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FORUM: ON CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY

This forum emerged from the editors' initial efforts to stimulate essays on three questions. These questions came from our realization that several of our past issues had focused on questions of difference, art made from positions of gender, race, and age. We wondered if there were other ways of thinking about being an artist today. The questions were:

• Speaking of difference, how are male artists doing today?
• Is there a community of artists beyond the polarity of gender, race, and class, the competition of economics and various aesthetic and ideological stances? What are the possibilities for any common interests for artists today?
• Are there contemporary redefinitions of creativity? What is keeping art and artists alive in the 90s? (Is it just because we're all manic depressives, as suggested by recent articles in the Science Times?)

We first solicited essays from a small group of artists and critics. However, the first small group of responses included more pithy, short, forum-like statements than essays so we decided to expand our pool of authors. The following responses mostly answer the questions on community and creativity, nevertheless some do include considerations of the status of male artists today. In addition, G. Roger Denson's essay "The Indivisible Individual Invisible in There," and Dena Shottenkirk's "The Birth of Metatheory" emerged from our original call for essays on these subjects.

Suzanne Anker

CREATIVITY AND THE RETROVIRUS

Standing with one foot in the swamp of slime-produced-greed and the other in a future where the commodification of the self and its parts are redeemable coupons, the question of the ensuing or even the present is a perplexing topic. Radioactive waste masquerades as bio-hazard discrimination, molecular politics focuses on a return to ethno-nationalism and a worldwide recession heralds in the information age. In a post-cynical pose, abhorred by utopian reveries, the question of creativity, its nature and relation to cultural production presents alternative networks of intentionality, design and the construction of meaning. Authorship and authenticity, appropriated and
manipulated during the eighties further question (like fallout) any rhetorical position. Through overstimulation and tabloid sensibilities neural networks uncharge their batteries as judgment becomes addiction. Creativity buckling under the strain of its own weight is a relative force expanding and contracting within the society-at-large and its comfort quotient of conformity. Creativity is one of those words, abused and beleaguered, functionally autistic. However, as a concept bound up with historical post-modernism it can be approached as an information circuit. As a transformative model, the flow of energy is constructed to include possible mutations and retro-systems, thus complicating, once again, clear pathways. Uncertainty, a fact of life uncovered at the early part of the twentieth century, now becomes a paradigm for life and culture through permutation, variation and transmogrification. Through a restructuring of the cyber-real world, responses are annexed by conditions of market indicators. For example, the issuing of credit cards to transvestites points to this strategy. With photo-documentation appearing as an identity marker on credit cards, the transvestite is offered not one, but two cards. One representing the male and the other reserved for his transformation to a woman. Here cross-dressing meets corporate reality as if banking were a liberal institution. Reforecasting scenarios of cyborg worlds, nothing is outside of a digital future. Whereas in more Romantic periods forgetting was a source of inspiration...the imagination in the nineties is an act of remembering. With historical amnesia a readymade solution for the uninformed connoisseur of the eighties, the complexity of the collapse and the bombardment of the fragment has created a condition whereby memory has become an adaptive code-key charting frontiers of gray matter, smart drugs, and high-speed intelligence. Synthetic enzymes, machine vision and artificial blood, to name a few, become design elements in the architecture of evolution.

The immune system, functioning as a surveillance screen, is the body's defense system, its military machination is a facsimile of other globalization networks operative within a late twentieth-century military-industrial society. As a defense system, its military machination is a facsimile of other globalization networks operative within a late twentieth-century military-industrial society. However, with regards to creativity, the prime issue to be siphoned from this analogy is the immune system's ability to remember. Clonal selection theory, formulated in the fifties by N.K. Jerne, postulates that the body at birth, is already equipped to recognize intruders. This natural selection theory of antibody formation states that during fetal development, antibody molecules are produced and storehoused for future use by the organism. When attacked by an invader, the immune network decodes its supply of weapons, and defends through geometrical fit. Antibody molecules are a priori agents put to full employment by a selected mathematical configuration. With an ability to detect self from non-self, a form of species memory encoded in the cells protects the organism from invasion and obliteration. Where is our species memory? Where is our ability to recognize self?

In conclusion, I wish to make clear that biological metaphor has in the past been filled with regressive traps, partisan to doctrines of eugenics, sociobiology and essentialism. However, as a systemic network with analogical possibilities, biological maps can be reworked as a progenitor of theoretical discourse in concert with the social consequences generated by bio-chemical bracketing. Metaphor and metonomy as communication tropes, employ an intoxicating ability to transfer one thought onto another structure. How metaphor operates, its limitations and passwords is a further exploration available using immunological thinking.

Notes
1. During a recent conversation with a group of artists from Cologne, Germany, the recognition that it was difficult to be creative in a culture that rewards conformity was discussed. Artists and writers present include: Rolf Persch, Stefan Bohnenberger, Susanne Greven, M. Lucelo, Heke Tiber, Alfred Banne and Haus Werner Bett.

Susan Bee

THE FRAGMENTS AND FRAGRANCE OF COMMUNITY

I have many complicated thoughts and feelings about community — as a magazine editor and as an artist. I originally formulated the question for this issue of MIRAI/IN/1/N/G because I had come to feel that an art community does not exist in the way I imagined it to years ago. Sometimes it seems the art world is just a series of cliques or people bound together for reasons that have nothing to do with altruism or aesthetics and have everything to do with venality and commerce. This is my paranoid sense of things. However there are pockets of special needs and special interests: people bound together by an ideology such as feminism, or joint ventures such as co-op galleries, or friend-
ships based on school ties, mutual admiration, or other noncommercial bonds.

I hoped when I asked the question to find out if an art community exists and if so if this is an important issue for artists and critics. I've noted that on the Internet — the e-mail "Poetics" group of about 60 people, which I have eavesdropped on, has been hopping with people madly writing about, defining, or denying a poetic community. Community seems fundamental to many of these poets' sense of their work and the written nature of communication currently available on the Internet facilitates these discussions. In my monitoring of e-mail activity on "The Thing," a computer arts network, I also noted a heated though surprisingly vague discussion of the possibility for virtual art communities. (However, since "The Thing" charges a fee and the poetics group is free to all with a computer and a modem — this could account for the differences in the amount of participation.) Perhaps as these networks become more visually oriented more artists who work with computers will avail themselves of the opportunity to interact electronically. So community is an issue of interest in some circles. However, it could be as Komar and Melamid have suggested recently in The Nation, that the artist's real problem in the 90s is lack of a broader public audience for their work beyond a small circle of friends and participants in the art world. The sort of audience that exists for popular T.V., music, and films, for instance, does not seem to exist for the fine arts and this is the cause for some despair among artists.

Art these days seems like every man or woman for themselves and as the pickings get leaner we're like dogs sniffing around a few bones for hints of meat. Not much chance for naive illusions of cosmic harmony there. Still the idealist in me — the person who eight years ago envisioned M/E/A/N/I/N/G as an open-ended space for artists and critics still hopes for a place where utopian art dreams matter. Sometimes at panels and the exchanges afterwards, there are glimpses of those possibilities. But too often all is lost in the rush of self-interest, name-calling, and factionalization that typically plague the art world's public events. And while identity art is a strong bondmaker, it also highlights deep divisions among artists.

As Peter Schjeldahl put it in December 1993 in The Nation: "Many in the art world are so soul-starved they convince themselves of belonging to a community when they really don't. The art world is a fairly savage social and economic zone where values are always in doubt and often in conflict. That's a function and part of the fun of the art world. It incidentally makes people very nervous.

Of course, sentiments such as Schjeldahl's may be part of the problem, surely he does not suggest a solution. Perhaps because artmaking is still often a solitary activity involving individual action, most of us can only posit the notion of a larger community. This circumstance leaves me to assume that the mixture of people that turn up at openings or go to art schools or art colonies or collect art or write about it or call themselves artists — maybe do actually care about art and that these people will eventually find each other.

“Sapiens, did someone say sapiens?

"Sapien adj. [ME Sapients, prp. of sapere, to taste, know: see SAPIE] full of knowledge, wise, sagacious, discriminating"

Whoever decided homo was sapiens must have presciently heard Webster, proceeded to "SAPIE", and noticed that there was also a "SAP" which could add appropriate complexity to the binomial. SAP, a noun (from L. sapere—to taste, to know) is about the juice that circulates through plants bringing vital fluids to the tissues and about vigor, energy, and vitality. SAP, a verb and a noun (from MP. sappe—a hoe) means to undermine by digging away foundations, in fact, to undermine in any way, to weaken and exhaust—all useful to the noun SAP which is an extended narrow trench for undermining an enemy position or fortification.

