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OVER TIME:
A FORUM ON ART MAKING

We asked a diverse group of artists who have been working for at least twenty years for their responses to the following questions.

How long have you been practicing as an artist? Over the period that you have been working, how do you develop or sustain your art? What keeps you motivated? — or is motivation an active concern at all? Do you find you reuse motifs and styles, or ideas and techniques from earlier work, and to what extent is this a conscious part of your practice? Are you concerned about the ways your work repeats itself over time, or, in contrast, how it breaks from itself?

How has being part of a specific generation marked your work and affected your ability to adjust to changing stylistic and ideological concerns in the world "at large" as well in the art context? How have the themes, ideas, and goals of your work evolved from your early years to the present?

Rudolf Baranik

SHARDS

In 1951, while I was studying with Fernand Leger, I had my first one-person show in Galerie Huit (Gallery Eight), a tiny cooperative gallery run by young American artists on the Left Bank of Paris. It astonishes me that in rereading the first reviews in the Paris press my work was described in very much the same terms it continued to be for four decades later in this century: "... a great silence on the verge of turbulence, a formal sensitivity which merges with underlying social concerns." It surprises me because to me the very early work, which I have in photograph is far from it, but my goals, intuitive and not cognitive, have not changed through the years, even during the Vietnam era, late 60s into the 70s, when I did the Napalm Elegy paintings; it remained formalist and poetic, a silent outcry. I think it is stronger that way.

While the above answers in essence most of your questions, I want to give here some fragments of my thinking, done as postscripts after the work is done. These are from statements I read during the years at the long string of panel discussions of which I was part, panels under slightly different titles yet adding up to same, such as Art and Revolution, Social Intent and Formalism, Society and Art, and so on. There I argued with my friends who talk about "Political art" and "Activist art," limiting art's formalist and poetic prerogatives, and with my friends who talk about the impossibility of "mixing" ideology and art.

• • •
Why reclaim the term “formalism”? The answer is not an easy one, and yet it is clear. In the great variety of ways it was used we find one common trait: hardly anyone uses it favorably in self-description. When used to describe others it is always negative.

In art, formalism has been and is the red herring used by those who are opposed to the poetic prerogatives of art. The dictionary definition of formalism (“rigorous or excessive adherence to recognized forms”) was used in the Catholic church, in societal mores; but in art it is something entirely different: ideological social realists used it against abstraction as such; “populist” philistines used it against so called “high art”; know-nothings used it against any art of sophistication. Under the banner of anti-formalism art is being called to task to be clear, serviceable, responsible, useful, and, above all, dependent. Thus it becomes important to take the term away from the detractors, to claim it for all powerful art, as the term Black was taken away from the racists by American Blacks who made it their own. At the same time it also takes it away from the stylistic sectarians (Greenberg et al) from those who are satisfied to build theories on thin diagnostic profiles.

Democratization of society will make art, per se elitist, more democratically available to the people but “democratization” of art will not change society — it will simply lessen the reason to change society for the better because life will be more impoverished by the loss of a subtle and complex art after the change.

Art is an elite activity. Yet to create art is not to be an elitist, though in defense of the activity artists may become so — or perhaps they do not become elitist — just defiant, as did Ad Reinhardt, an abstract artist and a socialist, when he called his magazine “It Is.”

“The necessity of art” overshoots the target. Art is not necessary — it is simply unavoidable. In its own dark, uncontrollable, unpredictable way it carries the best and the worst of human expression. It does not “enhance” life as is often said — it chars it, invades it, disturbs it. Therein its power.

To mystify art and to recognize art’s mythic force are very different things. In fact those who mystify art do it as a substitute for sensing the myth. Often just describing the myth becomes an act of mystification. Sontag was right when she spoke “against interpretation”. . . . Mystification and de-mystification are two activities which feed each other while art pays no attention.

Art lives in the night, in the dark bypasses of dailiness. Concrete analysis of art thinks of itself as a powerful searchlight in the darkness while in reality it is a dying flashlight.

Larry Bell

I like beginnings. I have gone into the studio just about every day for the last thirty-two years and begun my work. That work has been a constant series of investigations, explorations of volumetric illusion on canvas, progressing into the volumes themselves thus becoming sculpture, then addressing the nature of light as it interfaced with those volumes: the way it passes through or is absorbed, or reflected, or dispersed by the surfaces. I now believe that my medium has always been “Light on Surface.”

Early in my career I worked with glass and investigated the way cubic volumes activated the space they occupied by altering the conditions of the light with-in their structure and in the immediate area. These pieces were sculptural tapestries that wove the transmitted and reflected light into the ambient light of the space they occupied.

The work of the last thirteen years has focused on two-dimensional formats, again investigating the interface of light and surface — the difference being that the varying surfaces trapped, absorbed, and dispersed the light rather than transmitting it. So, I could say that the two-dimensional works are weavings of reflected and absorbed light.

I consider my work, my teacher. Everything I know about what I do I have learned in my studio. Over the years, certain motifs, or shall I say light/dark relationships, have reoccurred. When I work — as well as building a physical inventory, which is the evidence of my investigations — I also build an inventory of ideas and concepts. Many times I have drawn on this conceptual inventory for the current studio activities. Lessons I learned years ago and had forgotten reappear intuitively during periods of improvisation and spontaneity. I like improvisation. I think it takes a great deal of discipline to use it well. I like being spontaneous and working fast because it helps me be improvisational and intuitive.

For many years I was considered part of the “Minimalist” School. There was a period when I was thrown in with the “Op-Art” School. I have always been considered a West-Coast artist, even though I have not lived in Los Angeles for almost twenty years. I like being part of a lot of different things. Personally, I do not find it distracting to be considered a Minimalist, an Op-Artist, a West-Coast artist, a Southwest artist, and a Light and Space artist... I am a hands-on artist. Above all, I am interested in the sensuousness of my work. My investigations are made in my studio, by myself, with the tools that I have created for those investigations into light and surface. I believe in what I do. I believe that an artist must have faith in his work and must recognize its importance to the rest of the dreamers of the world.
Rosemarie Castoro

I return to myself and reach into the future like an ever expanding stretched spring. During my graphic art studies at Pratt, I choreographed and acted, creating space relationships which later resurfaced in sculptural groupings. Walks around the cobblestone streets of lower Manhattan reinforced acrylic fields of mosaic-tiled wall paintings. In 1965 a dominant element emerged: the “Y.” I answered its question by painting “Y’s” all over 7-foot-square single color fields, their extremities becoming larger extending into a grid. I eliminated saturated color and drew into a monochromatic field with T square and cardboard triangles, turning my canvases into massive drawing boards.

A psychological consciousness opened up. I attended Art Workers Coalition meetings in 1969. Poets and artists produced “Street Works.” I made an stall out of Manhattan island by “cracking” the sidewalk with aluminum tape, bringing to my mind my childhood paintings of desert islands. I timed myself for a week, a weekend, and a day. My stopwatch works examined the inventory of my daily activities.

In 1970, I built a white painted room for a show in Vancouver, lit it with one floor-centered light bulb triggered by a rheostated switch in the door and screwed four large casters to the corners of the ceiling. Open the door and the light goes out. Close the door and the light slowly returns to brightness. People were in spiritual intimacy as their bodies threw shadows onto the walls, until someone opened the door.

The shadows were temporary. Through a strong desire to strike blackness onto those walls, I bolted together masonite panels, gave up the straight edge and cut them out with a saber saw. Free-standing walls turned into parts of rooms. “Rotating Corners” were four doors that got together. What comes through revolving doors? People came through in the form of cut-out broom strokes. I studied groups of people in the subway and crowds on the street. I squeezed their exoskeletal auras onto masonite, and made roots growing down from the ceiling. Through epoxy and steel I made tops of tree branches suspended, then finally released, dancing on the ground. In a dream, I returned to myself and reach into the future like an ever expanding stretched spring.

Concrete encrusted surplus lead brought to mind the slices of mountains I drove through in New Mexico. The density of lead prompted me to examine concrete. With expanded metal lathes, I formed super-structures on which to plaster concrete “Flashers.” Observing a “Flasher” for its geometry, I saw triangles and curves. The cardboard triangle tool from the 60s became the building element for the “Flasher,” now called a “Shrine.” Through mixing concrete I saw graphite and charcoal as three-dimensional dust.

In 1984, I began again to wrestle steel. I cut head and shoulders into sheets of galvanized steel and left the “Angels” unpainted, as sculptural equivalents to the charcoal “Portraits/Flasher” drawings. Color returned. Using a torch to anneal stainless steel, I discovered how to paint with fire. Members of monarchies ensued: Kings, Queens, and Dwarfs, paying homage to the games of chess I played.

In 1985, I began drawing at the opera and the dance. Graphite crystals grew, diamond lathe and cardboard “Shrines” became solidified. Since 1987, I have used the triangle to weld stainless steel. The archetypes transformed into their own architecture.

Arthur Cohen

How long have you been breathing? How do you develop or sustain breathing? What motivates it? or is it (motivation) an active concern at all? Does your breathing repeat itself? To what extent is repetition in breathing a conscious part of current breathing? Are you concerned about the ways your breathing repeats itself? Or, etc. etc.?

How has being part of the human race marked your breathing? Does it change styles? Does changing ideology affect it? How has your breathing evolved? Are you still breathing? And most importantly, could you stop breathing for a moment to observe and write about it? We’re looking for MEANING, and surely meaning must lie in words and not in life? In living?

Bailey Doogan

1. I’m 49 years old. I’ve been practicing as an artist for about 23 years. I’ve been teaching art for 22 years.

2. My work is a result of my life — the recording of external and internal events. What keeps me going is the struggle to make work that feels real. Sometimes I succeed.

3. My process: A pressure builds up — a physical pressure like a boil or gas, an idea that gets under my skin and won’t go away. Sometimes I give it an intellectual overlay and explain it in blue terms but usually it’s red. Once I start working, there is a relief.

4. 20 years ago I did small, very representational line drawings in pencil — the line outlined the form. I began to paint. The work became looser, more colorful and expressive. Now I paint and draw. The work has again become more physically real and the line is internal.

