

Both Benjamin and Fried note that as art approaches the conditions of literality, the need for contextualizing becomes imperative, a need that finds its expression in the strategy of serial production. For Benjamin, this means the narrative succession of filmed images, or captions accompanying photographs. For Fried, this situation is rife with paranoia and equivocation, at the same time that it underscores the moral rectitude of the modernist critic. In *Three American Painters, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Fogg Art Museum, 1965), Fried explains that advanced artists of the day tended to work in series in order to provide a context of "mutual elucidation" for their individual paintings: "The series, then, has become one of modernist painting's chief defenses against the risk of misinterpretation—a risk that has grown enormously during the past twenty years in direct proportion to the success of modernism itself."²⁷ By success, Fried means success in revealing the true essence of art, i.e., flatness and delimitation as per Clement Greenberg's critical theory. A consequence of this success, Fried says, has been the expansion of the possibilities of the pictorial—that is, of what might be thought of, seen, or experienced as a picture: "Because all sorts of large and small items that used to belong to the realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless may now be experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial, the risk is greatly increased that first-rate modernist paintings will appear arbitrary and visually meaningless."²⁸

Benjamin, Fried, and even Rosalind Krauss notwithstanding, arts of succession require the constant care of contextualizing and recontextualizing. Witness the decline of the successive narrative as an exemplary explanatory mode in the 1992 trial of four white police officers in Los Angeles accused of beating Rodney King, a black motorist. In this notorious case, a home video took center stage as seemingly irrefutable evidence of police brutality. However, as the verdict in the California case demonstrates (all the officers but one were acquitted, the exception being a single conviction on the least serious of several charges), images of all kinds remain essentially ambiguous.²⁹ In relation to such a skeptical, or relativized view of meaning, the essays of Benjamin and Fried, and Krauss's on indexicality prove more alike than different: each professes a vision of ideally secured meaning. For Fried, this security extracts a high price—eternal critical vigilance (which must intervene with force, if necessary). In contrast, Krauss's security is disappointingly tenuous—the simple supplement that is photography's (apparent) promise.³⁰ Finally, and most tragically fatalistic, Benjamin located the guarantee of understanding in collective historical experience. Believing as he did that the future was destined to belong to a group whose self-consciousness he could never share, Benjamin would consider suicide an alternative to emigration.

Back to the Future

On page *viii* of the introduction to his 1986 book *After the Great Divide, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen, professor of German at Columbia University, longtime editor of *New German Critique*, and self-described cultural outsider (the book's acknowledgements include a debt to the mentor who trained recent emigrant Huyssen in the mysterious ways of McDonald's), defines what he calls the 'great divide' of modernism as "the kind of discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture."³¹ Huyssen then cites the American art critic Clement Greenberg and the German philosopher and social theorist Theodor W. Adorno as examples of critical theorists who embraced this divide "not coincidentally at the same time" (the late 1930s). Huyssen elaborates this coincidence further in his essay "Mass Culture as Woman." Greenberg and Adorno, he writes, each cast themselves as last ditch defenders of high culture because of a sense of historical inevitability, that is, a belief in progress in art. Such belief is understandable, Huyssen notes, because it was posited in response to totalitarian proscriptions against modernism on the one hand, and manipulations of mass culture on the other.

Huyssen's characterization is remarkable for its elision of the widely divergent receptions that Greenberg and Adorno have had in the United States, as protopolitical cultural theory in the case of Adorno, and as depoliticized cultural theory in the case of Greenberg (in fact this difference accounts for the slippage in terms between Krauss's and Foster's otherwise quite sympathetic critical attitudes). Why Huyssen is able to perform almost effortlessly an act that seems impossible for his American colleagues (that is, to acknowledge an intellectual debt to *both* Greenberg and Adorno), is a question worthy of investigation. A provisional account of this difference might begin by noting that Huyssen's project, an attempt to sever the form of Adorno's dialectic from its historical content in order to reinvest it in the present, has something of a precedent in Adorno's own work.³² In contrast, Greenberg's retrospective qualifications ("Today I'm not bothered by kitsch as I used to be. I was bothered by it when I was growing up. I remember a record player at college that went on forever. It was the repetition that bothered me. Today I think kitsch is better than it used to be. Movies have become much, much better over the last thirty years. I think that if I had grown up in the '60s I wouldn't have felt so assaulted or assailed by kitsch.") come too little and too late to inspire a reconsideration of his project.³³