It's true, we've gotten very good at entrenched ourselves in our own positions, at walling ourselves off, and as of late have been doing a great job of weakening, exhausting, and digging away foundations, the very foundations of life. It's as if we've decided the earth is the enemy we have needed to entrench ourselves — against. Not that we've done this consciously. It's just the unconscious byproduct of a culture built upon delusions of limitless power and addicted to satisfying its voracious and endless appetites — a culture that has made greed a virtue and placed it at the core of its economic philosophy. We are all encouraged, programmed, to want more and more — more money, more power, more fame, more stuff, and to be as aggressive in our pursuit as we can. As the 80s made so very clear, the art world has bought into this American Dream wholeheartedly, and so have artists, despite our postures of critique and marginality in the culture. If Adam Smith was right and narcissism and self-interest are a good basis for community, then artists are off to a running start.

But, it's the 90s now and perhaps because the craziness of the commercialism and materialism of the 80s was so clear, perhaps because of the sluggishness of the art market, perhaps because the world's problems seem so insistent, there seems to be another current in the air. As I describe my own concerns, again and again people say, 'Me, too. I know so many people who feel that way.' What's that way? Many of us feel a hunger to be part of the world beyond the art world, and to have our work and ourselves have more direct social connection. We do not want to be isolated within a system that by cloistering itself creates an illusion of inclusion within its borders at the cost of defusing the power imagination can have within the world.

— Franz Kafka

"...and then there's another kind of art, which is related to everybody's needs and the problems existing in society. This kind of art, has to start from the molding power of the thought as a sculptural means."

— Joseph Beuys
The anguish of the world: the silencing of the disenfranchised, violations of human rights, epidemics of hunger and poverty, abuses of women and children, diseases more virulent than we have ever known, and for me the most overriding — the depletion of the life support systems of our planet, cries out for creative, imaginative, and functional responses. This isn't about being politically correct, it's about listening to our hearts and our intelligence.

We "sapiens" have a lot of growing up to do — we are much more primitive than we think — and have a good deal to learn from creatures we have placed lower on the evolutionary ladder. It's interesting to note that the biological sciences are starting to be curious about the role cooperation and even altruism play in the evolution of species. Although there have been rumblings about those ideas for a long time, until recently the competition-aggression model drowned them out.

There's so much to be done, we cannot afford to waste any resources. Artists practice synthetic thinking, live from their imagination and intuition, and are barometers of the unconscious. These are vital resources that should be as part of any problem solving dialogue. In a culture as consciousness-oriented as our own, where Pavlovian canned laughter triggers audience responses, and thinking is carefully molded by the commercial interests of the media, people need exemplars of inner directed thought and action, of individuated motivation. "Individuated" is not the same as self-interested, although certainly among artists the two are often congruent. I don't pretend that artists are naturals at community. This too must emanate from inner need and each artist so motivated must find their own access. The possibilities for community among artists reach into the possibilities for community among all people, and across the same minefield of difficulties. Reaching beyond the boundaries we are comfortable in means facing our own prejudices. Trying to hear voices that have been silenced means reorienting one's own assumptions of value. Helping all individuals live lives of dignity requires real humility. Trying to stop the wanton destruction of our planet and learning to value its plenitude means each of us must learn to live within limits bringing our own individual consumption into line with what the planet can bear and accept that humans must take their place within a much larger community of beings.

Artists can be examples of compassionate engagement. There are lots of ways to go about this, be it working within a local community or collaborating with people in other disciplines — physical and social scientists, educators, public policy makers. They may not know that we as artists have something necessary to bring to the dialogue, but we should, and the initiative must be ours. I believe that there is need for solitary work too — that we must keep "practicing" all our faculties and balancing individual needs with those of the collective. Far from being mutually exclusive, they are necessarily mutually inclusive, and we must honor both. That humans are both individuals and social animals creates a fecund tension which sparks our development. It's time we let the juicy fluids flow, and move from SAP to SAP — to bring vigor, energy and vitality to the tissues of our world — and maybe eventually we really will stand upright, sapien.
drawing inspiration wherever she may find it, “from nature and the unconscious to great artists of the past.” “I’ve explored a variety of directions and themes over the years. But I think in my painting you can see the signature of one artist, the work of one wrist.” And on that immensely talented wrist, Helen Frankenthaler has chosen to wear a Rolex.

With this advertisement copy, which appears on the inside front cover of the March 1994, Gourmet, we wheel in dear old Helen Frankenthaler who, reduced to a wrist, begins to resemble the severed hand that stalks Michael Caine in The Hand—however one which torments far more than its former corpus. (On this note, perhaps she resembles “Thing.”) Frankenthaler’s “immensely talented” wrist has been pressed into service to demarcate and promote Rolex’s perceptual and property interests; she is mapped at the “highest rank” of art history and creative genius, that entire corpus located—or rather, sucked up like a vacuum—in her wrist, which stands as an indexical code so force-fed with meaning that it cannot contain the surplus and must transfer it outward in a form of auto-amputation. It is then, along with its golden halo, used as a marker in another informational landscape. It points to its extension or transcendence, like the hand-pointer used in advertising years ago and in some current computer programs. Such a pointer leads always to an informational elsewhere.

Here, perhaps, is the nexus of the artistic or literary hand: no longer “one artist...one wrist,” this body part stands as a traversal of energies, always attached to a body but pointing elsewhere, always standing in relation to a mode of embodiment, a constructed subject, a system of codes, enmeshed in relations which simultaneously locate it and detach it. Bodies, bodily components, bodies of texts or relations (artworks or otherwise), and textual elements are enmeshed in this perpetual movement, ceaselessly jostling, engaging in an intertextuality and transactionality both biological and informational. Dynamic networks link bodies of codes, the economies and technologies that generate them, and the embodied subjects who produce and are produced by codes, economies, and technologies. Such bodies of codes, fluid and permeable, circulate as indices of social relations and oscillate between informational and material embodiment, continuous and subject-object, viewer-viewed relations, marking territory and then displacing it, wounding, reversing, circulating, swirling signification.

Pointing also to an informational elsewhere is John Wayne Bobbitt’s penis—or rather, its absence—which aptly illustrates this joining/detaching, appearing/dispersing, commodity-like, having become a circulating index of sexual, social, biological, and property relations animated by bio-social constructs through which both blood and information flow. Consider a press release recently issued by the City of Manassas, Virginia, produced in order to dispel any notions that Bobbitt’s penis was lopped off and disposed of within its territorial limits. The release, reproduced in the January 24, 1994 issue of Time, is accompanied by a crudely drawn map, boldly emblazoned with the statement, “It DIDN’T Happen in Manassas!” and featuring three prominent location-markings, labelled “dismemberment,” “disposal,” and “reattachment.”

A heavy dotted line, running diagonally down the length of the map and mildly suggesting a suture, clearly demarcates the borderline between the City of Manassas and Prince William County, the “other” place to which the gruesome acts of “dismemberment” and “disposal” of the hapless penis are banished. Its miraculous surgical “reattachment,” however, is proudly claimed by and incorporated into the City of Manassas. One would expect a golden halo to appear and then temporarily encircle it like a cock ring.

Such schemas whip McLuhan’s notion of auto-amputation into a delirious, circulatory frenzy. Such extensive partiality, fueled by a bioeconomics whose currency is information, prompts the construction of info-social prosthetics of every form and prompts a continual detaching-and-reassembly movement through various interfaces, which mediate bioinformational processes even as they are constructed by them. Such processes increasingly cloud the distinctions between life and non-life, problematize divisions between disciplines, rework notions of “difference” and creativity, generate new modes of artistic production, prompt alternate communities and spin new socialities.

No longer only “the work of one wrist,” the artist’s brushstroke extends outward through the studio wall, piercing it and blurring its boundaries, blurring marks of positioning and conditions of creation and viewership. It leads always to an informational elsewhere. It is circularly not uni-directional; its logic is not that of expression but of informational interconversion—perpetual transformation between information and materiality, within which objectivity oscillates—which evades any strategy of enframing. The creative hand-function moves through space, writing in social space as it is written by it, as frames—formerly wood frames on walls, now likened to telecommunicational windows—appear and disappear, and stack, overlay, and map themselves onto various social constructs as such constructs are, in turn, mapped onto them. Such frames dissolve to codes to function as texts, only to reappear as windows to enframe codes. Such codes and frames flux to modes and nodes in complex matrices of possibility, through which social energies navigate. The artwork is not centered but cirulative, always partial, configurative, transactional—a punctuating interface, an index of social energy and embodiment. New definitions of creativity are to be found in this hall of mirrors, new artworks in their chimerical holograms, new ghostlike embodiments and hybrid identities among the intersecting and circulating planes of the cognitive, the biological, the social, and the cosmological. In this new landscape, contradictions and partialities build active affinities beyond polarization; essential unities on the basis of gender, race, or class cede to multiplicities of configurative alliances, propelled by the untranscendable horizon of economic activity which produces opposition in order to contain it.