The content remains the same: the body that quivers, the words that surround it.
5. Concerned about the way the work repeats itself? No. How it breaks from itself? No. . . but dealers, collectors, etc. are opposed to what they see as stylistic changes because it is essential/marketable to have a consistent style that can be labeled as belonging to an established movement. . . LABELING IS KNOWING. It is felt that if the "look" of your work shifts often, you are uncertain, still questioning, not possessed of a mature style . . . all of which is true of me. The idea comes first — this informs everything else.

6. As far as my place in a specific time and generation and how it's marked my work — Three major influences:
   a. Growing up Catholic, which made me aware of the power of symbols and ritual and control by fear.
   b. Working as a graphic designer in the early to mid 60s, which made me aware of the manipulation of people's insecurities and desires through language and symbols, (one of the most powerful of these symbols being the objectified female body, the more tightly wrapped, erect and phallic, the better.) An account executive once told me he dealt in "FEAR, HOPE, GREED, AND EXCITEMENT."
   c. Feminism and the Women's Art Movement, which many contemporary critics would say is passe — eager to label and write about the next movement. But movements that spring from groups that have been marginalized (women, gays, people of color) are not "movements" at all in the strict sense of the word. They are an identity that is — that doesn't go away but evolves, changes, and has infinite variety.
   For me, women's bodies are the core. The desire in this country to censor, deny, or control our bodies is at the very center of a culture of self-hate and war.

Hermine Ford

I've been working consistently for about twenty years. I'm motivated to work because I start to feel empty and lethargic when I don't. The work comes out of what I value the most and feel closest to. I keep trying to get closer. The content has been pretty steady. It comes from spending time in relatively uninhabited places on the planet Earth, and reading about, looking at pictures, maps, and diagrams of same. The various ways of combining this material has endless possibilities, and that accounts for changes — shifts of interest — in the work. I make certain willful changes to keep the making of each painting fresh.

I've been a witness to the art world since the 50s, so I don't always take seriously each little hiccup in art world trends. I like to be surprised though, so I do pay attention. I think I have a large overview. I don't care much for style or ideology as separate concerns. The work from any age that I like the best is where you feel the humanity of the artist near.

Nancy Fried

What motivates me? That's like asking why I eat so much chocolate — I love it, I feel addicted to the high I get working.

What motivates me? My life motivates me and the work gives dignity to my day. My work has always been autobiographical. Before I called myself an artist, I was a hippie sitting in my kitchen creating scenes of my everyday life in dough. My images are directly affected by my life. My work is about my survival. I don't sit down and say "I'm going to deal with that pain," it's that the image I see is a reference, a symbol for the pain or experience.

The first time that I had breast cancer four years ago I dealt with the fear, loss, anger, and regeneration in my work in a very different way than I am now dealing with having just had breast cancer again. Four years ago I had been making sculptures of full-bodied women using myself as the model. After I had the mastectomy I continued to use my body as the model but the content and form changed. Feeling very fragmented, I made only the torso, with one breast and a mastectomy scar, rather than the full body. Survival was my motivation. The work helped me to accept my body and to even find it beautiful in its new, altered state. Putting the fear, anger, and pain into the work helped me move through a process of acceptance and regeneration very quickly.

At a point the cancer and mastectomy stopped being a motivation. The torso continued to have only one breast and a mastectomy scar but that was totally incidental to the content of the piece. For a while I felt obsessed by my niece's pregnancy because she was only nineteen. That obsession became the motivation for my work. Then I became fascinated by the penis as an icon. I put penises in altars, on sarcophagi and on the stations of the cross. In January, just as I was losing interest in the image of the penis, I found out that I had breast cancer again. The penis immediately disappeared. I hadn't planned to have breasts in my work ever again but what was my option? The minute my breast doctor told me that I needed a biopsy I saw a Mexican type altar with rows and rows of breasts. There was the breast again and the need to make it but now I needed to put it in the context of suffering and spiritual transcendence. The breast, now isolated without a torso, reappeared in Mexican-type altars, on sarcophagi or in chapels. The pain and fear were the motivation and the work was the relief from the suffering. I made an altar with a cross and nailed a breast to the cross. It felt so great to nail that breast up that I thought maybe I should go into the mail-order business and supply a cross, breast, and hammer to women who had had breast cancer. One altar had a cross with a small breast nailed to it and a mound of discarded breasts at the base of the cross. By transforming and transcending the pain I have had the luxury of never having to say "Why me?"

My work has never been defined by what is happening in the "au courant" art world. I don't censor the images because they're not "cool" or might not be very saleable. I do what I do because I have no option.
Leon Golub

Years as an artist: 40

What keeps one motivated?
1. Schizoid splits — desperation to euphoria... euphoria to desperation.
2. Daily working practice.

Concern about work's repetition or innovation:
Yes

Generational location in respect to changing stylistic and ideological concerns:
1950s: not an issue. 1960s and 70s: a towering issue. 1980s: not an issue. 1990s: ?

Ideas and goals into the present:
Intended goal: to head into real! issues in real time/media time. Results: ?

John Goodyear

My recent work relates most to my earliest work done in the 50s. The "middle period" begins to feel more distant. I work in series which change abruptly for unknown reasons. The things within each series look very much alike. Making works which consist of more than one part is a trait that has continued up to now. I'm sure I'm trapped in a generation. But I'm not sure what that generation believes. As my friends and I grow old together, I notice some tend to stick with ideas for which they became known, others even older than myself have come up with innovations which have helped define the artistic present, still others like myself keep trying new things with different degrees of response. There are other categories besides "generation" which are more delimiting. Being a white male is more of a box than being sixty.

A motivation for my work is the realization that so much is hidden from us. Not only should we try to find out what is hidden, but also we could provide in the work something similar to the life experience; more is given than we can know.

Mimi Gross

Movement change, while still, (holding time), need to hold;
It seems like something, more organic, can be accomplished.
A line, a rough shadow cut-out, light on ear: The Idea.
(Turning a corner, so many ideas!)
Inspiration needs energy. Inspiration is (at least,) my motivation.
The process enlarges, picks up a new subject or new technique, & backtracks.

Actual learning is incremental.
Object of interest, in place, or kind, plastic forms,
most constant problems,
Inventing an inner life, an urgency.

Nancy Grossman

June 28, 1991

This afternoon the temperature has reached a humid 100° in New York City. Very uncomfortable. I’ve been suffering with a headache all day but for an interlude when I opened the door of my un-air-conditioned sculpture studio where, a few days ago, I had begun to remove the mitered one-by-twos which framed a 60s construction. Some of the leather in the piece had become dry and needed to be restored or perhaps replaced. Although I had no intention of working on the piece today in the light, airless space, somehow I began to approach it. An hour passed, another — no headache, no worries, no gender, no body. A closed space, a dream space, an ecstatic losing of my care-worn conscious self. That’s the way it is sometimes, like going out to play.

I’ve been a working artist for the past 30 years, showing in New York City galleries since 1963. The greatest interest in my life has been art. I keep going back to it again and again for my excitement and sustenance. Art is my way of understanding existence, myself, and other people. And it is the only thing I ever really wanted to do. I made the right choice. Art is my fire, my light, my power to transcend the limitations I was handed as a child. It holds the possibility of expressing the heart of the matter and coming closest to the truth. Because we humans, even at our most formal and pompous, are so puny and so short-lived, we need all we can get — recombinant collage of everything we touch as a representation of so fleeting a reality.

The body of work which I’ve produced in the last 30 years may simply revolve around my own body. But then I may be, for all intents and purposes, a Heavenly body or the Wizard of Oz.
Yvonne Jacquette

1. My mother kept giving crayons and paper to her seven kids to keep them busy and out of trouble. I grew up thinking everyone was "an artist." The others woke up to reality. I just never stopped "working," or "practicing." Thirty-five years ago I quit art school.

2. Most of what I do starts with direct perception. I'm most fired-up by experiences not so commonly found in art: the aerial view, the oblique view, night light. After working from nature I work from drawings.

3. Curiosity keeps me "motivated." The gap between what I want to get and what I do get is interesting. Sometimes gaps found while working on another idea lead to a new direction. Hindsight shows up personal connections I hadn't realized at the time. I've found some stimulation when appreciation is evident.

4 & 5. I'm after paintings that vary quite a bit from each other and especially changes evident from one show to another. The longer I work the more possibilities I have the illusion of having. I like a linkage with former work but I'm after the breaks. From inside the differences are probably felt to be wider than they appear to others, however. An image in black and white is very different to me than when it's explored in color. Scale also alters the meaning. Materials push one further than expected.

6. My generation was the next after Abstract Expressionism. There seemed to be a fear of self-aggrandizement in the work but not in lifestyle. Astute literalness (rather than mythic concerns) seemed to be a good path for me but now my personal cycle has rotated to more interest in political, allegorical, and symbolic pictures. Starting "tight" is not a bad discipline for later "loosening-up." I can't take credit for my generation being able to change in the world or in the art context.

7. The only "evolution" I can experience about my painting is the way I feel less obsessed with "control" and more interested in opening up to a new set of challenges.

Ellen Lanyon

At fifteen I began working in the drafting department of a foundry equipment company. My task was to disassemble machine parts and draw an exploded view of the entire mechanism. The job demanded accuracy and thus, it didate my responses to precision and fidelity. My vision became influenced by this process of fragmentation: the floating juxtaposition of objects and how they relate to one another to create a whole.

By nineteen I was in awe of and inspired by Sienese and Florentine predellis, and out of trouble. I grew up thinking everyone was an "artist." The others woke up to reality. I just never stopped "working," or "practicing." Thirty-five years ago I quit art school.

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Melissa Meyer

Unlike grownups, children have little need to deceive themselves. — Goethe

Whoever is not a misanthrope at forty can never have loved mankind. — Chamfort

All children make art. Since childhood my work has developed and sustained itself from my life, at times difficult but rewarding. I have looked and thought about art and life, and I have tried to put this in my work. My generation does not include very many women abstract painters who are currently visible in the art world. This generation has flourished with other media and other concerns. One reason could be that by the late 60s abstract gestural painting was devalued and consisted of what Philip Guston called "the empty gesture." In 1974 I was an art student in Provincetown and the artists Leo Manno and Victor Candell would say to me, "you choose your art parents and then you have to leave home again." I chose elder art parents — ironically like my own "real" parents.

For an artist, just surviving is a form of success. Stubbornness and the strength to make sacrifices are some important ingredients.