However, from the perspective of their immersion in moments of postwar cultural crises, these differences recede, as both critics reaffirmed in distinct yet strikingly similar ways the necessity of an

autonomous aesthetic realm. Both advanced aesthetic theory as a form of praxis—as intervention—variations on Schiller’s existential command that a change in consciousness will in itself be a revolution. And the two shared several key concepts: a rejection of mass culture, an advocacy of the formal values of high art, and a dedication to utopian and humanitarian ideals. Clement Greenberg championed what he called the pure art of abstract painting and Theodor Adorno, the cerebral art of atonal music. Greenberg’s voice emerged against the horizon of compromise and accommodation that was leftist intellectual debate in New York in the 1930s, as America reassessed its role on the world stage. Adorno’s work was also part of a response to perceived crisis; the project of Marxist revitalization that had been initiated by the Institute for Social Research, the so-called Frankfurt School, beginning in 1923. These geographic and temporal differences are reflected in the form of their commitment: Greenberg would enlist the positive language of science, entrusting his revolution to a neo-Kantian ideal (the disinterested and absolute judgments of the critic). Adorno, responding to a different imperative (his early experience of the politics of pragmatism, and later, the example of Auschwitz), would insist instead on a thoroughly dialectical procedure, one that would unfold, inevitably he believed, through history.

Adorno considered the modernism of Arnold Schönberg’s music a dialectical negation of the modernity of the age. Modern, abstract art, Adorno reasoned, was both the expression of society’s negativity and, at the same time, by refusing to become useful, the beginning of a reversal of negativity. As articulated by Adorno in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, art is not

social only because it derives its material content from society. Rather, it is social because it stands opposed to society. Now this opposition art can mount only when it has become autonomous. By congealing into an entity unto itself—rather than by obeying existing norms and thus proving itself to be ‘socially useful’—art criticizes society just by being there. Pure and immanently elaborated art is a tacit critique of the debasement of man by a condition that is moving towards a total exchange society where everything is for other. This social deviance of art is the determinate negation of a determinate society³⁴

In other words, art’s autonomy guarantees a space of resistance to the regressive tendencies of capitalist mass culture. That, Adorno concluded, was the utopian promise of modern art.

Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with his colleague Max

Horkheimer while the two were refugee intellectuals in America in the early 1940s. The book, considered a definitive statement of the Frankfurt School's critical theory, was an attempt to analyze the emergence of mass culture. What Adorno and Horkheimer identified as a "culture industry" was a sign of man's social alienation, the determined and negative result of his drive to dominate nature. "In thought," they wrote, "men distance themselves from nature in order thus imaginatively to present it to themselves—but only in order to determine how it is to be dominated."³⁵ Technological progress should be liberating for all; instead it had become one class's tool of supremacy. It allowed an elite to seize political power, and, by inverting the social promise of technology, guarantee their own rule. Enlightened reason dialectically becomes repression; to use Adorno's and Horkheimer's term, it becomes "instrumental reason." Still, as Susan Buck-Morss has observed, Adorno's goal was not sheer nihilism. What animated his work was the belief that "a new logic could be educed out of the very contradictions of idealism."³⁶

Greenberg was also an enemy of mass culture. One of his earliest published essays, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in the *Partisan Review* of 1939, clarified notions that had been gathering currency among New York intellectuals and was an indictment of the role of "commodity" forms of art. In the essay, Greenberg ennobled the pursuit of innovation in hopes of protecting the practice from, on the one hand, economic alienation which might tempt artists back to academicism, and on the other, the emptiness of vicarious experience and faked sensation. In contrast to Adorno's dialectical insistence that abstraction in art is destined to appear at the very depths of alienation (when instrumental reason turns most repressive), Greenberg's logic of an aesthetic avant-garde based on purity was evolutionary, and reflected his faith in the discourse of scientific rationalism. The art he promoted offered, he said, a "vision of ... complete and positive rationality ... the only remedy for our present confusion."³⁷ Of course, modeling his practice on the method of the empiricist, Greenberg felt he was responding to an historical imperative. He noted in his 1940 "Towards a Newer Laocoon," "I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art."³⁸