“Dismember” is not essential, but socially negotiated. If art is to be made from a position of difference, it must seek to uncover the terms of that negotiation, and thus continually undermine itself. Such a stance then, oppositional or otherwise, does not involve a staking out of territory, but an ongoing investigation and articulation of the social networks and transactions through
amorous. Maybe it’s time to enjoy the artwork’s promise of reconstituted subjectivities. Perhaps a revised notion of the fetish would be useful. If there is a community beyond the polarities of gender, ethnicity, class, ideology, sexual preference, age, or psycho-metabolic character, I think it is dependent on our power to exercise imagination; to dissolve or cross the boundaries between individuals and between groups.

William Pope, I.

A low grade fever
Topped off with feelings of impotence
The biting of nails
The gnashing of teeth
Involuntary shrinking and swelling of genitalia
Skin rashes, rashy skin, unreliable melanin-omens
And a disturbing rolling beneath this ersatz calm:
A weird cardboard sorrow
A dogged determination to be somebody
At the center of some great moment
Like a colorful plastic raft floating in a swimming pool

The belief that contemporary artists can be a community is mistaken. It would take a massive shift, a revolution or crisis in current ideology, economy, and spirit for such a community to be obtained. This is unfortunate and pathetic. Not because people tend to need a crisis in order to make fundamental changes in their attitudes but because the crisis is now and we are slow to recognize it.

What connects most artists, is what connects most people. Fear and blindness. We fear because we do not see. We do not see because we fear. The circle is unbroken. Self-perpetuating. We say to ourselves as artists, we say: "I make art for me. No, no I make it for other people. Whatever the case, if I make art, it will help in some way. Maybe it will help me see. Feel better. Understand more deeply. Or, even if it doesn’t I can, hell, I can sell it. Don’t look at me that way, I might! Sure anything’s possible, right? Sure, sure the money may mess me up even more but that’s the price you gotta pay, cause with money I won’t have to worry any more. Cause with money I’ll be above that common shit."

Few artists make their living selling art. Most lose money making art. Most are in the red. Most are angry, frustrated from living in the red. This is a commonplace for most artists. So why doesn’t it bring us together? We’re all common folk aren’t we? But the art world is not about what’s common. Is it? Isn’t it? Every artist wants that celebrity carrot. One among but above the many. I am like you but I’m not like you. I am an artist, I make political work.

We, artists, take our lacks for granted. I believe the common ground for artists today is what they lack not what they possess. What we lack is a healthy, pro-active and convincing picture of ourselves as a viable political and spiritual body. An economic body. An analytical body.

Meaning: our vision of ourselves, our mutual destiny, as artists, is a matter, to a large extent, of our will to a new self-image. Just because I need isolation in order to make art doesn’t mean I have to create my life in isolation from the concerns of the larger community. All acts are social. All social acts are political. In the U.S. the relationship between art and life is confused, not because the relationship between the two is inherently confusing, magical or difficult, but because we are blinded by the aura of the artwork as commodity. We think: "It is a thing. I can sell it." We tend to not think: "This is my labor. This is my choice. This is another brick in the foundation of my house of destiny. How do I want to build it?"

We are more comfortable alone. In isolation. As individuals. We have been socialized to feel this way. To be this way. In art school everybody had his/her own cubicle, his/her own vision, his/her own opinion. All opinions were equally valid yet not all artists were equal in the eyes of our beholder: history.

We found solace from the welter of difference and opinion in our solitude. It worked before. Why doesn’t it work now? There is a wind tunnel in our heads. It’s at its worst when we are among other artists or when we discuss art (heaven forbid!) or when we are out and about in the artworld (having beaten back once again that cultural agoraphobia!). We try to yell above the cacophony, we say to ourselves, inside our heads, at the gallery opening or the gala museum benefit, we say: I am more comfortable by myself. I do not like this milling and frothing and jostling for territory. I can’t relate to a group. I am an artist. I make political work.

Perhaps we, artists, feel so isolated today because we refuse to get the message. Our greatest dream, our worst nightmare is to be the uncontestable ruler of our own domain of culture surrounded by our great works and the non-stop applause of our countless admirers. We are locked in our little bunkers of desire. Our biggest illusion is that we have erected this bunker ourselves. Our second biggest illusion is that this will somehow protect us. A gun-port is our only access to the outside world. We’re always cranky. We have an adverse relationship to almost everything. The gallery dealer doesn’t understand us. The collector, the person on the street, our parents, our children, our pets, our stuffed animals, no one understands us. (Secretly, we think: "Maybe David Letterman will understand us")? Intuitively, we can smell our isolation and its concomitant vapors. Highly toxic. Boding no good wind. Something’s burning. And it ain’t the casserole. We are on the way out.
We are on the hit-list of culture. We are an endangered species. Last ditch move: zoos for artists. We'll be listed with the parasites. Because basically our relationship to life has become parasitical. A highly specialized sub-species of parasites with no real function except that which we make for ourselves. (In this sense, we are mercenary.) So, how imaginative are we? Well, how imaginative have we been?

Multi-culturalism is another kind of surrealism. A dream of a universal language which will bind together a universal family. Like European Surrealism of the 20s and 30s, multi-culturalism is idealistic, elitist, and ultimately cynical. Even so, the trend has assisted the careers of minority artists. But it would be foolish to believe that this is its real goal. That its real goal is not consistent with the dominant ideology i.e. to present the facade of inclusiveness while simultaneously constraining minority opportunity. Multi-culturalism is a kind of propaganda. The perfect surrealist image: the melting pot.

So, how imaginative have we been? Gender issues. Womanist Deconstructions of culture. Guys in skirts jumping off of buildings into the arms of the Matriarchy: the "B" side of Multi-culturalism. And I admit I am one of those guys. My skirt is clean and pressed (in the closet) ready for another assault on culture for the proper fee. So who am I feeling? Am I slumming to another's drummer? I'm caught in a welter of difference. Constrained by what I've been taught to be while banging into shape the metal that I want to be. Like most men I don't really see it coming. I don't doubt myself enough.

Nothingness is to femininity as obdurate is to masculinity. Yet here I am a black man with his ass on backwards. To me race and gender are a means to awareness is possible under the status quo. I'd rather think about how black I am or how male I am. Nothingness is to femininity as obdurate is to masculinity. Yet here I am a black man with his ass on backwards. To me race and gender are a means to a larger community. (Whether this will be a predominantly artist community is in doubt.) It is disturbing. I have a choice. To regain wholeness by hanging onto familiar and comfortable outmoded values and ideas or reach out, increase my dispersion until my wholeness becomes the sum of my difference. I don't have to be Babe Ruth or Richard Wright or Toni Morrison any more. I can be Mary Jane Montalto or Chuck Yuen or Paul Rodriguez or Marty Pottenger or Lowery Sims or Mr. Milk and Aunt Jenny.

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Robert C. Morgan

REVERSING PARADIGMS

The problematic of the art world—as a genuine community of artists—has become a profound issue as advanced culture moves towards the fin de siecle. Clearly the emancipatory requirements of artists to actively pursue their respective goals in relation to one another has been sorely lost or dismissed. This was largely the rationalization under the rubric of Postmodernism. In the eighties this term was cited in the art world, often as a means to conceal feelings of desolation and angst among artists and observers of the contemporary art scene.

The eighties was a decade of expropriation and recontextualization; that is, forging certain assumptions about the decline of late modernism, characterized by a type of aesthetic formalism, coincident with the writings of Clement Greenberg, and a recyling of earlier twentieth-century art history into a hyperbolic present-tense. Given the misunderstandings taught in various American art schools throughout the seventies it was no surprise that the generation of artists that evolved into prominence during the eighties were possessed by the overburdening desire to let go of their collectivist "nom du pere" and regain the creative territory of expressionism without the formalism of past decades.

It worked for awhile. It worked until it suddenly became evident that without an operant aesthetic basis things were not going to travel very far nor very smoothly into the horizontal of linguistic ploys about visual expression. Theory was needed—and it came regurgitated. It came hot and heavy. The term "aesthetics" was not particularly useful or extant at the outset of the eighties— at least during the reception of Neo-Expressionism. And for good reason. "Aesthetics" was out then as today. Even the term "intellectual" has been virtually swept from the lexical palette of art writing. What replaced aesthetics was the term "critical theory." To the chagrin of those critics, who entered into a Postmodern discourse in the visual arts at the end of the seventies, it was evident that the ideas were already more or less established in other fields—namely, literature, cinema studies, and architecture.