Howardena Pindell

When I was eight I decided to be an artist. I was sent to the Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia for a Saturday class in drawing. I felt very intimidated as I was the youngest person. I do not remember if I was the only person of color. I continued to take Saturday classes in various programs in the area (Tyler School, Phil. College of Art) until I graduated from high school when I was 16. I was determined to be an artist and was inspired by the presence of work by Henry Osawa Tanner in the home of one of my friends who was one of his relatives. There were many black artists in Philadelphia plus excellent collections (mostly European art). There was not much of a gallery system. I did not feel it was odd for me to be an artist and was frankly quite amazed at how closed the art world was once I left Philadelphia. Not that Philadelphia was open, on the contrary, but people were working and there was not the massive commercial gallery and art trade publication network we have today. I felt there was always someone to appreciate your work. My first exhibit was in our neighborhood church which was a black church (the Presbyterian Church was not the massive commercial gallery and art trade publication network we have segregated at the time).

I spent a lot of time in the Philadelphia Museum in the Arensberg Collection. I was very fond of Duchamp’s work and landscape painting. There was always a split for me between traditional painting and the avant-garde. I was fond of them both. I was primarily trained in traditional oil painting but gave it up (the use of oil) after becoming allergic from using too much lead white. They never taught about the hazards of lead white until after I graduated. Art hazards are a relatively recent concern.

I sustain myself through sheer tenacity as the art world does not want artists of color to be full participants. I work because it is my life’s work. I have no other choice. I do not get bored with it or impatient unless I am overtired. I could have been a classical musician but hated to practice and had terrible stage fright. My work was primarily about process until a freak car accident in 1979. After that my work becomes autobiographical as part of my desperate struggle to heal myself. I had a brain injury because of a concussion and not everything was working right. . . plus I had severe headaches and had a very short fuse as a result of being very uncomfortable. I also had trouble walking.

Since autobiographical themes are really endless and there are so many things that I want to explore, I find that I am not at a loss for ideas. More at a loss for time. I do a lot of reading and research and now do almost as much writing as I do painting. I have a series that I started, in 1988, on war, racism, and foreign policy. I am working on a painting about the Gulf War and have completed a long article about the war which will be published in Asiba Tupahache’s Spirit of January. My work repeated itself more with subtle variations when I worked with process in the late 60s and 70s. Now there is not that much repetition as each painting is sort of an odyssey or epic. One unrelated tangent I am following is an interest in science. I loved science as a child (biology and balancing chemistry equations) and I am particularly interested in new physics and quantum mechanics and how it ties in with spirituality.

I do not feel a part of the present new generation, I guess, because I was brought up in a different time frame. I was born during World War II, in 1943. I remember the atomic bomb and the dark window shades for blackouts and rationing of food. I remember segregation and the aggressive oppression as opposed to its more subtle form now. I remember the civil rights movement. I was basically brought up on radio not T.V. I thought T.V. was frivolous and can only remember Ed Sullivan, This Is Your Life, Ernie Kovacs, You Asked For It, and the Mouseketeers, Howdy Doody, and Flash Gordon. They certainly had nothing to do with my life. The difference also is that then there was not the massive advertising or the horrendous violence which has been so normalized. The violence of racism was there but there was a silence around it because no one in power wanted to acknowledge it.

Travel has made the big difference for me in that I did not get isolated in the American pathology. I lived in Sweden, Japan, and India and spent time in parts of Europe, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Caribbean, Canada, and the U.S.S.R. I have always been concerned about the world at large. I spent some of my summers as a teenager in a kibbutz-like environment that was international in the hills of Pennsylvania. The ideal for me is international cooperation as each culture has so much richness to offer. I also worked in a factory for one summer and got a taste of what could happen if one gave up one’s education. I am from a very racially mixed family (some are liberal and some very conservative) and have tried to understand or appreciate this. I have been puzzled by the need for one culture to be obsessed with domination of another.

The goal of my work is to share knowledge. This is the reason I have also been writing as well as painting, teaching, and giving some public lectures. I do not feel very much part of the art world because of the restrictive environment that is brought to it by people who are pathologically indifferent. I do not see art and life as separate.
Lucio Pozzi

As a kid, I was involved in poetry and architecture. Then, around age 16, I started with painting. It is thus now about 40 years since I began.

I keep wondering what drives me. Even on those sad days when I feel I’ve wasted my life in insignificant endeavors, something persists in leading me to the surfaces I put paint on. It is what I must do, for reasons I can not fathom. I guess it regards approaching and never capturing the mystery of existence. The logistic aspect of art, its sociology, psychology, and technique are all subsumed in that.

I constantly allow the return of motifs and procedures in my work. Sometimes I recycle them consciously, but most of the time they necessitate their return in the spiral process of my mind. In the spiral, the mind leaps from station to station in the most unexpected manner, but it always seems to do so within the terms of its own territory, a territory it does not know beforehand. The mind’s continuous attempts to break away from its territory reveal themselves in fact as the means for exploring it. It is by way of its endless movements that the mind both forms and discovers its territory. The stations come to be recognized in time as belonging to families, to groupings, which in turn are found to be linked by some (but not all) of the ingredients they are composed by.

From the start of my consciousness, I have found myself attracted by the kind of critical creativity I see both in resistant dissent and in mystical contemplation. I found plenty of both in the 60s. I loathe the pedantic conformities binding the right and the left in our culture. I try to keep myself alerted to all alternative private and public probes which might offer themselves on my way. The theory and practice of my work have learned from many ventures in their creative moments and disengaged from them in their institutional phases. It is most difficult to keep connected with the truth of experience in a society dominated by publicity.

Jacques Roch

I was born with the condition of the wide-awake dreamer. I can still feel the wind blowing at the temples of my sixteenth year at a time when I was living on the back of a camel, crossing long stretches of bumpy desert road in search of the well that doesn’t go dry. Painting was my love, but one day I had reluctantly to admit myself to feminism and such politics have inspired me. The art is successful in that it sustains art by reinventing my belief system as I go. Since 1970 I have committed myself to feminism and such politics have inspired me. The art is successful for me when the passion is clear and the sensual language is available to others.

My earlier work moved from one impulse to another. And looking back I am proud of the variety of my myths and styles. I see how I used to project my ideas into the New World mixed with a certain nostalgia for the old gave my paintings a way to close a circle that continues nonetheless to widen into a target toward which the trajectory of my work has come like an arrow from the past.

Miriam Schapiro

I have been a professional artist for 45 years. I have sustained life by working at waitressing, teaching, lecturing, etc. I have sustained art by reinventing my belief system as I go. Since 1970 I have committed myself to feminism and such politics have inspired me. The art is successful for me when the passion is clear and the sensual language is available to others.

My earlier work moved from one impulse to another. And looking back I am proud of the variety of my myths and styles. I see how I used to project my imagination and how much freedom I allowed myself. I now have a large resource from
which to make selections. And that is a great pleasure like going to Bloomingdales and having all the money I need to spend on what I want.

I have trouble with a question that asks me how I adjust to changing stylistic and ideological concerns in the world. I see myself free in the studio inventing ways to bring out of the hidden crevices of my heart that which is stubborn and which asks for more and more strength and discipline for the extraction. If I make shifts I do not see myself following trends—I see yet another aspect of myself which needs definition. Yes, my current work reflects ongoing aspects of the expression of a woman who meditates on all her original work and like the movie *Rashomon* tries to give another picture of what happened in her art in the first place.

Carolee Schneemann

I WORK TO

put a crimp in the fabric
a break in the thread
to put a stick in the spokes
a brake on the wheel
sand in the gears
a finger in the dike
a shot in the dark
a cry in the wilderness
a light in the tunnel
sugar in the gas tank
oil on the waters
poison in the well
for a twist of fate
for pearls before swine
a needle in the haystack
a drop in the ocean
a coin in the desert
a pig in a poke
to find a snowflake in hell
a flash in the pan
a crack in the shell
a kiss in the dark
a howl to the wind
to see blood on the moon
ears on the hand
a pebble in the bucket
a black cat in the night
to fan the flames
a notch in the belt
to dance with the dead

Richard Tuttle

Sitting, overlooking Santa Fe there are no leaves on the trees—but there will be soon! Only dark pines “individuals.” Planted by humans, they stop just at the valley floor—give energy to the mountain above. It looks like Europe...Tuscan! What is the base of this mountain? An idea which, if removed, unifies makes everything look “American.”

Last night I read a story by Mohammed Mrabet about a man who lived an idyllic life, farming, smoking kif, and watching his slugs by the hour. Some French soldiers broke into his isolated world, and he died. This morning it reminded me of seeing a perfectly contented cat one minute, being pounced on by a vicious dog the next.

The space between the two stories reminded me of the space between me and the mountain, reversed it, and brought it back toward me. This was artist-time.

Crossing the driveway yesterday in my imagination, there was a light which went into the gravel. Today, really crossing the driveway, there was a light which did not. Remembering yesterday, I come toward today. And as I do there is a ghost of yesterday made of gravel that crosses, and as he does I see his feet don’t touch the real gravel, and the light that enters here where the feet don’t touch and the feet should be, is artist-time.

David von Schlegell

In much of the given world there is an early morning freshness which is forever getting lost. Art, which is all about attention, astonishment, and an alive consciousness, should oppose this erosion.

For me, the lost paradise of myth, or golden age, is simply a surviving intuition of a deep past when attention was supreme.

I have been making art for over forty years. My evolution has been like that of the world, with its seeming illogic and its strange driving force. As gravity begins to dominate, lightness becomes crucial.

I have been sustained by art, have tried to learn from mistakes (mine and others’), and now move toward simplification of thought and feeling—toward clarity, economy, and silence.

Lawrence Weiner

I PRACTICE EVERY DAY

(AFTER THE FIRST SOLO PRESENTATION OF WORK: 1960, HAVE BEEN PRACTICING IN PUBLIC)

ONE THING SEEMS TO LEAD TO ANOTHER
Faith Wilding

I'm writing this in Vermont just before my 48th birthday. I'm blissfully alone in a new studio mostly built by family members, my husband, and myself. Since 1973, I've thought of myself as a practicing artist. But it all began long before that. What was I painting today, for example? — a diaphanous dress shrouding a thick, brownish-pink pupa/bud/sprout/worm. What was I scratching into the hard red clay floor of my bedroom during the midday siesta when I was 8? — a diaphanous dress (which I imagined to be apple-green) to shroud my thick brownish pink girl-child body.