For Greenberg, art's autonomy guaranteed its quality, and he championed abstraction as the last hope for the survival of culture. Quality in art was its own end, Greenberg believed, and the disinterested judgments of taste could provide a universal criterion for assessing quality. A pivotal experience in Greenberg's transition from a Marxist of Trotskyite persuasion to a zealous arbiter of public taste must have been

the years in the late forties and early fifties that he spent as an associate editor of *Commentary*, the journal of Jewish record. Beginning in December 1945, *Commentary* instituted an ambitious series entitled "The Crisis of the Individual," which invited leading American and Continental thinkers to address the question of man's political and moral beliefs in light of his demonstrated capacity for brutality. One response in particular must have struck a chord with the young Greenberg; that of a unique figure in the humanist tradition, the French man of letters, Julien Benda. Autonomy of thought, Benda wrote, was imperative as a balance to political expediency. The new "activist-type" scholar was the true threat to rationalism, which remained, Benda argued, the only path to enlightenment.³⁹

The much later "Modernist Painting" of 1965 reworked Greenberg's early dialectic of avant-garde and kitsch into more strictly Kantian terms: Greenberg's was an avant-garde that would carry the movement forward through the force of its own creativity. As his career developed, the political dimension of Greenberg's project was subsumed by this faith in the benefits of artistic quality, of course as he had defined it. The conceit of his formalism was this supposed objectivity, the positing of an ideal critical viewpoint. For Adorno, the issue of quality was inseparable from historical development, and the autonomy of modern art depended on its obscurity—its ability to escape the ideological limitations of, if not the marketplace, than at least explanation. Abstract art, in its refusal to be useful, represented for Adorno the only possible strategy of opposition to incorporation into the capitalist culture industry, what he described as the "total administration of culture from above." Adorno maintained a Hegelian faith in history, in the duality and dichotomy of modernism and mass culture. Although he railed against declining standards, his sympathy for the sociological critique of Max Weber left him suspicious of such optimistic beliefs as Greenberg's, in progress, and industrial and rational modernization: he continued to interpret cultural modernism as a symptom, as much as a solution.

Both Greenberg and Adorno sketched genealogies of modern art. Parallel to Greenberg's trajectory from the French avant-garde of the 1860s to the American abstract expressionists of the 1940s, is Adorno's from late Romantic music, to Wagner, to Schönberg. And each felt threatened by developments subsequent to their moments of apotheosis. Greenberg saw the return of kitsch in pop art's figuration, and Adorno a regression in authentic aesthetic response brought on by the fetish character of new music. Each was compelled to come to terms with the pessimistic determinism of Oswald Spengler's provocatively entitled tome, *The Decline of the West*; Adorno as early as 1941, Greenberg only in 1981, when he felt the tide of history turning against his judgments.

Adorno's essay "Spengler Today," was a zealous refutation of what he described as Spengler's positivist metaphysics, specifically, "his elimination of the category of potentiality" an action that relegated man unfairly, said Adorno, to the blind determinism of his nature.⁴⁰ The more positivist Greenberg evoked Spengler's name at last in "To Cope With Decadence," a paper he delivered at the 1981 Vancouver Conference on "Modernism and Modernity." After years of issuing authoritarian judgments, Greenberg appealed to history once again, laying out his program in no less foreboding terms than he had in the 1940s: modernism, conceived in mid-19th century France as a preemptive strike against lowering standards, still stood as humanity's only hope for enlightened, (i.e., urban, in Greenberg's lexicon), existence. "It remains to Modernism alone," Greenberg concluded, "to resist decline and maintain the vitality of high art."⁴¹

For better or for worse then, Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno chose to align themselves with the secular religion of the Enlightenment. Their allegiances might be contrasted with the work of Benjamin, Adorno's older friend and close colleague: while Benjamin's plea has historical pathos, the question remains as to whether it offers real alternatives. Was his, as I believe, simply a restatement of the perennial avant-garde dilemma?⁴² Adorno considered the rejection of mass culture central to his notion of progress. Thus *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was intended, at least in part, to refute Benjamin's theory of commodity fetishism. Where Benjamin suggested that "aura" (the quality perceived in a great or important work of art through the viewer's association of it with the originality and genius of the artist) would "[wither] away under the impact of mechanical reproduction," Adorno countered that the culture industry would contribute to aura by solidifying cultural consensus, the true source of authority.