Critical theory became virtually synonymous with Postmodernism. To speak of deconstructing a text integral to the ideological structure and concomitant ramifications found in a work of art—a hypothetical projection founded on lack—was the fundamental issue beyond all else. Art was no longer about experiencing an idea with any degree of heightened emotional awareness. Art was no longer about a higher (or even lower) sensory form of cognition. Art was—in Postmodern terms—about a lack, a deficiency of the human psyche, a desire that was considered inferior to the informational basis of mind-operations in the computerized age. Although at the outset critical theory was substantial as a method in coming to terms with the absent "aesthetics" of much of the trendy Neo-Expressionist painting, its use in popular
art magazines by the end of the eighties was less about a method and more about an anti-canonical canon; that is, a canon used to offset the canon of Modernism and its patrimonial heritage.

By the end of the eighties, — with the important exception of a minority of feminist theorists, in particular — the popular dilution of critical theory, as it was appropriated for major art magazines, generally implied that one was expected to reduce one's options as to the subject of art in favor of concentrating on careerism by seeking-out furtive opportunities in order to gain publicity. Careerism — in social, political, and economic terms — often seemed the complete raison d'être for doing art. In short, one's career became an end in itself. This occurred in a somewhat desperate manner as most careers are forever made, for better or for worse, despite ultimate shortsightedness.

Perhaps these comments are overly compressed and too overbearing in their skepticism; but they are not intended to finalize the experience of art as a cynical art. Quite the opposite. Too often we are functioning less as a community of creative people than as subscribers to a set of taxonomical divisions. Unfortunately, this suggests that the art world community has become unnecessarily insecure about its current direction as a significant cultural force. Too often artists are subliminally put in the position of competing with the more predictable and superficial directives of advertising and the entertainment arts. This results in unnecessary economic and social pressures which are less a reality than an interference with the artist's identity. This is not to imply that social and economic pressures cannot be real, because they are real; it is merely to suggest that, if careerism becomes an obsessive goal, these pressures can become unnecessarily inhibiting in terms of what one does as an artist. To see the opposite of cynicism one must return to the origin of one's emotional strata to see why one is doing what one is doing. What is the purpose of one's art? Why be an artist? What is the motivation?

These are tough questions. I think they have always been tough questions, but, of course, the present always outweighs the past. We are all up against the present. And part of this alienated present — which Postmodern terminology saw as absence — is the failure to trust one another, to see the common basis that underlies artistic intentionality. This is always for good reason, and the problem will not be ultimately resolved by simply saying that the demarcations between gender, race, and privilege are no longer issues. This is always for good reason, and the problem will not be ultimately resolved by simply saying that the demarcations between gender, race, and privilege are no longer issues.

The problem today is that we are not willing to see nor to accept that we are all "other." Perhaps it is. But I doubt that Postmodernism has changed the way society in general (the media!) perceives what artists do. What society understands about advanced art is nil. This was true with Fauvism and it is true of Multiculturalism today. Society simply has no regard for the artist — none. Society — as the French Situationist Guy Dubord pointed out — wants its spectacles, a diversion from the pain of capitalist exploitation, a diversion from the masochistic lifestyles of a programmed recessionary economy in the late twentieth century.

In reversing the paradigm of Po Mo, I would say that the term today has less to do with art than it has to do with life. When I speak of Postmodernism today I am speaking not about theories as I am speaking about the evident conditions of alienation, fragmentation, conflicts without an ideal resolution, the perennial information glut obscuring the trace of historical memory, surreal forms of brutality and violence crossing over between the domestic and public front. These are real life conditions. They are not about art. They have nothing to do with art other than as the necessary and appropriate content that art hopes to reify in some intelligent way, in some specific way. Art will not solve these problems.

Traditionally, art has been able to sustain itself as a conduit of expression, even under the most pathetic and intensely disturbing situations, even in the most unprivileged situations. The individual recourses for making art happen in such situations are of considerable significance. One cannot ignore privilege, or lack thereof, as a very real situation for many excellent artists who are not being shown, promoted, or advertised in the delimited infrastructure of today's art world. To make art happen as a vital force despite this situation is the beginning of the recognition of community.

Barbara Pollack

What is keeping art and artists alive in the 90s?

In 1990, I put away Griselda Pollock and Roland Barthes and picked up Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie.

As silly as it sounds, The Power of Positive Thinking and How to Make Friends and Influence People have become the seminal texts of my art practice. Lesser known works, such as Peale's Enthusiasm Makes The Difference, Carnegie's How to Stop Worrying and Start Living and Dr. Joyce Brother's How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life have also found their way into my studio.

If the 1980s gave artists the cynical illusion of career strategies, the 1990s have brought us the necessity of survival strategies. I am moved to share the wisdom of these texts to assist other artists trying to survive this bleak decade.
LESSON #1: WHEN LIFE HANDS YOU A LEMON, MAKE LEMONADE

The new definition of creativity rests on the ability to turn rejection into a source of inspiration. In this light, the artworld of the 1990s is practically a lemon orchard, offering artists countless moments of encouragement. Some may fear the current situation — fewer exhibition spaces, minimal sales, restrictive grants. I have learned to embrace it as a lesson in self-reliance.

For example, the shrinking art market has given me a much more light-hearted view of dealers and collectors. I keep a file of letters from galleries who have closed. It makes me very happy to know that I am still making art while others, once considered so powerful, no longer retain addresses in Soho.

Plus, I find it much easier to show my work in my studio than in a gallery. No worries about shipping and insurance. No fears about negative reviews or lack of recognition. No wine in those little plastic cups. Just friendly visits with good conversation.

It is no coincidence that an increasing number of artists call themselves "independent." Whether it is by choice or not, it is wonderful that artists can experience a sense of independence from the art market, one more time.

LESSON #2: COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS INSTEAD OF SHEEP

Insomnia has replaced the Cedar Tavern, according to my answering machine, which regularly receives messages from friends at 4 a.m. Artists are staying up all night worrying how to go on. Most worry about things that are impossible to change — how to pay their rent, how to support their families, how to overcome discrimination in the artworld. All this worrying only causes lack of sleep and distractions in the studio.

The surest cure for worry is to remind yourself of the positive aspects of your life as an artist. First and foremost, artists need to appreciate that we have unique training for living without money. For years, we have been taught to ignore economic considerations. This puts us way ahead of the rest of the American public suffering in the recession. We believe that history, rather than the market place, will prove the value of our work. I doubt unemployed investment bankers share our optimistic view of the future.

A physicist once said to me, "You and I do the same thing. I go to laboratory. You go to a studio. We both explore ideas for years and years and few people really understand our research." "Yes," I replied, "But I have to pay for my reactor." He looked shocked. It was clear he had not worked as a waiter or word processor to support his research. Artists are so multi-talented, so uniquely suited for the current U.S. economy.

Before this sounds too Pollyannish, I have to insert that Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie started writing in the late 1940s to an audience recovering from the Great Depression and World War II. Their books are filled with "true stories" of women and men facing failed businesses, hungry children and lost homes. "How I Hit Rock Bottom and Survived" is a typical title.

Artists, who once evaluated their self-worth by their gallery affiliation, can learn a great deal from these stories. A loft in Williamsburgh and a fax machine may not seem like a lot, but there are many examples on the streets of New York of others with much less.

LESSON #3: TELL YOURSELF ALL THE GOOD NEWS YOU KNOW

At times, it seems impossible to do anything but dwell on the obstacles. Discourse has been replaced by a mantra of failure. The danger is depression can function like a long warm hug, even when it is objectively caused by external forces.

To challenge this state of mind, I propose we change our definition of greatness. In the 1990s, survival should be a sign of genius. To me, every artist managing to live and work in New York City right now is a genius. I am surrounded by artists who are out of work or hold two jobs, are facing AIDS and cancer, must support families or struggle alone. Yet they continue to make art. As far as I am concerned, this puts us in the middle of a city filled with more great minds than Florence at the height of the Italian renaissance. (After all, they had the patronage of the Medicis, so how good could they be?)

With a restructured definition of genius, it becomes easy to find good news. Artworld gossip is an endless litany of inspiration. I am not hearing another "hard luck" story. I am discovering another genius.

LESSON #4: ENTHUSIASM IS MAGIC

All authors of self-help books from Norman Vincent Peale to last year's bestseller, Learned Optimism, talk about enthusiasm — which is probably enough to make most artists run in the opposite direction. However, this is a mistake. In these times, it is essential to value this asset. It does not cost money, requires no education and does not discriminate.