The pupa/cocoon/mummy/worm/sprout form has appeared and reappeared in my work since childhood. It is a "generative" image for me — an image which never can be exhausted, and to which I return time and again to mine another nugget of meaning. And I still scratch my drawings into the paper with tiny pen-nibs or sharp pencils. The compulsion with which this image recurs convinces me that I'm somehow on the right track for what I am searching for.

It is often hard — even impossible — for me to work concentratedly when I am in New York because I'm working at teaching and other things to earn a living. There are long silences in my work — in Tillie Olsen's sense. But still the work seems to continue relentlessly inside me, a process much like that which I imagine to be going on in the pupa preparing for the great metamorphosis. I'll wake up of a morning compelled to go to the studio and work on an image which has wormed its way to the surface. Because of this I experience my art as a continuous process even when there are fairly radical changes in style or technique. I'm always tailoring away in preparation for the great metamorphosis, and everything I read, see, experience becomes a secret feeding of the great brown-pink worm.

Now that I'm approaching fifty, there's a great urgency to work — I'll do almost anything to make time. And there's a great conviction that this work is my center — that from this I go out into the world and have my being. The great German artist Kathe Kollwitz said: "Ich will wiken in meiner Zeit." Hard to translate this pun, but it means both "I want to be effective in my time" and "I want to be actively engaged in my time." So do I. The kind of art I seem to need to make was encouraged by the re-generation of feminism in the late 60s and by the feminist art movement of which I was an early founder/participant. Feminism gave me the permission to explore such themes as female subjectivity, the body, sexuality, desire, and anger. And it also gave me the belief that my experience as a thinking person in the world was important; that I could have deep thoughts about the "big" subjects, heretofore (and according to most art history texts STILL) tackled only by the big boys, i.e. the nature of life and death, nature vs. culture, language, politics, belief, myth etc. I never think of myself as limited because being representative of a certain generation or art "movement." On the contrary. And I hate to be classified — as essentialist — as "just a feminist" etc., etc. As an artist, I experience the unfolding of my work — and the unfolding of myself — from the inside out, and each change makes sense to me in terms of my engagement with the world. This sense of the unfolding has come slowly, and has been bitterly struggled for. But now I see that this is what has kept me going and has sustained me all these years. Ich will wiken in meiner Zeit. I want to be engaged with the world through my work.

Alison Knowles: An Interview

Aviva Rahmani

Alison Knowles was the only woman member in the original Fluxus group. Fluxus coalesced, in 1962, with a concert at the Wiesbaden Kunstverein in Germany. It was a group of disparate artists, including Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and George Brecht, many of whom had studied with John Cage at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1960. It has continued as a magnet for younger artists particularly in Europe. Knowles has taken her work regularly to Europe since 1962. Knowles and some of the Fluxus artists taught at CalArts in the 1960s, when John Baldessari, Judy Chicago, and Allan Kaprow were also there. Aviva Rahmani was Knowles' student at CalArts. This interview took place in New York City in the winter of 1991.

Aviva Rahmani: We live in a world of chance and the collective unconscious. That's the essential connection I associate with Fluxus. Can you define activism or truth in your own work?

Alison Knowles: Making an artwork is an action with its own politics. An artwork has its context. It succeeds or not. By that I mean it communicates from the artist to a world outside and vice versa. Communication, truth, and action are always bouncing off each other! I came to CalArts in 1970. I came from my first performing experiences and was invited for the first time to teach. As a performer, your availability is limited. As a teacher I felt I had to be available without any limits, my thoughts, my time were always shared. I found many unexpected conjunctions: art as a vehicle of truth and the problems of marketing, design, and professionalism all in one basket. There's nothing inherently evil about marketing; however it's best treated as a kind of game.

AR: Assume you're talking about conflicts around careerism, as opposed to a deeper aesthetic drive.

AK: Yes. Careerism. Art is a calling based on need. It's based on what people need and on knowing. It may be a problem that people go to school to discover that and make art; but then we have to be somewhere to make connections. Art schools provide these resources. At that time, and since, you have made an autobiographical frame and I a local one. Local but not autobiographical. We each notice things so differently, as we examine and touch materials. We each have such different distances from the body, the object and the self. Is it a problem that people go to school to learn to make art? We have to be somewhere. My context is local to my immediate environment, but not autobiographical per se. We look at materials as we walk along the streets, eat our food, look into the woods.

AR: Do you mean local in terms of wherever your body is?

AK: Yes. A bean ritual called Setsubun crossed my path in 1990 and took me and
Yasuano Tone to Japan. Once there I framed the time and art into a soundtape for radio and a live performance. Wherever we go we drop a frame around our experience. At a street market in Kyoto I found very unusual bean specimens. The frame was the same as it would have been at home but all the accoutrements of the experience of that transaction were very beautifully different to me. The weighing device was a small square wooden vessel, handmade. The coins exchanged and the language spoken were exotic to me. I was living in a paper factory then. It greatly amused the women there to see me take those beans back home and eat them all up. That maintained my frame!

The best I can do for the ills of the world is to maintain a tight battle with the art. I confess to being totally disengaged from the war in the Persian Gulf. There isn’t any way for me to enter that frame.

AR: Can you talk more about this concept of a calling?

AK: I haven’t understood how to have a career in art. I arrive by a leap of faith. Art is a language spoken were exotic to me. I was living in a paper factory then.

AK: And it gave me access to feminism for the first time. I hadn’t had access to women of that stature. All the artists I had worked with were men. This access to feminism was central to these events. It was especially central to the origins of the Fluxus group, which blossomed in Germany in 1962. George Brecht has a book coming out soon with Gebruder Koenig Verlag in Germany based exclusively on his notes from the John Cage class. In all these works chance was used systematically, starting with Notations. This was at a time when everyone was using the word improvisation.

AR: That juxtaposition of chance and system encapsulates the Art/Life concept which drew me to CalArts in 1971. So many of you teaching and working there then had initiated that development in the late 50s and 60s. At that time Allan Kaprow was doing the same thing! It was new and exciting to work visually along with others. I tend to work a long time on things and rarely get them finished up until an outside demand forces me to wrap it up. Artmaking is the hardest work I can imagine and only from time to time does something get completed. At CalArts I saw people working all sorts of ways and with each other and getting work finished quickly. It was an eye opener.

AR: CalArts then was total heaven for an artist: all the equipment in the world, all the ideas and possibilities in the world, all the people and lots of money to keep it going! A wonderland!

AK: And it gave me access to feminism for the first time. I hadn’t had access to women of that stature. All the artists I had worked with were men. This access began at CalArts for me and then I refound it in Hamburg and Amsterdam. I found women working everywhere. It forced me to take a harder look at myself and what my own history had been. I had to make a new balance in my territory of making art between the feminist art at CalArts that offended me with an aggressive edge that doesn’t suit me and a more Taoist view of life.

AR: While I was at CalArts, it always struck me as ironic that I argued with Judy Chicago about the feminism of your work. Chicago felt then that no woman could tap into her full artistic power without tapping into her personal anger at sexism. You were the most supportive of all my mentors there in my research into personal and ephemeral material. The question of anger became a turning point for many women artists.

AK: If one works from a personal anger as the subject matter of the art, it’s rare that it becomes excellent. There has to be something over that or with that or any emotion, whether it is anger or fear, or love. All these are primary driving forces into another place, which is where the art comes from. Everyone is free to play an instrument, but do we want them in the orchestra? Ezra Pound said words to that effect.

We work together as one orchestra and we sometimes look out at another orchestra. People are drawn to different orchestras, different artworks. No one should push us to one place or another. I’m against activism as a united front in any context. I think there will be terrible consequences, for example, from our meddling in the Persian Gulf. My work looks in another direction completely.

AR: You’ve spoken generally about what impels artmaking. Can you talk about what happened around the time you became connected to other Fluxus people. What was your personal catalyst?

AK: I use chance to begin anything, even if it’s just folding a cloth to get some creases to know where to start. At the moment, I am printing and reprinting the cloth again and again, each time washing and obliterating the image that I’ve made. Only fragments remain. That way I always surprise myself. The Fluxus movement was very indebted to John Cage. He has a way of throwing things out and away from himself. He avoids his influences. He doesn’t get heavier with his life, but lighter all the time. Fluxus is a first come, first served kind of art; a collision of circumstances and people. I had a chance to do a book and screen prints with George Brecht in the late 60s and early 70s. Notations was the first of three books I worked on with John Cage starting in 1967. Notations was published with Dick Higgins at Something Else Press. Within that same time frame of five to six years, I had babies and I became a performance artist. The Cage class at the New School was central to these events. It was especially central to the origins of the Fluxus group, which blossomed in Germany in 1962. George Brecht has a book coming out soon with Gebruder Koenig Verlag in Germany based exclusively on his notes from the John Cage class. In all these works chance was used systematically, starting with Notations. This was at a time when everyone was using the word improvisation.

AR: That juxtaposition of chance and system encapsulates the Art/Life concept which drew me to CalArts in 1971. So many of you teaching and working there then had initiated that development in the late 50s and 60s. At that time Allan Kaprow was approaching the same problem a little differently. He has described his relationship to controlling that balance as both more formal and rougher in its parameters of place or time. “The acceptance of Chance is the source of how control slips away from the artist and then life creeps in.” How was your early work related to what Allan Kaprow was doing then?

AK: My acquaintanceship with Fluxus started me writing events. Allan was doing Happenings, which are completely different from Events. I participated in a number of them in America. But I met Allan after Brecht and Dick Higgins and Cage. We became friends and I visited with him and Vaughn Rachel out in New Jersey. He was out in New Jersey doing these strange things! Events reflect back in with a quality of localness and Happenings reflect outwards with a large panoramic frame. I remember Allan’s wonderful performance, wrapping people in silver paper in Grand Central Station. There was no attempt to make any frame. The frame is a physical context. People are contained by simple elements. Let’s say, in my event, “Make a salad,” they are contained within that. Nothing else is going on, overtly.

AR: It’s irresistible to muse on how two of your better known students at CalArts,
respective, Suzanne Lacy as Allan's student and Barbara Bloom as yours, have
taken those structural approaches in very different directions.