What today conditions cultural consensus is the rejection of formalist rule. In the case of art criticism, the enemy is Greenberg, a critic who, having decided on what side of history certain modes of representation belonged, elected to sever his audience's connection to that history.⁴³ Yet it seems wrongheaded to me to try to discredit, as Greenberg's critics have done, the transgressive efficacy of abstraction (as he defined it): it is the historical fact of Greenberg's effectiveness for which an account must be made.⁴⁴ I suggest that the fortune of Greenberg's criticism is tied to its Kantianism (as Adorno's is to its Hegelianism), by which I mean that each appeals and appalls precisely to the degree that an audience requires a vocabulary to articulate change. The problem with Greenberg's Kant (for the *October* group) is that he provides tools only to analyze, not to effect. At the same time, the problem with Adorno's Hegel is that he subsumes individual action into a faith in history.

Relevancy has reemerged as a rallying cry in the wake of recent formalist practice. Today's art critic is unpersuaded by Greenbergian talk of universal criteria: in Hal Foster's writing, Greenberg's devotion to quality is irrelevant and Adorno's emphasis on negation only slightly better.⁴⁵ Scorning the distinctions between critical and scientific modernisms that a comparison of Greenberg with Adorno and Fried with Benjamin rehearses, some critics hope to revive avant-gardism in the guise of a deconstructive postmodernism. This "post" celebrates Adornian negativity, albeit reborn in the production of an ironic, allegorical art. Deriding as "elitist," Adorno's defense of an abstraction now itself institutionalized as kitsch, this generation argues for the communicative potency of the conventionalized. In a dialectical reversal of Adornian theory, the "degraded" works of mass culture, in their very currency, have come to represent the only possibility for vanguard expression.

"Progressive" critics and artists, eagerly assimilating Frankfurt School theory to the French discourse known here as poststructuralism, are turning Benjamin's historical plea against Greenberg and into a justification of the cultural commodity itself as the new location of resistance. The anti-Greenbergism that motivates this project is clearly articulated in several responses received by Joshua Dector when, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," he solicited a variety of younger artists, critics, and curators for the purpose of measuring the impact of Greenberg's polemical works: one respondent lamented that "by raising art's stakes, Greenberg was restricting art to production and understanding only within the field of an unspoiled aestheticism."⁴⁶ Another claimed "what we have today is an institutionalized avant-garde used as a marketing tool for the masses (and turned into kitsch), and kitsch elevated by an educated elite as a potent, edgy form of expression still capable of the kind of shock value that only vanguard art used to have." Only the painter and critic Stephen Westfall alluded to the dangers of this shell-game approach to historical content: "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," he noted, was written at "a time when the enemies of high culture could be easily fingered: Stalinism, Fascism, Kitsch ... I worry more about the culture industry itself. Like all industries, it can be regulated, prescribe 'absolutes' and theoretical models ... all this within a state apparatus that gives no *outward appearance* of totalitarianism."

The present ascendancy of allegorical modes is as much an expression of restlessness as it is an appeal to history. Patrick Frank has pointed out that "the process of picture-making can still be a vehicle for inner explorations, no matter how often the resulting images are reproduced, and no matter what use they are put to."⁴⁷ The same might be said of the writing of history. What if the importance of kitsch in current art

production *and* the return to older historicist paradigms in the writing of art history were welcomed as an affirmation of the power of self-expression, rather than enforced as inevitable historical imperative? We live in a moment characterized by diminished economic expectations and cultural conservatism, a more modest coda to the post-World War II era of expansion and optimism. In our search for meaning, the comparison of Greenberg and Adorno may serve to remind us that the formalist's dream of pure presence is not so much false, as it is merely over. As Adorno would say, to negate the notion of universal history abstractly, in theory, leads only to its blind affirmation in praxis.