Enthusiasm simply means that you believe that in yourself is the wisdom, courage, strategy, and faith necessary to deal successfully with all difficulties. Popular culture portrays the artist as a morose, manic-depressive overcome by obsessive problems. Few artists can afford to internalize this stereotype anymore. It may take awhile for us to turn into cheerleaders but remember — if we don't act enthusiastic about contemporary art, Morley Safer will never will.

Here are some simple steps to develop a more enthusiastic self-image:

1. The next time someone asks you if all artists are manic-depressive, ask them what would happen if you locked a lawyer in a room and gave him no money or recognition until he won a Supreme Court case. That should shut them up.
2. Avoid situations that create self-doubts. Artists may have to suffer, but they don't have to suffer humiliation.
3. Keep a file on artists who continued to work against great odds. Art history — especially feminist art history — is filled with them.
4. Develop sympathy for non-artists working in the New York artworld. Dealers, critics, curators, and receptionists have to confront creativity all day.
It's a tough job and they don't even have an excuse for being manic-depressive. Try to be kind.

5. Think of ways to help other artists, rather than yourself. If you fill a need, you may eventually get paid to fill that need. Then you will have a way of supporting your art. Even if you don't, you will make friends.

6. Remind yourself that you have already made a dream come true. You wanted to be an artist ever since you failed "self-control" on your elementary school report card. Now you are and no one can take that away from you.

If you follow these simple steps, you will be a more productive artist. You will also stand out as original and unique — the genuinely happy artist. Few will comprehend your state of mind, so you will seem intriguing and mysterious. Your self-confidence will inspire confidence in your work.

Norman Vincent Peale would say that this is the road to success, fame and fortune. All I know is that it will help you continue making art. Maybe, I should keep these secrets to myself. It's not supposed to be good to leak information to your competitors. However, I am sincerely concerned that the current economic climate is causing some of our best artists to give up. Many have not yet been recognized, have not yet emerged. I want everyone to continue. I look forward to your new ideas, new images, new art forms. I don't have solutions, just pat answers. That will have to be enough for now.

Lucio Pozzi

The creation of art in the wealthier societies is still dominated by orthodox assumptions and expectations, submitting creativity to exploitative rules of distribution. For instance, the pretense that there are standards of excellence everyone can agree about, may lead an individual artist into censoring intuitions incompatible with whatever standard that artist has chosen as a guideline. The pretense of progress may cut the links between the present and the past. A call for product recognizability could impede an artist's exploration of territories charted by others. The fear, say, of sentimentality or of rationality, as dictated by whatever fashion, could reduce an artist's desire to engage in both.

Creativity, instead, is to be re-defined within terms of critical alertness to the ever-changing capillarity of experience. To do so, I must delete my prejudices. I must trust my desires. If I cultivate my fragility and avoid pretending any final truth, I could perhaps keep my mind alive. In so doing, my art might testify of manners of thinking alien to the suffocating strictures imposed by our society of exploitation.

The monolithic sharing of some basic values has probably become an unachievable myth in the context of today's global culture. It might be seen as yet another nostalgia for undesirably unified dimensions which our present conditions of experience do not warrant. Many of us try to console ourselves by inventing surrogates of lost unities. In their name, we develop devastating collective conflicts of annihilation and personal neuroses. In other words, we hide behind systems of validation which inhibit the deeper potentialities of our existence and we come out fostering social and individual disease. The only way we may overcome our crippling habits is to substitute exchange for conflict, emulation for competition.

Rather than agreeing to any collective program of renewal, I prefer to constantly attempt to regenerate my singular self. That seems to be the most desirable channel by which I may reach out to others and, in turn, be open to their reflections. Through a non-exclusive attitude, maybe I can achieve both a personal enrichment and a collective dialogue.

Unpredicated exchange between singular entities is the re-definition of creativity. Exchange could be the common ground between artists today, but not too many seem willing to undergo the effort to promote it.

As for your query regarding difference, I suppose you are joking by proposing such a blanket generalization as "male artists". Every individual is a universe in desperate need of developing an autonomous empowerment currently denied by our culture. I am certainly not the first who recommends that each person should be taught to reach out for empowerment by relentlessly and thoroughly questioning every component inside her or his individual and collective experience, rather than rushing into simplistic solutions.

Jerry Saltz
You already know how "male artists" are doing — white "male artists" that is: as usual they're doing better than most. But that doesn't take away the fact that it's hard for everyone these days. If you had asked "How are critics doing?", the answer would be different. Proportionately — I think it's fair to say — that criticism is more equitable than art. Probably because there's no money in it anyway and it's a pathetic way to make a living — but that's another story. People got too used to thinking of artists as fat cats. They're not, and anyway there's nothing wrong with making money. The problem is that it sets up artists as the bad guy. Though the ones that do fall near this category can drive you crazy. I saw one very famous male artist walking down Greene Street the other day talking on a cellular phone! How, I wondered, did this artist get so out-of-touch that he assumed he could do this and not be recognized? Maybe he wanted to be seen. Meanwhile an equally famous woman artist — who has been in more than three Whitney Biennials — has to look for teaching jobs because sales are so scarce. You know stories like this too.

It's okay to have a cellular phone, a house in the Hamptons, a Jeep Cherokee or a Saab, it's okay to appear in the Style Section of the Times every three weeks, it's okay to hob-nob with the super rich, with movie stars, financiers, designers and tennis stars, it's okay to have your house featured in Vogue or a 'shelter' magazine—but you better believe that vast segments of
the art world will perceive you as — well — flaunting it, a joke or otherwise acting unconsciously. There's nothing wrong with success — the question is how are you at being successful? Are you a Bad Winner?

Peter Schjeldahl wrote that "in the eighties art and money had sex in public." If that's true you could also say now that money has gone — and certainly it is not in the strata where it is helping to make interesting things happen in the art world — art has been left as its Battered Spouse alone to pick up the pieces and get on with its life. Art may have started out wanting a flirtation — (and who can blame it after the 70s) it had been living on its own and wanted a bigger 'market share,' more of an audience; only what started out as an innocent impulse developed into a full blown — some would say self-destructive — obsession. But even here, I have to admit, it was mostly the guys who got the goodies — though everyone went along for the ride. The good news is, with money gone, value isn't so tied to money. The bad news is that means it's hard to survive — again.

As to your question about "community" — community is a relative thing. Mostly the communities I see in the art world reflect those in the real world: they're usually segregated and men tend to have the most power. Narcissism rules. Ideological difference doesn't really keep people apart. On first glance it does but then you realize that everyone wants to get their stuff seen so people show up at everyone else's events — if only to dish afterwards. Still communities tend to polarize into snarling tribes. After all Self/Importance stands guard over the Kingdom of Narcissism. This all sounds much more cynical than it really is. Mostly what you have are a lot of artists who care a lot about what they're doing.

As a critic I think of myself as having a skeleton key to all camps in order to survey the changing landscape. This is where language comes in. Why is it that some art criticism is indecipherable — even to us? If art has lost its audience then surely this type of smarter-than-thou 'criticism' played its part. Criticism isn't the right word for it anyway. Much of this writing feels cut-off from its context. When a critic reports back about what he or she has seen it should be in accessible, clear language and not a lot of brainy gobbledygook that no one understands. A critic should want to be understood. But the price you pay for this accessibility can be dear. You can lose your 'pass' into certain academic circles, or it might mean that you don't get asked to be on all those panels that discuss art and its relationship to bio-genetic whatever and in one or two cases whole new approaches. Things always start to happen when artists take matters into their own hands. The art I'm seeing in these newer galleries or anti-galleries or nomadic-sites or whatever they are may not always be good — usually it's no better than what's in the 'regular' art world — but that's okay, we need the sparks to set the fire.

In answer to your question about "what is keeping art alive?" My advice — not that you asked — is: don't give people the sense they know what you're about; they'll use you up, or think they understand you when they probably don't (plus art isn't about understanding). I don't know what it is about but it's not about understanding. Unfortunately too much art I'm seeing seems to want to be about sociology or biology or philosophy or politics — which is fine [after all, all art is in some way political] but it would be nice to see more sculpture, say, that was about doing things and solving problems only sculpture does.) Other advice would be: don't care, but don't care so little that I can't find you. Just don't make it too easy. You don't have to put your art right in my way. It might be interesting to remove it a little from it's 'normal' house. I'm not sure where or how to put it, but I'm sure you will. There's no 'one problem' everyone's trying to solve. That makes for a lot of different fertilisons. My motto is "Build It And I Will Come". A lot of people don't have to see your art in order for it to get 'discovered'; plus a show can exist by word of mouth — as things in the imagination tend to be bigger than they are in reality.

critics. For the critic this means not being 'loved' by everyone. But a critic shouldn't want love. He or she wants respect. If you write negative things you may not get asked to all those sexy dinner parties or you may not be the one to write the juicy catalog essays but at least you'll be doing your job. I don't care what your taste is (well, really I do, we all do) I only want to understand your writing. The formula for this is: the artist is a transmitter, the critic a receiver. The critic's job is to relay back exactly what they picked up. In the last ten years too many critics have fancied themselves as transmitters.