AK: My favorite of Allan's works was his apple shrine at the Ruben Gallery. My
most vivid memory of that work was finding myself in a small installation space
with no one around, so I could enjoy it intimately. That was about 1960 or 1961.
Kaprow was in that Cage class where Fluxus blossomed but he escaped and contin-
ued with his own directions. I wasn't in the class, my connection was through Dick
Higgins but the mechanisms of structure discussed in that class helped me escape
the ravenous jaws of Abstract Expressionism. I had graduated from Pratt as a
painter and already had my first solo show. The immediacy of these new ideas con-
çvinced me to stop painting in the New York style of abstraction. I burned 30 paint-
ings out at my father's house in East Hampton. I met Dick Higgins at a party and
then met the other Fluxus people once at a time. We all lived or congregated around
Canal Street in George Maciunas' loft. In my loft on Canal and Broadway, I took a
piece of cloth and I folded it and I put numbers in the seven areas. Dick was on the
phone telling me the probabilities available, given my local visual vocabulary at the
time. I made hard divisions on this canvas that I could not overstep. If I threw a
two, the area must be blue. I was then 25, it was 1968. In 1966, I made a scroll call-
ed, "do you remember," based on a poem by Emmett Williams. We performed this
on one of our evenings on Canal Street. I physically stepped on the canvas, spraying
around my naked foot. . . .

AR: That must have been an incredibly dramatic leap, from Abstract Expresssionist
painting to stepping onto the canvas as a proscenium.

AK: This was the first performance in which I showed an exact structure, putting
certain small objects I had assembled on the floor beside me, into the scroll as im-
ages. I allowed myself to use a range of objects, such as shoe heels and can tops, but
they had to go into prescribed places, dictated by the poem. This was my digestion
of John's infamous class.

AR: I want to come back to activist art and your work. Horrible things are hap-
pening in the world. Sense would call your approach frivolous. This lightheartedness
seems very Fluxus to me. How does this simplicity tap into something deeper?
When we follow the thread of the unconscious, I believe we come to the notion of
group politics in the most fundamental sense.

AK: Because these event pieces are so simple the audience projects their own politi-
cal or artistic frame. Each person must flesh it out. At a recent S.E.M. ensemble
concert in Brooklyn, I performed a piece by George Brecht, an example of this. I
taped two beans to the keys of a piano. There was no sound at all. I did not try to
make a sound. All that was audible was the scotch tape being torn over the toothed
dispenser of the scotch dispenser. These pieces are not in the least frivolous. They are simple
and performed in a straightforward vintage no-dramatics style. If they are profound
it depends on the perceiver. In the most fundamental sense, you've never heard a
Phrase piece that sounded like anyone else's work. A personal and lyric style comes
across. The spoken texts I am working on, the fish diaries of Barton Apple Bean,
or the West German radio texts, are organized, compiled researches, that give me a

chance to read. They are found texts that become sound works. If we get to the
right attitude, work just rolls along and we can't get enough of it.

AR: I can identify with that more than you might think. After all, I've committed
myself to nine years on a remote island to study invisible Ghost Nets in the sea for
the "Ghost Nets" project. I think we're talking about a way of thinking very close
to the Native American; that the earth ultimately responds more intensely to the
private rituals of a few dedicated people than to all the machinations in all the
world's capitols.

AK: I'm perfectly appalled by what's happening in the world. It's another or-
chestra. Is victory possible in any war? I have been working on a series of cloths
about the moons of the American Indian, studying their dependence on nature,
their love of the other animals on earth, their respect for all life. We realize too late
our loss of connection to the earth.

AR: Rachel Rosenthal talks of that a great deal in her work. I find it tremendously
confirmative that many of us are working in these different ways to address similar
concerns. To stand outside a dysfunctional system is certainly political and activist
in ways that a march may not be.

AK: I marched once against the Vietnam War up Fifth Avenue playing bells with
Philip Corner. We performed well and no one noticed. That was the best part.

AR: Have you done anything else that overtly political in recent years?

AK: I was asked to put my name on a Guerrilla Girl poster ("Guerrilla Girls Identi-
ties Exposed," 1989) and I did. I'm also a member of NOW. With my strong an-
archist tendencies it's quite amazing. Let the rain fall down, the breeze come up. We
miss most of what's really going on, projecting our silly selves all over everything.

AR: I think that when you were in California, because of the Pacific Rim, people
might have been more receptive than here in the East to the Haiku style of your
work. Do you have anything coming up soon?

AK: I have a chance to publish my spoken texts, so I'm working on that; in May
I'm off traveling for a residency in Banff, Alberta in Canada. I'll think of you net-
ting ghosts. I'm sure they'll come when you call.

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WHOSE AGENDA? FALSE DICHOTOMIES ON AN UNEVEN GROUND

MAY STEVENS

In giving my essay* this title, I am using these phrases to refer to recent cultural theories which have said, variously: you can’t make art anymore (after the Holocaust you can’t make art; you can’t represent the human figure in art anymore (since the advent of the camera, which does it better); you can’t represent woman’s body anymore (since it is colonized territory; you can’t paint (since John Berger declared painting to be incurably bourgeois); and, for a woman artist, things are really rough since, in post-structuralist theory, neither woman nor artist exists. We have only the audience — and the writing theorist. Now, this is not my agenda. Des- emerson says (imagine quoting Emerson when there’s Barthes, Wittgenstein, and Derrida to call on):

For as you cannot jump from the ground without using the resistance of the ground, nor put the boat out to sea, without shoving from the shore, nor obtain liberty without rejecting obligation, so you are under the necessity of using the actual order of things, in order to discourse it, to live by it, whilst you wish to take away its life.

But I think the solution of the resulting conflict, difficult perhaps to actualize but nonetheless necessary and obvious, is to understand the confronting sides as an accumulation of alternatives. As Catherine Stimpson said recently about the great battle between those who want to bring Third World ideas and culture into the aca-
demy and those who want to protect and maintain the monuments of Western culture: What’s the fuss? Why do we have to think in terms of replacing one with the other? Why can’t we have them both? Why can’t we have them both? They need each other. Like artist and audience. I may not be able to control the audience response to my work (certainly I cannot and would not want to), but I am an audience, not only for my own work but for a great deal of art and ideas afoot today. My work goes out to those who will look and its very life depends on my ability to make it speak to those who look. And the delicate, excruciating part is that I must reach them, touch them, mean something to them (to you), without ever kowtowing, without lying, without being deflected a hair’s width from what I believe, in order to wow you.

*This piece was presented as a talk at Hampshire College on February 27, 1991, in conjunction with an exhibition of paintings by May Stevens at the Herter Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Art that starts from loss and restitution must make a third thing, a new thing. It must be an art act, an act of art, which creates something that never existed before. It in no way compensates for the loss, replaces what is missing, or restores the way it was — which can never be done. Because time has happened. Everything has changed. The loss is permanent, can never be restored. A patch will not mend it. The gap, the hole, has gone away like water.

But the art act takes the loss and the restitution (the attention, the concern, the ache) and goes to a new place with them, making a new thing untranslatable in terms of either. It is no longer about loss or restitution but exists separately, on its own, as art.

Poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña says: A metaphor is a three-dimensional form given to a thought or a feeling. It makes it exist in space and in time.

Susan Sontag has written about memory saying the future we know nothing about, we can only speculate; the present is a thin edge slipping away from us, every moment turning into the past which is all we have. We are made of memory. How to be faithful and critical at the same time, that’s the dichotomy I’m trying to bring into balance.

The earliest feminist precept — “The personal is the political” — is a state-
ment with which I still agree; it is indeed an empowering understanding. But, of course, there is much more to be said — and done. The political connection to the personal has to be drawn and worked at. Pain is not enough. The telling of one’s own story has to be by oneself or someone else who can speak for it, to it, contextualized and made clear in the resonance of its usefulness.

Using my own work, the work I know best, as an example, I want to point to the problem autobiographically-based work must contend with. It is not so much neutralizing; what’s required is a vividness and truthfulness that compels recogni-
tion.

If my work remains for the viewer a piece of history about a mythical figure of “The Revolution,” Rosa Luxemburg; if it remains a touching representation of the lost life of Alice Stevens, and a daughter’s anguish, then it remains on the level of anecdote and a cozy comforting of myself and other women, victims of the jugger-
naut of history, progress, and patriarchal oppression.

For this kind of work to do its work it has to speak beyond that — to a level where any embarrassment the artist might feel at personal revelation of personal tragedy; any embarrassment the viewer might feel at witnessing such revelation, are burned away in the purity and power of the art. Anger and pain are to be dis-
solved in a passion of making the art just right. The artist’s passion is only the en-
gine, not the end product. What must be given is another thing, something for which there is no name, but something I think we can all recognize.

The work needs to be understood and described in this way and at this level. I want it to speak to the uneasy, frightening, unsolid, awful, extreme places we can go to, the furthest ones, but to speak of more than self, to go beyond ego and speak in a voice that is, quoting Jorie Graham, “both personal and communal, both pri-
vate and historical.” It’s like opening the pores to art, allowing oneself, as Louise Bourgeois says, to “regress” to a more primal level of fear and delight.
ART AND DISCONTENT: THEORY AT THE MILLENNIUM
by Thomas McEvilley

For those readers familiar with Thomas McEvilley's writings over the past decade, most evident in the pages of Artforum, this recent collection comes as no surprise. It comes as no surprise in the sense that McEvilley's style and/or manner of presentation is consistently written according to his own voice, his own speculations, and his own lateral set of ancient historical and multicultural references that he weaves ebulliently throughout this text. Most of the six selected essays in Art and Discontent did, in fact, make their initial appearance in Artforum, while the other two, more recent texts, appeared as catalogue entries in Europe. What seems significant about the book as a linear compendium of six essays, in contrast to reading them separately and at intervals, is how they function thematically both in terms of the title (which is elusive) and the subtitle (which is more direct). At first glance, one might think of the title as a play on Freud's summation, Civilization and Its Discontents; but Freud rarely enters McEvilley's discourse except for one passing reference in "I Am' Is a Vain Thought." One might go as far as to assume that the author's primary basis for postmodernism has less to do with psychoanalysis or linguistics, and much more to do with philosophy and history. From an American standpoint this is immensely refreshing in that it allows a firsthand voice to enunciate differences as opposed to a voice filled with quiet desperation seeking to verify the canon of French, British, and Germanic approaches to deconstruction. McEvilley is less obsessed with getting the theories of others' right and more concerned with getting himself right. Sometimes he succeeds better than others. The essays are not all of the same quality, but generally the voice is clear and the structure of ideas emerges succinctly and often quite persuasively. It is clear that the editing of this book was painstakingly considered and packaged by some feat of semiotic surgery. The connections between the essays were brilliantly conceived, thus giving continuity to McEvilley's content where it might have otherwise appeared much less incisive.