Indexing Intervention

The point of this exercise has been to restore to the practice of criticism the repressed narrative of the anti-aesthetic, that is, that the critical projects of Greenberg, Fried, and Krauss are contiguous and continuous, both literally (in history) and figuratively (in the sense that their theories and practices indexically implicate one another). Above all, each believes in the ability of criticism to do more than to explain, but to intervene. One final task remains, to acknowledge the presence of the artistic practices on which all this criticism ostensibly depends.

For the group at *October* it is clear that the post-painterly abstraction of the 1960s was inseparable from Greenberg's (and later Fried's) championship. As a result, they defined American abstraction as the debased "other" of their critical interventions. In the pages of *October* an unrecognizable caricature of postwar avant-gardism has emerged. And while I would not want to make an argument that the development of artists like Frank Stella, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland (or Tony Smith for that matter) occurred "outside" Greenberg's persuasive field,⁴⁸ I would like to suggest that the practices and products of the generation of painters called abstract expressionist have been done a great injustice.

Fortunately, a great deal of historical and philosophical writing has been devoted to thoughtful restorations of what *October* (following Greenberg, one might add) is dedicated to effacing: the complex relationship between abstract expressionist painting and the constructed world. Richard Shiff, for example, has recently extended his argument about Cezanne's physicality to the project of postwar American abstraction.⁴⁹ For Pollock and his audience, Shiff writes, performance was more important than the representation of appearances, thus Pollock pictured performance itself in his work. This was accomplished, according to Shiff, by taking literally the painter's marks. Brushstrokes, in other words, for artist and audience, were actual physical imprints.

Shiff illustrates his argument with a parable: the modernist mythology of authentic experience begins, and ends (he claims), with indexicality

(in between the primordial indexical past and the reclaimed indexical present, lies a fall into mediated iconicity). When Shiff defines the aim of modernism as "the attempt—perhaps doomed—to fuse iconic appearance to indexical performance"⁵⁰ he is suggesting that abstract expressionist painting becomes an indexical sign of its own appearing (for the formalist, an appearance true to painting's own nature, for the expressionist, one that mirrors the emergent inner self of the artist). Thus the problem of marrying indexicality to iconicity is *the* problem of self-representation.

Ann Gibson, on the other hand, reminds her reader that philosophy and history must consider the validity of the object. Gibson offers four additional circumstances surrounding the development of abstract expressionism to those already catalogued by recent scholarship: to a list of explanations that suggests the abstract expressionists were 1) establishing the excellence of their medium by exploring the limits of its uniqueness, 2) responding to the unfortunate association of realism with totalitarian regimes, 3) rejecting an impotent European picturesque in favor of a vital American sublime, Gibson adds 4) interest in Jungian Psychology, 5) the milieu of New Criticism, 6) the (subliminal?) example of Russian Formalism, and 7) the proximity of Existentialism. These circumstances led to the twin fallacies of Greenberg and that other critic of abstract expressionism, Harold Rosenberg: Greenberg's reduction of subjectivity to the empirically observed fact, and Rosenberg's identification of the act and object (the process of making and the thing made). Following Paul Ricoeur, Gibson suggests that Greenberg's reasoning corresponds to the neutral attitude of science, and Rosenberg's to the neutral attitude of phenomenological religion.⁵¹

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this project of reconstructing the history and meaning of modernism arises in the wake of the tradition established by *October*. And that, the observation that what I have been calling the *October* group represents both the best and the worst in recent criticism, is the inescapable conclusion of this essay. The best because its discourse has raised the stakes of criticism from the task of the (bad) translator to a dialectical practice of art and art theory. At the same time its criticism is in danger of becoming the worst kind because it seems determined to throw out the baby with the bath water. To illustrate this final point, I am tempted to note that the experience of art (or, at the very least, the experience of art-making) is still available even in *October's* rarified circles, and to let one of Rosalind Krauss's anointed artists, Sherrie Levine, have the last word (as spoken in an interview that assuredly did not appear in *October*):