I know critics who only support a handful of artists (I'm told this is more a European model) which is okay even though it seems unnecessarily limited. I also know critics who say things like "I hate painting". To that I would say "Don't hate" and "What do you mean?" Really taste transcends separateness. Whatever your eye leads you to is important. In other words: If you use a theory or ideology to define your taste sooner or later your eye will betray you, as you find yourself attracted to something your theory says you're not supposed to like. I say "Thou Shalt Have Pleasure".

I'm thinking; now is not such a bad time. True, the money's gone but the air feels clean, the eye feels cleansed, the criteria for success so not narrow. It's hard to get by but that's nothing new. Artists and young entrepreneurs (but especially artists) seem to be coming up with twists and variations on old themes, and in one or two cases whole new approaches. Things always start to happen when artists take matters into their own hands. The art I'm seeing in these newer galleries or anti-galleries or nomadic-sites or whatever they are may not always be good — usually it's no better than what's in the 'regular' galleries — but that's okay, we need the sparks to set the fire.
The romantic notion that artists are egoistic, lonely, maybe even mad individualists hell-bent on self-expression is a cliche which some segments of our society, including some artists, may still subscribe to. It may even be a comforting self-image in the face of very real difficulties in being an artist today. Students frequently say their work is about themselves, made for themselves. Significantly, many of my current students are fascinated by outsider artists. But in the next breath they speak of their friends, maybe just the one friend they discuss their work with. That already constitutes an audience and a community, extending their practice away from the solipsistic studio. Their teachers, the confines of a chosen institution organized around the practice of art, these also are elements of a community. This does not even take into account the ghost community in which almost any artist operates, of absent relatives, lovers, artists living and dead with whom they are engaged in vital conversation. Even, maybe especially, the Oedipal system of patricidal response, rejection, conquest, and appropriation which dominates the history of Western male modernism constitutes a community of belonging, although its individual participants personally may be fatally isolated.

Community interpreted in this way is barely intentional. Community, artistic and other — understood as a vision of common identity, common interests, survival strategies that place the individual in the context of a group which needs support so that, in return, it can sustain the individual — must be sought out, recognized, maintained.

Active, articulated communities must be worked at and thus may be sporadic. Groups like the CalArts Feminist Art Program, the LA Women's Building, Heresies, the Guerrilla Girls, Godzilla, WAC, Gran Fury, Coast to Coast, Four Walls and, for me the past eight years, M/E/A/N/I/N/G, come together, reach out to individuals, bring them together around a cause, a goal, an ideology. One has be willing to serve, but even just the effort to serve is not only not incompatible with individual artistic production but it's even a refuge from the stress of carrying one's own ego around. There is a peculiar relief in going outside the self, if only for a moment. It is work that takes precious time away from one's individual art practice, time borrowed also from jobs and rest.

Entropy, change, exhaustion, the demands and the effects of individual careers, and the necessities and burdens of personal life undermine the community, and yet the period of intervention leaves a web of friendship, common knowledge, and memory which endures, perhaps in the energy of the next group of activists that comes along.

The purer, the more rigid the organizing ideology is, the quicker the fade. Practically, I've learned to accept the surprising but useful zones of agreement with people I feel are radically different from myself. Politics make strange bedfellows but strange bedfellows are part of the reality of a functioning community. So creating community has involved for me the evolution of a dual system of values, a dual aesthetic standard. One is temporal, contingent, ironic, contentious, rueful, but paradoxically, it allows me to function as an artist more freely than the system of absolute values in aesthetics and ideology which, nevertheless, are the basic inner fuel for my work. Art making is complex so one's sense of community must accept complexity and contradiction.

Feminism has provided me with the most enduring and trustworthy community, not only for the precious support of an actual group of women artists friends, but through the expansion of my sense of self from an individual (often lonely, unhappy, in danger of seeing myself as a victim instead of an agent) to a member of a group with a shared goal: the representation, expression, and inscription into visual and linguistic history of female subjectivity, so long denied and devalued. The analysis of personal circumstance in relation to other women's and to a discourse of power separates what is specifically individual from what is in fact societally based and therefore (more easily) changeable. The buzz phrase of 70s Feminism, "the personal is political" expressed this liberating dialectic.

What women artists do within this community, how each contributes to its survival is an individual choice, ranging from small groups of like-minded and supportive friends to political action groups like WAC or the Guerrilla Girls. It is the continued, unfortunate necessity of a feminist analysis of power, of feminist strategies and support networks that insures an involvement with community and which paradoxically may help explain the embattled loneliness of some white male artists. Individual men may be "failures" or "successes" but they belong to a dominant group whose basic solidarity is a given, and the long-held dominance of that group makes it hard for its individual members to generate a new sense of community of representation. Of course many male artists see a common cause in political and aesthetic movements. Perhaps it is the most successful artists that don't have a cause except their own success and thus are the loneliest. Picasso, the twentieth-century model of male genius, arguably did his greatest work first when he and Braque formed a community of two in the development of Cubism, and, later, when he worked from his sense of spiritual community with victims of Fascism in Spain, in Guernica.

Writing has created a community for me of unknown and sometimes known readers. M/E/A/N/I/N/G was born of a community of two, Susan Bee and myself. This intimacy suited me well because I find working with larger groups personally difficult and operationally tortuous. Yet now a group of friends, strangers, and institutions are collected in a card catalogue of subscribers in a red box in my studio. It holds an abstract network of people, as insubstantial as a spider's web, yet providing connection to the outside world.

My hope is that I can continue to create communities for myself throughout my life. This hope is framed by my concerns about how to find community with younger artists who form actual and ideological communities of their own — community is often generationally coded — and my sad awareness that communities ultimately are eroded by the illness and death of their members, as I see in the lives of older artists. Thus my hope is that I can identify, create, and maintain cross-generational communities that will enrich
my life and sustain my existence in a wider world. It is as important to me as the life of my mind and the life of the studio, and that is saying a lot, given that, of course, I'm one of those individualistic driven loners!

Harriet Shorr

A FEW THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY

Today on National Public Radio an announcer referred to “the law-enforcement community.” The men in blue hired by the community to protect it are now themselves a community. The word is on everyone’s lips. It has become a euphemism for “interest group.”

“Is there a community of artists beyond the polarity of gender, race, and class, the competition of economics and various aesthetic and ideological stances? What are the possibilities for any common interests for artists today?”

The questions posed by M/E/A/N/I/N/G reflect that pairing of “community” with “common interests.” Communities based on shared values or common interests can and do exclude those who differ. They challenge a democratic ideal in which the community itself is the common interest. All over the world people are narrowing the idea of community to include only those who have their origin, their religion, their sex, their class, their race in common. Exclusion is writ large in the ethnic struggles following the breakup of the Soviet Union, in the attempts of both left and right in our own society to censor opinions with which they do not agree.

In the simplest form of community people living in proximity to one another have some sense of responsibility for each other. A man’s wife dies. His neighbors take turns bringing food. A woman breaks her leg. Her neighbor drives her to work. It is not necessary for them to be friends. Members of a community may have different political opinions and different tastes in movies. They may be of different races and classes, yet in some measure they can depend on each other.

A city is a more complex community where an ideal of political responsibility extends the sense of personal responsibility. The social and economic well-being of everyone who lives in a city is vital to the city as a community. When a city neglects entire classes of people, it ceases to be a community.

The majority of American artists live in cities. As artists we are no different from other citizens. We form interest groups and compete for available slices of pie. There are good reasons, both political and historical, for people to come together because of race, class, religion or sex. Yet the “politics of identity” will not create a whole community. Democratic politics cannot be based on identity because identity is by its nature exclusive.

Artists are often described as “individualists.” It is hard to imagine “common interests” beyond the “polarities” posed in M/E/A/N/I/N/G’s question. Perhaps we should not look for them. Perhaps when we wish to engage in politics, we could devote ourselves to the interests of the community as a whole, bringing independence of mind, creativity, and imagination to the task of solving the difficult problems that impoverish us all.
THE INDIVISIBLE INDIVIDUAL
INVISIBLE IN THERE

G. ROGER DENSOn

In a song from the 1968 musical Hair, a trio of black girls sing of their desire for white boys while a trio of white girls sing of how sexy black boys are. In the number's finale, all six sing in unison of the glory of "mixed media," a euphemism suggesting, in typically cool-1960s fashion, that intersexual is the quick, hedonistic fix to the problem of their difference. Were it so easy.