I recently made a comment to an academic colleague that one of the major problems in reading Anglo-Poststructuralism is that it felt dead in the water; in other words, its political correctness tended to be far too labored as a result of implicit puritanical guilt. With McEvilley the text appears more naked and more open in its propositional attitude; the flow of the language seems assured and less dependent on trying to verify itself through external references. This is not to say that these references are absent. For example, in the second essay, "Heads It's Form, Tails It's Not Content," there are eighty-five footnotes, most of which are scattered quotations from vastly diverse sources, ranging from social science to poetry. While in some academic circles, this might seem too serendipitous, it functions well for McEvilley's style. He plays off and responds to the ideas of others in the manner of collage as a lateral progression of sequential metaphors.

For example, in the essay mentioned above, the author precedes one section of his own interpretive writing with a quote from Nicholas Calas and another from the aesthetein Joseph Margolis. He then follows his extended paragraph with another quote from Derrida. McEvilley is interested in the problem of a waning formalism in relation to the contextualization of meaning, suggesting that "an artwork...radiates meaning on many levels." What McEvilley hopes to reveal in his discussion is that the apparent emptiness of formalism is not so empty when seen within the context of multicultural interpretations, and that form is not merely about a perceptual act or even strictly adherent to the artist's intentions, but that form has an extended meaning that opens itself to the critic's response. McEvilley is interested in the relationship between the artwork and its critical response:

So it seems that criticism, quite like art, expresses a Weltanschauung inescapably. It is not a meta-game above art, but just another game on the same level, with similar motives and satisfactions. Like art, it operates on a constantly shifting foundation, peaking in flashes of special insight. McEvilley's arguments against pure formalism are curious in that they appear to represent the position of advanced criticism in the United States at the end of the 70s; that is, at the end of the so-called pluralistic decade, the decade in which the Greenbergian hierarchy regarding a strong visual and lyrical determination of the formalist position was under siege. At the end of the 70s, postmodernism began to usurp modernism. In that formalism was at the core of Greenbergian high modernism, no one — including McEvilley — considered that the operation of formalism might shift into another guise; that is, formalism might also exist within certain aspects of postmodernism. What McEvilley does acknowledge, however, is the issue of content as a consequence of contextualizing meaning in relation to the artwork, even if the work was produced using the best of formalist intentions. In the third essay, attributed in a somewhat inspired way to the poetry of Wallace Stevens, entitled "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," McEvilley continues to develop his thesis that, in coming to terms with the problem of content in art. In essence, McEvilley is against the idea of content as a form of closure in art. In his final essay, he picks up this idea and states that the place or situation offers the significant point of reference in representing the trajectory of specific meaning in relation to the global arena. But before he gets to this point, McEvilley is arguing against the duality of form and content as an historical process in interpreting meaning. He is particularly emphatic in his support of what he calls "quotational painting" (what others called appropriation art) in that it foregrounds the issue of content as opposed to checking it in relation to formal procedure. He refers to the old idea of dualism as promulgating essence or Soulism.
It would make sense that in the fourth essay McEvilley would then try and give us a postmodern alternative to Soulism, namely through Barché's concept of the death of the author, where language speaks through the subject rather than the subject being the controlling force in determining its outflow. He struggles with the problem of metaphysics, which — in my opinion — McEvilley is not entirely satisfied to leave behind. The essay ends with a rather problematic descriptive categorization of the two modes of self — the modern and postmodern — but holds out that "the self of the future stirs to be born." I get the sense that McEvilley is opting for a new metaphysics in which content rises above the banality of empty elitism.

— Robert C. Morgan

MARY FRANK
by Hayden Herrera
Harry N. Abrams, 1990, New York, $49.50

What interests me about the art of Mary Frank is its depth of intuitive response to nature and to the body as having a subjective connection that is at once fully perceptive and cognitively indelible. Frank is a symbolist artist of the first order, and it would seem that this compendium on her work has been long overdue. The question is why is it so long overdue? One cannot be naive about the logistics and pragmatics in getting a book like this into print, and one cannot help but commend the editors at Abrams for seeing it through. But why has Frank's work been overlooked by the critical establishment for so many years?

Although Hayden Herrera's text is superb in its narrative sharpness and in its ability to evoke feelings in portraying Frank's life and art, the major fault with the monograph is that it does not provide an adequate art world context by which to determine the artist's success and her shameful neglect. Herrera, the author of the much celebrated biography of Frida Kahlo, is so entirely focused on the inner world of Frank's artistic evolution and her unquestionable brilliance that she scarcely acknowledges the problem of critical reception. There are some references by Hilton Kramer to Frank's work, but these occur primarily in formalist terms. Kramer cites the formal aspect of Frank's drawing ability, but tells us nothing about the vital message being signified.

Many of the artists and artist-teachers associated with the artist in her formative career are mentioned, including Max Beckmann and Hans Hofmann, and later, such artists as Paul Harris and Jan Muller, but there were also lesser known figures, such as the painter Emily Mason, who inspired Frank, and Herrera does well to reveal these influences. There are some passages that are quite funny. For example, Frank is quoted in her description of Hofmann's drawing classes:

He would put his lines on, and make the model's head very small. He loved a certain model whose body was large and whose head was small. "Ach, she is so beautiful with her wonderful pin head," he would say.

Those were his favorite proportions, his ideal woman.

Herrera points out that Frank often had a difficult time striving to define her position as a serious artist in the early 1950s when few women artists were being included in the rising canon of Abstract Expressionism. When Mary became involved with and finally married the photographer Robert Frank, her life was made more complex. This complexity became all the more pronounced when she gave birth to her two children, Pablo and Andrea. Her desire to work and be taken seriously never faltered, even under the most stressful living conditions. The book subtly reveals Frank's exceptional character in her ability to adapt to the most trying adverse circumstances, including the tragic premature death of one child and the chronic illness of another. Herrera, in her gifted narrative style, makes us consider that the way to become an artist is not simply a matter of attending the right schools and the right openings to become recognized. Indeed, for Frank it has been a supreme struggle to live in order to work, and to work in order to live positively in such a way that one's work utterly represents the spirit of rejuvenation.

For Frank, to find her place as an artist, it has taken considerable forbearance. There is no easy access or trendiness in coming to terms with such a career. Herrera traces the artist's development from her early years as a sculptor through her involvement with clay, ink drawings, monoprints, shadow drawings, and her uncanny images involving mixed media, such as The Grammar of Regret (1982) and her stupendous paper-mache works, including Chimera (1984-86) and the recent Trajectories (1986-89). Her works in both two- and three-dimensions are filled with references to ancient mythology, primeval remnants, ritualized evocations, feminist representations, ecological issues, and intense psychological dramas. Ironically, Frank's imagery has all the vestiges of political correctness, yet it is not fashionable or trendy. If anything, Frank's work has always meandered on the outskirts of the establishment. This is not to say that she is without a following, because she has a substantial and loyal following of viewers and collectors that seem to respond honestly to what Frank is trying to do. But beyond the politically correct signs in her work, Frank is a highly intuitive artist — a romantic, perhaps more than a modernist. If she is a modernist, then she would have to be considered an expressionist, and that type of categorization would limit the message and the intensity of her original statements as an artist.

What seems apparent is that Frank's place in the current art scene will probably expand in the next few years as the issues in her work become all the more relevant to us. As an artist coming out of the repressive 50s, it has been more difficult for her than other artists who maintained a formalist posture and alleviated the burden of significant content from their work. It would seem that Mary Frank's significant content is what the world needs, what the art world needs, for sure.

— Robert C. Morgan
tive moving eye, to consider the field of vision rather than a fixed point of view.” She also writes on her belief in the priority of painting over subject matter: “The implicitness, or the possibilities of abstraction in still life, lies in the following ambivalence: Cherries are cherries and they are also round and red. If the painter loves them for their cherry-ness, you get one kind of still life painting. If the painter loves them for their roundness and redness, you get another kind of still life painting.” On light: “I am trying to make the yellow shape of the pear feel as real as the pear itself,” which is precisely the secret for getting those real toads of Marianne Moore into that imaginary garden. Shorr concretizes her aesthetic philosophy at every turn; no abstract proposition stands alone without a particular example. In this, as in its graceful directness, her writing is consonant with her painting practice.

Narratives about work on individual paintings involve such specific decisions as how to deal with fugitive light on her objects and also recount more intuitive occurrences in the work process, as when she discovers that painted shadows of leaves in a work correspond to her feelings about the nearby lake’s surface. The second section, “Style and Subject,” tells us more about the role of such correspondences in her imagery, especially in the often unpremeditated interplay of depicted forms on printed fabrics or painted china and the objects in “real” space that she herself is depicting. This section also provides a succinct account of her artistic development.

The third section, “Meaning and Metaphor,” begins, “The look of the painting is the meaning.” Stated differently in a journal entry: “‘Pure’ painting is about appearances: how a rose appears or how red appears. ‘Impure’ painting is about stories and ideas. Most people prefer impure painting to pure painting and think it has more meaning.” Having established her allegiance to purity (another credo of classical modernism), Shorr does allow that some paintings begin with the choice of deliberately contrived metaphors (for example, a ceramic swan-shaped bowl placed on a water-like mirror) and that she will on occasion choose objects or colors as objective correlates for feelings that precede the painting. But it is clear even here that the crux of the work lies in the perceptual experience it affords, that is, “the look of the painting.”