I enjoy painting because of its physicality. The surface becomes a record of the artist's bodily relationship to the

painting. I want [my paintings] to be experienced as beautiful, sensuous objects ... Unfortunately, the rhetoric that developed around my work didn't make that clear enough. My intention seemed programmatic and bloodless. I regret this misunderstanding and my part in it.⁵²

However to end with this admission of aesthetic commitment (albeit to a radically contracted vehicle) would be to put too optimistic a spin on a state of affairs of which *October* is but one symptom. And so I will conclude instead with an artist's statement that occurred in the same context as Levine's unlikely phenomenology, this calculated and complacent description of his recent work by the painter Peter Halley:

I liked [Baudrillard's] idea of taking combinations of preexisting signs and recasting them to make other meanings. It was the key to how I wanted to express myself. By using terms like 'cell' and 'conduit,' I want to separate my way of thinking about art from the formalist verities ... I agree with Foucault that geometry is not ideal, not an a priori phenomenon, not neutral. Instead, it is primarily a technique of social control ... For me, the system is too closed and reality is too degraded; all that I can do is operate situationally within what's going on and point out things here and there. Additionally, the idea of opposition presupposes an idea of reality, but a system without reality can have no oppositional force ... It has been said that my work is cold, but actually, it is the world that is cold ...⁵³

Beyond Levine's belated defense of aestheticism and Halley's absurd attempts to illustrate Baudrillard's post-structuralist tautologies, lie a variety of practices that can be identified more or less as political (Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince among others). Here, in the territory of the anti-aesthetic that seems more and more to be the legacy of *October*'s critical project, I find myself lamenting neither Levine's nor Halley's follies, but the loss of even the possibility of transformative visual experience. At the risk of revealing myself to be hopelessly reactionary, I wonder which is the more confining: the universalizing conceits of a past (ecstatic) faith in visuality, or the impoverished sensibility of a present in which all experience is limited to text?

Notes

- 1 Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), xv.
- 2 This is the case perhaps in part because, as Martin Jay has noted, "critical theory seemed the most appropriate form of heterodox Marxism for a society without a large-scale militant working-class movement ..." Jay, *Permanent Exiles, Essays on the*

- Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 127.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 242.
- 4 Benjamin, 236–237.
- 5 Benjamin, 238.
- 6 Benjamin, 234.
- 7 The parallels between Benjamin's and Peirce's theories have been noted in German discussions as well as in Peircean literature. Although this is not something I am prepared to comment on in this context, it is interesting to note that Benjamin is employing a typically Peircean analogy—the bullet hole as indexical sign.
- 8 C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, edited by Charles Hartstone and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960). Many of the fragments compiled in these volumes were presented as lectures or published as essays beginning in 1867. Some were never published previously. Regrettably, the chronological development of Peirce's thought was suppressed by the editors in favor of the presentation of his work as a unified system.
- 9 Peirce, *Collected Papers I*, 295.
- 10 Peirce, *Collected Papers II*, 170.
- 11 Peirce, *Collected Papers II*, 165.
- 12 Peirce, *Collected Papers I*, 293.
- 13 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), 203.
- 14 Krauss, 211.
- 15 Krauss, 211. Krauss does not elaborate on this great divide. She simply leaves it to the reader to assume that she refers to the painted sign's embedded-ness within a tradition of symbolic representation, versus the photographic sign's inherent proximity to the world.
- 16 Cf. Richard Shiff, "The End of Impressionism: A Study in Theories of Artistic Expression," *Art Quarterly* 1 (1978): 338–378; *Cezanne and the End of Impressionism. A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984); "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, ed. Michael Auping (New York: Abrams, 1987), 94–123; and "Cezanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch," in *The Language of Art History*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129–180. Unlike Krauss, Shiff (so far as I can tell) is not necessarily interested in promoting a new avant-garde. Instead he tries to rehabilitate earlier avant-garde moments by championing modernist painters who, he claims, "humanized" vision through an emphasis on the "reciprocity" of touch. In order to do so, Shiff relies on the same persuasive force as does Krauss, indexicality, but without her insistence on ontological difference: the dialectic of indexicality ("the battle between ... the self-representation of an image impressing itself on a surface ... and the manipulation of a surface to form an image"), is, according to Shiff, operative in every act of representation.
- 17 Postmodern photography, Crimp wrote in his 1980 essay "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," must labor to subvert Benjaminian aura by "showing that it too is now only an aspect of the copy, not the original ... showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen." Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 98.
- 18 Krauss, 168.
- 19 The essays I discuss include Greenberg's "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall 1939): 34–49 ; his "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7 (July/August, 1940): 296–310; and his "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 193–201. Fried's major critical statements include *Three American Painters, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Fogg Art Museum, 1965) and "Art and Objecthood [1967]" reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968).
- 20 Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "A View of Modernism," *Artforum* 11 (September 1972): 48–51.
- 21 Cf. especially Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75–88.