Hair's celebration of the "tribal" mix may not have been the most sophisticated prefiguration to multiculturalism, but it did much to disseminate sentiments against racist and sexist difference in the mainstream media and advocated a new concept of difference optimistically embodied in the 1960s by the term "mix." The songwriters were also playing off popular culture's recent discovery (through magazines like Life and Look) of mixed media art forms that were then still deemed avant-garde, an association that gave the sixties' version (and very fleeting) multicultural mix an air of hip radicality.

But just as the term "mixed media" now strikes us as quaint and reminiscent of a bygone modernism, an intervening, more pragmatic time has steered identity politics away from the innocent desire for a human mix, and relatively, away from humanism. In its wake, political empowerment became the prize of the newly emancipated classes of humanity, a prize that at times called for a radical separatism or temporary isolationism in the politics of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. Popular art, especially agitpop forms embodied by rap and rock groups like Public Enemy and Arrested Development, AIDS dramas like Angels In America and Philadelphia, trans-gender films like The Crying Game and Orlando, and individual entertainers like K.D. Lang and Queen Latifah, do much to explicitly reinforce pride in one's cultural identity and multiculturalism, an air of hip radicality.

Once it may be time to ask what has happened to the metaphor of "race," there is nothing in the world that can do all that we ask the metaphors of "mixed media," "woman," "black," "jew," and "homosexual," were to be redeemed instead of reviled, most activists and intellectuals affirmed these identities as socially and biologically real. Only a few intellectuals objected publicly that the sole basis for these identities was their function as categories of metaphors — even though, as Kwame Anthony Appiah explains about the metaphor of "race," there is nothing in the world that can do all that we ask the metaphors of cultural identity to do.

Although few people have lost their sense of personal individualism entirely, it's significant that so many people today base their sense of self on categories of humanity and stock circumstances rather than looking first at the individual product that distinguishes them within those categories and circumstances. How often do we hear someone say, "I am a woman, African-American, Jewish, proletariat, or gay before I am an individual?" The problems inherent to this hierarchical identification should be obvious: for though class consciousness and organization help to emancipate given cultural categories, the rhetoric of categorical identity alone does nothing to promote the individuals' place within that category. Furthermore, placing categorical identity above the individual, rather than making them inseparable and equitable, facilitates totalitarian agendas, charismatic leadership, and competitions of correctness rather than democratic principles. Once a categorical identity is reinforced with notions of determinate and essential difference, communication and intercourse with other categories of humanity becomes exceedingly rigid, if not ideologically proscribed.

Now it may be time to ask what has happened to the notion of the individual subject that humanism upheld in the West since the Renaissance and that guarantees recognition of diversity even within a human category? What has happened to the definition of an identity that proceeds from the preeminent individual been completely sullied by the hypocrisy and omissions of a humanism that coexisted with the heinous colonialisms of the last five-hundred years? (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. termed this coexistence the remarkable capacity of European philosophers to conceive of "humanity"
in ideal terms [white male] yet despise, abhor, colonize, or exploit human beings who are not "ideal"): Can a humanism that has eradicated its old prejudices and that argues for the emancipation and empowerment of both the individual and the class be restituted and redeemed?

Much of the rhetoric propelling identity politics argues against the humanist individual as the basis of society; for if the individual is given precedence, the organization and empowerment of an identifiable group of humani-
ty and the controls of its leadership, are believed by many to be diminished by personal ambitions. But as the leaders of most movements know intuitively, personal power within the political structure of any given identity group can only be achieved by recognizing and realizing one's own individual ambitions and strengths apart from the group identity, just as the resolution of differ-
ence among groups can proceed only after a greater difference, that among all individuals, is recognized.

There's little doubt that identities like "man," "woman," "black," "white," "yellow," "red," "straight," "gay," "bourgeois," and "proletariat," are in crisis. Although these ancient identities have motivated and sustained the emancipa-
tion and empowerment movements of recent decades, we may at times find such traditional identities limiting our personal development. Nonetheless, for many the practice of shedding traditional identification with an assumed racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, or economic class "jumps the gun," particularly if an achievement of parity is still forthcoming. While some feel the time for a deconstruction of traditional identity along the lines of race, gender, eth-
nicity, economic status, and ideology has come, others, especially those who espouse an activist identity informed by feminism, black power, Native Americanism, or gay rights, the impetus to dissolve traditional identity and move beyond it poses a reactionary threat.

While I personally align with the former group, I agree with the latter on one strategic point: that at this point in our developing multicultural soci-
ety, the movement beyond categorical identity is best facilitated after an analysis, emancipation, and empowerment of one's historic categorization has occurred, and after activism and assimilation by a class in the mainstream has evolved to the point that individuals within the class may prosper unself-consciously. In other words, I believe that a woman can only move beyond feminism, an African-American beyond black power politics, a gay man or lesbian beyond gay liberation, only after s/he has achieved full constitutional parity, is protected from harassment by the law, has knowledge of the history and cultural legacy of repression, or for those like the Native American, have had their land rights and historic representation restored.

But for a truly multicultural mix to occur, we must begin basing our empowerment movements on definitions of identity that repudiate essentialist and historic categories. This imperative may be complicated, however, by the ineluctability of human categorization: an individual who doesn't identify with religious faiths, for example, inevitably becomes identified with the meta-
physics of secularism; the crossdresser doesn't subvert or transgress gender identity, rather s/he redefines its codes; the surgically or biochemically altered patient doesn't defer race and sex, rather s/he exhibits them as transmutable metaphors for biological and cultural conjunctions. In each of these cases, an individual enters a new category, whether it be that which s/he appears to embody to others or that which s/he imagines herself to be. But though self-
identification is always tied to groups, and though both individuated and the mix will always be bound by categorical identification, the individual is never limited to any given identification with a specific group and can always change that identification so long as the necessary means are within reach. Only the reciprocal practices of categorization and self-individuation, and the tension between them, remain constant.

Theorists like Judith Butler and Kwame Anthony Appiah have already advocated taking such radical steps beyond class identification, respectively of gender and race, justifying individuation in the face of one's participation in class consciousness and activism. But we should remember that both Butler and Appiah have benefitted directly from movements that historically based their thought in essentialist identification (Butler from feminism and gay lib-
eration, Appiah from the black power and African nationalist movements). Ironically, they can so confidently attack the essentialist basis for class identi-
ity today because it motivated and propelled their respective empowerment movements so successfully.

Still, we can find the argument against an essentialist basis of identity stated prominently and clearly as early as 1949, when Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex wrote, "The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any such traditional identities ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro. Science regards any such characteristics as arbitrary in its application ... Yet we

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of “the white race” or “the black race,” “the Jewish race,” or “the Aryan race,” we speak in bio-
logical misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors. Nevertheless, our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which — more often than not — also have fundamentally opposed eco-
nomic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. . . Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to will this sense of natural difference into our formula-
tions." 1

And Kwame Anthony Appiah provides even greater detail:

Every reputable biologist will agree that human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Europe or Asia is not much greater than that within those populations, though how much greater depends, in part, on the measure of genetic variability the biologist chooses. If biolo-

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gists want to make intersocial difference seem relatively large, they can say that the proportion of genic variation attributable to racial difference is 9.11 percent. If they want to make it seem small, they can say that, for two people who are both Caucasian, the chances of difference in genetic constitution at one site on a given chromosome are currently estimated at about 14.3 percent, while for any two people taken at random from the human population, they are estimated at about 14.8 percent. 1

It's only to be expected that biological studies and corresponding theories of ethnicity such as these would have profound effects on gender theory and feminism. Judith Butler, both in following and extending de Beauvoir, uses them efficiently.

The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that not only questions the visibility of "the subject" as the ultimate candidate for representation of...liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women.

If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of a feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal.

The basis of most contemporary proposals for a tentative, provisional definition of identity and the corresponding abjuration of essences is the post-structuralist interpretation of Saussure's semiotics. After all, what is identity but a sign, and as a sign it partakes in that texture of signs we call language; therefore, identity, as a language, can be appreciated (in Saussure's words) as "a system of difference with no positive terms." It follows that identities do not refer to essences and are not discrete but are articulated in difference: identities are events in language that cannot be shown as corresponding directly to a thing or person in the world.

Those of you who protest might say: "My own color and sex and sexualinity can be pointed to as that to which identity corresponds." But I counter with a question: At what time? When a normally fair skinned person acquires a deep tan after many months, is s/he still "white" or is s/he now "brown" or "red"? When a self-defined "heterosexual" becomes aroused by a tale of sexual prowess told by another of the same sex, is s/he responding to the representation of the opposite sex's genitals or the expression of desire—manifest in the tone and modulation of the voice, the sensed urgency of the drive, the excitement of the narrator, the description of their shared sexual view—that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women.