How, then, does all this square with the attitudes and theories that dominate current art discourse? Although I know Shorr to be a thoroughly political person, passionately liberal (however that word has been mauled by the right and the left) and feminist, it would not occur to her to use her art as a vehicle of social discontent (though many have argued, art is political, then we may fairly ask, what are the political implications of her paintings? One might see in their love of sheer beauty, their groundlessness in feeling, the restrained sensuality of their performance, and their very eschewal of polemical claims to intellectual “importance” a plausible feminist ideal, especially as these paintings are also tough minded and independent of fashion. Such a stance is not that of the currently dominant gender-constructionist but might be sympathetic to many of those feminists, especially of Shorr’s generation, whose impact was decisive during the late 60s and early 70s. (An irony of theoretically ambitious feminism since then has been its exclusion of much art by women from serious consideration.) Shorr is, then, another in a long list of women artists whose work belies the myth of modernism as a patriarchal enterprise. Quite apart from the visual pleasures to be found in its pages, her lucid discussion of painting values at a time when so few critics seem entirely sentient makes The Artist’s Eye an especially valuable book. — Robert Berlind
Bois illuminates the sense of immediate and total space Newman sought to create when he states that “like all previous paintings by Newman, Onement I is concerned with the myth of origin, but for the first time this myth is told in the present tense.”

In Bois’ “Introduction: Resisting Blackmail,” he admits that “any critical discourse is programmatic in part,” and expresses the wish to “resist” the pressures which are brought to bear on contemporary art historians — to be theoretical, or to be anti-theoretical; “the dogmatism of the chic” (theory fads); “anformalism”; “asymbolia”. However Painting as Model’s own ideological program affects its usefulness to a consideration of the future of visual pleasure in painting: Bois is relentlessly anti-space, anti-figure/ground. Bois has been one of the few postmodern critics to give painting any allowances, chiefly by promoting Hubert Damisch’s theory of the “generic game” (painting) vs. the “specific performance” or “match”, in both the essay “Painting as Mourning” in this collection, and in the eponymous concluding essay “Painting as Model.” Through this strategic slight of hand, “One can conclude that, if the match ‘modernist painting’ is finished, it does not necessarily mean that the game ‘painting’ is finished.”

Despite this allowance, I gradually felt compressed into the approximately 1/8th of an inch maximum depth possible for painting within Bois’ formulation. Painting must always be returned to the question of flatness, to “real depth (thickness)” as opposed to “fictive depth (optical)”. Throughout Painting as Model pictorial space of any kind comes under severe censure. Mondrian is said to have “finally conquered the menace of an illusionistic hollowing out of the surface” (my emphasis) in New York City, 1942, his painting of “braided” strips of yellow, red, and blue on a white (forgive me) ground. I’ve never been a fan of perspectival space — Dürer’s over-reproduced woodcut of an artist putting a grid over a woman’s vagina points to perspectival space’s role of drawing a straight line back to the womb and drawing an organizing grid over the chaos of a feminized nature — but reading Bois, perspectival space begins to seem the most repressed element in twentieth-century painting.

This repression of the space created by figure/ground is relevant to the question of visual pleasure because Bois and the artists he discusses locate visual pleasure in painting: Bois is.

This summer I had planned to sit on my tuffet like Little Miss Muffet and try to conclusively (!) theorize the state of visual pleasure in painting today. Needless to say along came the spider, or in my case the laughing gulls of Provincetown and my resolve for this impossible task vaporized in the first whiff of salt-infused air. I was left with the books I had accumulated to help me write either by posing corroboration, legitimation, or resistance to my ideas.

In the general population visual literacy is centered on media images, rather than on paintings. Recent critiques of images, including those deployed in painting, have concentrated on socio-political readings whose purpose is to illuminate the production of ideology within these images. For example, visual pleasure has been noted as an agent of male eroticism and fetishism, as power is circulated through the male gaze. In this critical economy, visual pleasure is a lost art.

Thus, the extremely close descriptions of painting found in Yve-Alain Bois’ Painting as Model offer refreshing possibilities for visual investigation. In essays on Matissse, Mondrian, Strzemeniski, Newman, and Ryman, Bois engages in deeply detailed, almost scientific or technological descriptions of individual works. The degree of attention is exhilarating, however, it can also induce a hypnotic state of excruciating fatigue, which nevertheless offers much reward if one can stick with it.

Bois’ essay on Barnett Newman and his comparative descriptions of Onement I and companion works is perhaps the most illuminating writing of this anthology. By following Bois’ comparison of Onement I, painted in 1948, with somewhat earlier works such as Moment from 1946, the reader participates in the “dividing line” in Newman’s career which Onement I represents. Both paintings are vertically oriented, of nearly identical dimensions, and represent a field bisected by a vertical line. But whereas “in Moment we are confronted with a differentiated field that functions as an indeterminate background and is pushed back in space by the band — the band functions as a repoussoir”, so that what the artist had produced was “an image, something that was not congruent with but applied to its field,” in Onement I the meaning of the central “zip” “lies entirely in its co-existence with the field to which it refers and which it measures and declares for the beholder.”
of being included in the work of art: of art ...

indeed, visual pleasure rears its head in the catalogue, as it does in the work itself: despite Reinhardt’s effort to eliminate any illusion of figure/ground by using the most matte paint surface possible, the paintings do provide visual pleasure. In fact they make clear the distinction between “Beauty” and visual pleasure since many are hardly “easy on the eyes.” Color in the late works is often not visible, although the reproductions in the catalogue capture distinctions in hue and value which the human eye cannot. Despite Reinhardt’s wish to de-emphasise the materiality of paint, the paintings exude an aura not just of color, but of pigment. The pigment seems imbued in the cloth, though much deeper and more profound than a stain.

Bois’ essay is bracketed or framed by two images of the act of painting. In the first photograph, Reinhardt’s hand holds a brush placing gleaming paint on a matte surface, in the second the artist leans over a painting in a light-flooded studio. Those rigorously uncompromising (and almost ostentatiously) mystical paintings which seek to operate in that 1/8th of an inch and at a religious level, perhaps (or not), were painted by a person painting. It is a thrill to be reminded of this simple fact.

One wishes for an essay which would consider what Reinhardt felt that painting could not contain (and what the exhibit and the catalogue force to the margins): the acerbic critique of the art world seen in his collages and the passion Reinhardt expressed for a concern with our relationship to the absolute: “Modern painting is characterized by . . . a concern with . . . its primitive function, that is, its original function as a vehicle of human expression”; “We are reasserting man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions”; “The self, terri­ ble and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture.”

Newman was very concerned with Surrealism: he gave the Surrealists credit for reviving subject matter and for their “prophetic tableaux” of the “horrors of war.” Ultimately Surrealism failed because of “its use of old-fash­ ioned perspective, its high realism, its preoccupation with the dream,” or returning to the question of perspectival space as the illusory pair.

By insisting on a materialistic presentation of it rather than a plastic one, by attempting to present a transcendental world in terms of real­ ism, in terms of Renaissance plasticity and Renaissance space, by, so to speak, mixing the prevailing dream of the modern artist with the out­ worn dream of academic Europe, they hoped to make acceptable . . . what they consciously knew was unreal. This realistic insistence, this attempt to make the unreal more real by an overemphasis on illusion, ultimately fails to penetrate beyond illusion . . . they practiced illusion because they did not themselves feel the magic . . . Realistic fantasy inevitably must become phantasmagoria, so that instead of creating a magical world, the surrealists succeeded only in illustrating it.

Newman sees his generation as realizing some of the Surrealists’ unful­ filled goals. But his attention and respect for Surrealism provides an impor­ tant loophole in the modernist anti-space program particularly since Surrealist methods remain very popular and often viable among many third world artists and many women artists.

The magic of illusionism, indeed of vision itself, is a consideration in seventeenth-century Dutch paintings which perhaps influenced Surrealist artists even more than did Italian Renaissance works. These paintings are the
subject of Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing* which I read this summer, perhaps as a corrective to the twentieth-century formalist texts I had chosen to read. If I was searching for visual pleasure, as well as researching it, I found it within the pages of this book.

*The Art of Describing* offers an alternative, almost an alternate universe to the rigid policing of space whether through its pictorial organization or its formalist elimination. Another theoretical economy is found in seventeenth-century Dutch art which challenges that of Italian art which has so dominated Western art thought, as for Alpers notes, "Since the institutionalization of art history as an academic discipline, the major analytic strategies by which we have been taught to look at and to interpret images...were developed in reference to the Italian tradition."

Perhaps not surprisingly this different, Northern, system is a system of difference, and was given a gendered code by the dominant, Italian, mode. Michelangelo is said to have described Flemish art as one which "will appeal to women, especially the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony" because it is "done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice or boldness and, finally, without substance or vigour.""

According to Alpers, Italian art is hierarchic and prescriptive; active and dynamic: it is human (man)-centered; it selects and organizes significant material; it proposes a unified field of vision, a substitute, idealized world; it finds portraiture inferior to works that engage "in higher, more general human truths"; it relies on and is validated by verbal access to classic texts; it is narrative; it is a progressive tradition. Alpers finds that Dutch art is non-hierarchic and descriptive; it is an art of existence and stasis; it de-centers man as the measure of all things by, among other things, its embrace of telescopic and microscopic means of vision; it mirrors the visible world without imposing a "prior frame"; it privileges portraiture (whether of people or of mice, as the case may be) and, among other things, is characterized by a focus on individual identity; it is fragmentary: it emerges from a visual rather than textual culture; it is not a progressive tradition.

For the seventeenth-century Dutch, visual art is a method of pursuing knowledge and thus there are no prescriptions of what should or shouldn't be a subject for art, or what the format should be. Significantly, it is during this period, in the Netherlands, that the picture book was developed as a method of instructing children. Visuality was seen as "basic to education." Dutch art is taxonomic, interested in describing as much of the visual world as possible. Thus paintings may include elements from other forms of pursuing and promoting knowledge, such as maps and texts. Perspectival organization often impedes the full visualization of knowledge, so Dutch artists maneuver around or beyond it.

There is "extraordinary trust in the attentive eye." Alpers speaks of the selflessness of the artist, of the "passive eye." Dutch painting mirrors the seen world, rather than organizing it or idealizing it, and enjoyment of craft is seen in the luminous depictions of crafted objects as well as in the precise, polished surfaces of the paintings themselves. But the Dutch were well aware of the duplicity of sight both from a scientific point of view — the relativity and imperfection of the human eye and of the glass lens — and in its human, subjective dimension. Paintings such as Gerard Dou's *The Quack*, in which the painter, seen behind a quack selling his wares to a crowd who in their actions represent familiar pictured proverbs, alerts us "not only to the duplicity of the quack but also the painterly one." And the enjoyment of the senses, including the sense of sight, takes place in the face of mortality, always indicated by some detail of decay, in the manner of a *Vanitas*.