- 22 Arendt, introduction, in Benjamin, 11.
- 23 "A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Benjamin, 257)
- 24 Benjamin, 236–237.
- 25 Benjamin, 150.
- 26 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 140.
- 27 Fried, *Three American Painters*, 45–46.
- 28 Fried, *Three American Painters*, 47.
- 29 "In the California case, the defense was able to provide a different framework for the seemingly damning images. Defense attorneys not only undercut the stark emotional power of the videotape in question but also suggested a reading of it that shifted the jury's understanding of the scene from one of police brutality to one of self-defense and prudent procedures. The jury was shown the tape more than 30 times in the course of the trial, projected at various speeds. The tape was even broken down into a series of still frames, each of which was then subjected to lengthy analysis by defense witnesses and attorneys. As a result the defense was apparently able to deaden the impact of the tape, separate it from its reference to reality. The effect of all this was probably like that of saying your own name over and over until it begins to sound strange, and loses any link to meaning." Charles Hagen, art and photography critic, in *The New York Times* (Sunday May 10, 1992 Sec. H): 32.
- 30 That Krauss's faith in indexicality has been tested is demonstrated by *October's* recent turn towards historicism. Like Fried, Krauss and company are forced into a rear-guard action, that of policing boundaries, as in this latest example by Susan Buck-Morss, entitled "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered" (*October* 62 [Fall 1992]: 3–41). Buck-Morss suggests that there are historically appropriate and inappropriate ways to use Benjamin's essay. Inappropriate use (surprise!) would include any uncoupling of Benjamin's affirmation of new mass cultural and technological forms from their political specificity as anti-aesthetic practice.
- 31 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), viii.
- 32 Although tarred with the same brush of cultural elitism as Greenberg, Adorno did consider the redemptive potential of mass cultural forms. Huyssen credits Miriam Hansen with initiating a reconsideration of Adorno and mass culture based on his 1966 essay "Transparencies on Film," which, as Hansen noted in 1981, "seems to suspend some of the major fixations of Adorno's theory on Culture Industry. Moreover, it encourages a reading against the grain of Adorno's writings on film and mass culture which, for the most part, date from the period of his exile" (Hansen, *New German Critique* 24–25 [Fall/Winter 1981–82]: 186; Huyssen, 25). That Adorno's flirtations with mass culture were hotly debated at last year's symposium in Frankfurt was brought to my attention by a member of the audience at the 1993 College Art Association Annual Conference in Seattle, where I presented an earlier version of this essay.
- 33 From a conversation with Saul Ostrow published in *Arts Magazine* (December 1989): 57.
- 34 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 321.
- 35 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 39.
- 36 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 64.
- 37 Clement Greenberg, "Our Period Style [1949]," *The Collected Essays v.II*, John O'Brian, editor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 326.