Returning to the Italian/Dutch dichotomy, "the contrast can be made between such fragmentary beauty, a function of infinite attentive glances, and a notion of beauty that assumes the just proportion of a whole and thus admits to a prior notion about what makes an entire object beautiful." (One might note that while Bois calls for an art which refers to no other space than its surface thickness, he brings to painting a "prior notion" of what a painting should be, an implicit totalitarian impulse.)

*The Art of Describing* is as richly detailed and carefully crafted as the attentive paintings to which Alpers accords such equally attentive reading. In a typically non-hierarchic manner, a painting of a giant radish is almost as memorable as Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* which is the centerpiece of the book. The narrative of visual pleasure as a vehicle for taxonomic knowledge is so absorbing that at the end of the book the introduction of Rembrandt seems like a barbaric intrusion. He "rejects the established practice of good craftsmanship appropriate to each medium: in his paintings, figure and ground are bound together and thus elided through the medium." (These words are nearly identical to Bois' description of what happens in *Onement III*). Rembrandt ruptures the smooth surface of the painting and "settles for the materiality of his medium itself. His paint is something worked as with the bare hands — a material to grasp, perhaps, as much as to see." Indeed, the surfaces of Rembrandt's late works, as he moved away from the tradition of crafted representation in order to express what is not visible, "are the surfaces of a maker of pictures who profoundly mistrusted the evidence of sight. This point becomes the very subject of Rembrandt's art in his fascination with blindness."

Alpers' text casts Bois' views about pictorial space in a new light. The compulsion to eliminate space is the flip side of the compulsion to organize it and thus Bois can be understood as staying well within the constructs of the Italian tradition. And, given the pleasure of illusionism in the Dutch paintings, one wonders at the fear of illusionism which seems to be operative in the present devaluation and repression of visual pleasure — illusionism not necessarily referring to representational, figurative painting (or sculpture) but understood here as any concession to figuration. The model of seventeenth-century Dutch painting — an "attentive eye" and hand, a respect for visual knowledge, and a non-hierarchic system — may suggest some possibilities for the reintegration of visual pleasure into a new erotics of painting.
Letter from Rome: H.D., Spero, and the Reconstruction of Gender

To the editors:

My reading of MEANING #9 has taken place in tandem with the opening of Nancy Spero's show, "Sky Goddess, Egyptian Acrobat," (her first show in Rome) at the Stefania Miscetti Gallery, an occasion almost parallel with the arrival of related Spero collages in a rebuilt #9. These events have layered themselves with my recent reading of H.D.'s Trilogy and I've been fascinated by the connections between Spero and H.D., how their methods both underscore and illuminate the territory. Amalia Jones explores in "The Absence of Body," MEANING #9.

Jones writes that "The literal breaking apart of the body is the 'enemy' is a means to annihilate by cutting off, refusing the flow that is perceived to run out of control in the body of the (mother) feared (fantasized) as dangerously unbounded and threatening to male order." I remember, as I read, a particularly devastating photo-image of Spero's depicting a woman, head turned down and away from the camera, mouth gagged, her naked body entirely bound with rope so that you can see it pressing into her flesh, as if to cut off or forcibly contain some dangerous "flow" or current. This cut-out photo is reproduced by Spero twice, once in dark shadow; again, to its right and slightly higher, the same photograph is lit in harsher light. If this photo is to be taken literally, as Marlene Dietrich, in a pants suit, walks directly toward you in the company of a Thai dancer printed in multiples to make a kind of chorus line. Above them, a woman in a pants suit, drugged, dopamine, making her viewers look at this image, she takes it out of the Gestapo's pocket, exposing and refusing his shadowy erotics of erasure and absolute control.

H.D., writing Trilogy during the continuously threatening years of WWII, chose a more mystical accounting of the female spirit in history, while elaborating on its multiple embodiments and reinstating it through a long, site-specific set of images, here excerpted:

We have seen her
the world over,
Our Lady of the Goldfinch,
Our Lady of the Candelabra,
Our Lady of the Pomegranate,
Our Lady of the Chair.

we have seen her snood
drawn over her head

we have seen her with arrow, with doves
and heart like a valentine
(part 29, "Tribute to the Angels."
Part II, Trilogy)

she is the counter-coin-side
of primitive terror;
she is not-fear, she is not-war,
but she is no symbolic figure
(part 30, TA/Trilogy)

H.D. positions herself most assertively where maternal power locates, in a fluid and many-faceted narrative that activates historically-neglected female presence. Fragment for her, while partial, is not reduced to "lack" but is re-constructed with a survivor's urgency as a "particular" [embedded layer or aspect] within the reclaimed female history text — seen and hidden — as in ancient writing erased from papyrus each time a new message is written, yet always containing the shadowy buildup of origins/words/alphabets which thicken through time. H.D.'s novel, Palimpsest, names that very interweaving of plots and signs. As she recognized certain female presencing in the antique world and tried to respeak it mythically, as part of an empowering writing practice, so Spero has recognized the necessary deja-vu evoked in the play of memory among ancient icons and contemporary female representations.

Spero's modern icons do not avoid primitive terror; in fact, her female bodies often enact the "counter-coin-side" of H.D.'s "not-fear," "not-war." She has noted in a recent letter how she was struck by a similarity between the text of a 5th century B.C. Sumerian fable used in her "Torture of Women" series, 1974-76:

On her body he took his stand, and with his knife he split it like a flat fish into two halves, and one of these he made a covering for the heavens.

and H.D.'s ironic re-casting of myth from Helen in Egypt (used in Spero's "Notes on Time," 1976-79):

... how she was rapt away
by Hermes, at Zeus' command,
how in Rhodes she was hanged and the cord turned into a rainbow...

Spero is interested in how both quotes foreground similar mythic patterns — while giving them different readings — in which a woman is first brutalized and then glorified (removed from ordinary dullness! ... what she calls "the two extremes of women's position." Like H.D., she chafes against a reductive, insubstantial, and single-minded representation of female existence. She wants "to record the celebratory aspects of women's lives, as well as the hellish." While bringing her bound woman out of the shadow of pre-Christian classicism and into the harsh light of Judeo-Christian modernity, Spero does not settle for the abysmal image to solely represent a fate of female inevitability but, like H.D., instigates multiplicity — a slayed-out "open field" of non-sequential, non-ordinal narratives in which torture and cultural annihilation scripts are mixed with a repertoire of women energetically and often awkwardly and comically uncovering new plots for themselves in the middle of old chapters.

In Spero's Rome exhibit, women of varying historic and racial families enact their sexual and class roles in her recycled theatre of collage: ebullient and powerful women run "out of control" as Marlene Dietrich, in a pants suit, walks directly towards you in the company of a Thai dancer printed in multiples to make a kind of chorus line. Above them, a woman in full drag sits on a chair, looking amused, while splay-legged females — straight "cunt shots" — confront you with the immediacy of a "porno" magazine. Part archaeological photo-fact and part fiction, 80s white girls jazzercise the aerobic way next to Egyptian maternal figures.
Spero’s refusal of disembodied history is not an overdetermined one. The undeniable images of women tortured through historic time is a kind of warning and ballast. Her femmes en parade do not represent a marginal whitewash, enacting only the idealized layers of the millefeuille. The goal of her Woman in presence and active limbs... plus the unbound air of large enough arenas (walls, cupolas, sides of buildings) where she may shed the covert consciousness of the “male gaze” and gaze boldly back... a field large enough in which to recover and confront— even constitute— her own history.

H.D. and Spero share the formalized desire to break in on the “comfortable” and claustrophobic male/traditional construction of the female body and to include the fallible person, the provisional point-of-view as a legitimate part of female/human existence as it appears and reappears in history. To use Amelia Jones’ distinction, H.D. and Spero have created (and yes, have fantasized) a world of female presence that instantiates rather than palliates loss.

At the Cassa di Risparmio, an important bank in the northern Italian university town of Macerata housed in the seventeenth century Palazzo Ricci, there is a permanent and formidable collection of modern Italian painting and sculpture which I recently toured. Two things struck me forcibly, in the context of having just seen Spero’s show. The first was that among two-hundred plus works in this major collection, only one piece—a brooding, powerfully painted semi-abstract landscape, dated 1955— was by a woman, “A. Raphael (Mafai),” identified by my guide la V.P. of this art-loving bank as a “Lithuanian in origin and wife of the painter, Mario Mafai”— also represented in the collection. On my return to Rome, I happened upon the review of a major retrospective just opening in Modena, featuring the work of Antonietta Raphael, there identified as one of the three central figures of the Scuola Romana (or Scuola Cavour), along with Sgr. Mafai.

The second item of particular relevance was a bronze made by the sculptor, Augusto Perez, 1973, called Resurgit (Resurrection) and the theft of affect loitering in the catalogue’s description of this work. A woman stands with her head facing the viewer’s gaze, eyes closed. Her naked body appears to be bound at various points along the torso, outstretched arms and hands, as well as around the thighs and ankles, with thick lengths of fabric that prevent any movement of fingers or limbs. Her young, soft and sensuously modeled breasts are exposed. The “rhyme” with Spero’s appropriated photo of a tied-up woman victim, most probably Jewish, found on the dead body of a Nazi, is remarkable, although not surprising. The Italian version of the bound woman has been placed in one of the elaborately decorated rooms of the palazzo and is surrounded by luminous paintings, among them the prophetic technologies of power dreamed in color by Futurism’s major painters— Ballo, Severini, Ivo, Dottori, and Fortunato. In the catalogue for the show, the Perez bronze is described thus:

"Resurgit" is a stupendous reinvention of an historic theme that emerges in modern figurative sculpture, authentically revolutionary.

It is one of those figures which seems to come back before our eyes, expressing a passionate need to recover the past... identified and individuated across the painful experiences of a creature that struggles with herself in the confused muddle of present anxiety, amidst her journey between birth and death. —(L. Carluccio, art critic)

One no longer needs a lengthy deconstruction of such gender-specific hype to note the burden of single-minded cliche from which late twentieth-century artists must continuously extricate themselves. As H.D., Spero, and Jones have made evident, body is not just "other," body is us.

— Kathleen Fraser

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