- 38 Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," 310.
- 39 Julien Benda, "The Attack on Western Morality, Can European Ideals Survive?" *Commentary* (November 1947).
- 40 Theodor Adorno, "Spengler Today," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* IX (1941): 320.
- 41 Clement Greenberg, "To Cope With Decadence," in *Modernism and Modernity*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin, editors (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 164.
- 42 The history of this dilemma is worth rehearsing briefly here. At its political root in the writings of 18th century French social reformer Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon, the idea of an avant-garde created a privileged position for artists to occupy, as the creative force that would carry the new movement forward. At the same time, Saint-Simon complicated the issue by suggesting that the artist was only executing an already articulated didactic program. The dilemma for the artist, then, was whether to forward social ideals through the most accessible of possible styles, or to follow the call of individualized expression, expecting society to bring up the rear. In 1962, Hans Magnus Enzensberger complained that to follow the latter procedure had led only to an "impotent avant-garde ... content to obliterate its own products." Perhaps the Marxist historian Meyer Schapiro expressed this problem most pessimistically when, in his 1936 essay "The Nature of Abstract Art," he suggested that no truly 'avant' garde was possible at all. Schapiro argued that all art, even abstraction, belonged to the continuum of history, reflecting, not inspiring, the spirit and aspirations of its producers. See Donald Drew Egbert's "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 72 (December 1967): 339-366; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde [1962]," in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics, and the Media*, Michael Roloff, editor (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 34; Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art [1936]," *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 185-211.
- 43 Jürgen Habermas, in his 1981 essay "The Incomplete Project of Modernity," suggested that such conscious strategies of exclusion merely repeat the larger scheme of enlightened rationalism. Borrowing an idea from Max Weber, Habermas noted that beginning in the mid-18th century religious ideals were reinvested into the divided cultural spheres of science, morality, and art. Specialization would drive the engine of progress, and enable society more rapidly to conquer fear and superstition. However the technological disillusionment that was the legacy of the first World War redirected radical intellectual thought. Efforts were concentrated on the even more specialized investigation of the possibilities for resistance still available within the realm of art. The opposition of high art and popular culture—the so-called "great divide" of modernism—emerged out of these impassioned cultural debates. See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in Foster, 3-15.
- 44 Serge Guilbaut's "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" in *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 61-78 is one such attempt. Unfortunately, Guilbaut equates the value of abstract expressionism with the success of Greenberg's rhetoric.
- 45 Foster's "history" of the aesthetic idea ends with Adorno. Foster, with evident regret writes, "it is this last [negative] moment (figured brilliantly in the writings of Theodor Adorno) that is hard to relinquish: the notion of the aesthetic as subversive, a critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world. Now, however, we have to consider that this aesthetic space too is eclipsed—or rather, that its criticality is now largely illusory (and so instrumental)." Foster, xv.
- 46 Joshua Decker, "The Greenberg Effect, Comments by Younger Artists, Critics, and Curators," *Arts Magazine* 64 (December, 1989): 58-64. All quotes in this paragraph are from this article.
- 47 Patrick Frank, "Recasting Benjamin's Aura," *New Art Examiner* 16 (March, 1989): 31.
- 48 Although such an argument was precisely the point of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (curated by Maurice Tuchman with Judi Freeman), a breathtakingly ambitious if flawed attempt to revise the history of postwar abstraction in the United States so as to minimize the effect

- of Greenberg's positivism.
- 49 Shiff, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism" (cf. n.16).
- 50 Shiff, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," 103.
- 51 Ann Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47 (Fall 1988): 208-214. To Gibson's association of Rosenberg with existentialist phenomenology, I would add the pragmatism of John Dewey (to whose 1934 *Art as Experience* both the major early theorists of abstract expressionism, Rosenberg and the painter Robert Motherwell, acknowledged an allegiance. Further, quintessential action painter Jackson Pollock had a Dewey connection—the example of his mentor, regionalist Thomas Hart Benton. For Motherwell's interest in Dewey see Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Robert Motherwell, The Formative Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1987). The argument for Pollock's Deweyanism is made by Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Finally, a preliminary assimilation of Rosenberg's criticism to Dewey's aesthetics can be found in Stewart Buettner, "John Dewey and the Visual Arts in America," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (Summer 1975): 383-391.
- 52 Sherrie Levine interview in Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract Part II," *Art in America* 75 (December 1987): 114.
- 53 Peter Halley quoted in Wei, 121, 171.

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Laura Morowitz's review of the exhibition *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe* recently appeared in the Spring 1996 issue of the *Art Journal*, and her essay, "Anti-Semitism, Medievalism, and the Art of the Fin de Siecle" will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Oxford Art Journal*.



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