Identity depart from Saussure and where artists have been particularly ingenious in their representations of postmodern identity. Some are arguing that signifiers (words, concepts, symbols) do not correspond with well-defined signifieds (our experience of the world). To my mind, all attempts to define signifiers inevitably end up in a circular demarcation and deferral of meanings, as all signifiers are open to multiple meanings. There is an indeterminacy of meaning in all languages, even the most scientific, that leaves room for slippage from signifier to signer. As perhaps no one knows better than artists, the identities of things are relativized and unstable.

From this position, even the claim of the sciences to effect a mastery and explanation of the world through the scientific investigation of sign systems is undermined and compromised. We see the language of identity as nothing more than the contingent, convenient, yet arbitrary representation of difference. Now that the requirements of a multicultural civilization are being put in place, categories of social identity may end up seeming more and more a hindrance than a convenience.

Today, many of us analyze the ways in which art relates to identity through art's implied valuations, formation, perpetuation, and decline; how attitudes toward difference generates and structures aesthetic, historical, and mercantile decisions; how critical methods disclose the traces of difference and their reception in art and society. We have to understand how the languages we employ to define our assumed differences are further created, reinforced, and maintained in the materials, processes, and spaces of art, architecture, craft, and technology. And, as I've tried to do briefly here, we must analyze the languages of contemporary art and cultural criticism, recognizing especially that hermeneutic systems are not universal, color-blind, asexual, apolitical, or neutral. In this, we would do well to remember Edward Said's advice that our obsession with structure, relations, and concepts, particularly in poststructuralism and postmodernism, should not lead us to ignore or suspend social relations in the "real" world.

With regard to this advice, whether or not we affirm individualism, there are scores of questions about our identities as individuals that we can anticipate as strategic to the future of identity politics. Are we ready to recognize as significant—in art or politics—identities defined by criteria other than those defined by social categories? Or are conditions of prejudice and power still too hegemonic and limited in the mainstream to allow us to expand beyond a position of identity defined by social categories? Have we reached a new impasse? Is our empowerment in specific communities of race, gender, sexuality, age, and economic class still not secure enough for us to venture beyond them in a public arena? Do we have a basis for empowerment if we leave our communities of apparent sameness? Is the risk that true multiculturalism is not yet in place (in Western democratic nations) still too great, as the American and European reports of the rise in fascist, fundamentalist, and patriarchal backlashes may indicate?

Sometimes our oppositions are construed to achieve solidarity and strength: the success of the African-American, feminist, and gay movements
are paradigmatic of this. But too often opposition dissolves into isolationism, separatism, and terrorism, as it has in Bosnia, South Africa, Israel, and Northern Ireland. Difference yields constructive returns only when the contrapuntal sameness among people is recognized and respected. And from this emerges a key paradox: the homogeneity of humanity is its difference, a difference that saturates humankind and does not merely subside in eddies of race, ethnicity, social class, sexual proclivity, or settles along either bank of gender. For artists and critics, then, truly transgressive practice remains wherever and whenever we can mitigate ideologies of difference that do not also consider our common bonds.

Notes

YAYOI KUSAMA: IN BETWEEN THE OUTSIDE AND INSIDE

PAMELA WYE

"I don't consider myself an artist. I am pursuing art in order to correct the disability which began in my childhood." Combining this quote by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama with the fact that she represented Japan last year at the Venice Biennale gives a good idea of the current paradox of her position as someone who resides in that space in between the so-called "parallel visions" of the insiders and the outsiders of the art world.

Born in Japan in 1929, a fiercely ambitious twenty-eight-year-old Kusama moved to New York in 1957, but not before sending off two letters and some watercolors to Georgia O’Keeffe "to ask you would kindly show me the way to approach this life." She had the equivalent of a high school education.

Throughout the 60s, Kusama exhibited regularly in New York and Europe, and with an art fueled by recurring hallucinations and obsessiveness, contributed to the emergence of minimalism with her "Infinity Net" paintings, to post-minimalist sculpture with her "Compulsion Furniture", to environments with her "Infinity Mirror Rooms" and to the happenings movement with her nude body-painting performances. After 15 years in the US., Kusama returned to Japan in 1972 where she continues her prolific production. And though, since 1977, she's lived in a private psychiatric hospital, her informed participation in artworld developments precludes her from the "outsider" or "naive master" tradition.

"One day... I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth... and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows, the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate... As I realized it was actually happening and not just in my imagination, I was frightened."

By 1959, Kusama was exhibiting large-scale paintings at various 10th Street cooperative galleries. Artists like Donald Judd and Frank Stella during the formative years of their own art collected Kusama's all-over, monochrome "Infinity Net" paintings — which she described as "curtains which separated me from people and reality" but which Judd, in contrast, described as "massive, solid lace" capturing well how these paintings draw the viewer in to peer through the tiny crescent voids between the minute and repetitious brush-strokes.

"The main themes of my art... originate from the experience of illusion in the monotonous and repetitive action, which I have always had since I was
very young. I have kept a record by drawing all these illusions in my sketchbook." The ego-dissolution that was implied by the 60's aesthetic of repetition and "all-over-ness" is imbued by Kusama in her "Infinity Net" paintings with a florid psychological power. More than her contemporaries, Kusama's work reminds us that the repetitiveness of minimalism is both a courting and an appropriation of the methods of madness.

In viewing the minute and painstaking repetitions that Kusama builds into large paintings and phalli-covered objects, one understands how literally mind-boggling it must be to actually make this art. Friends report that Kusama would work without interruption until she'd collapse from exhaustion. The trance-like states of consciousness provoked by the mechanically repeated gestures simulate, in their threat to the integrity of the self, the terrifying (and seductive) vertigoes of mental illness.

Is such an art-making process a deliberate courting of madness or an accommodation of it? "I have managed to grope and find a way to live by tracing a thread that is art... However, if it hadn't been for art, I would have killed myself a long time ago, from an inability to withstand the environment..."

In Madness and Modernism, Louis Sass compares the "consciousness and...texture of the lived world...of many schizophrenics" 4 on the one hand and the sensibility...found in modernist art and literature on the other. Both, he says, are characterized by "acute self-consciousness and self-reference, and by alienation from action and experience" 5 — qualities he refers to as hyperreflexive and compulsively introspective. Sass's thesis most clearly intersects with Kusama's work when he describes the phase that precedes the schizophrenic state, the "compulsive and compulsively introspective. " 6

Sass explains that the truth-taking stare can be followed by the "profound penetration into the essence of things...[a] sense of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, — [where] the familiar has turned strange and the unfamiliar familiar."

Kusama's experimentation with non-art materials led to her "all-over-ness" in the early 60s. She gave form to the alien vision of things... and self-reference, and by alienation from action and experience"— qualities he refers to as hyperreflexive and compulsively introspective. Sass's thesis most clearly intersects with Kusama's work when he describes the phase that precedes the schizophrenic state, the "compulsive and compulsively introspective. "

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Kusama speaks of mental states that seem to parallel Sass's description of this mode of staring when she says: "A white curtain starts to fall around me and cut me off from the outer world...How long did I use to stay in nihilistic states that seem to parallel Sass's description of this mode of staring when she says: "A white curtain starts to fall around me and cut me off from the outer world...How long did I use to stay in nihilistic..."

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which Sass writes: the "encroaching madness would seem to be out there in the world, embedded somehow in the look of material objects and in the forms of space and time." "The fabric of space seems subtly changed..." In Kusama's hands, the objects of our daily lives — coach, ladder, rowboat, dish, and clothing — erupt in libidinal revolt, unleashing a contagion of sewn-and-stuffed canvas phalli and breasts.

Another aspect of these perceptual changes, Sass writes, is a vision of unreality pervaded by a sense of infinite vastness and brilliant light — "a universe of uniform precision and clarity but devoid of the...sense of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, — [where] the familiar has turned strange and the unfamiliar familiar."

Kusama is dealing with an art derived from mental illness, she has been able to transfigure her madness into an art that has often preceded the emerging issues of the artworld. In his catalogue for the exhibition he curated in 1993 entitled The Uncanny, California artist Mike Kelley chose an installation view of Kusama's 1964 Driving Image Show that shows Kusama dressed in fishnet (infinity (fishnet?) stockings and top, with hairbrush in hand, with a phalli-covered dressing table and an "Infinity Net" painting as backdrop. Kelley writes: "The uncanny is a muted sense of horror...tinged with confusion...one of the prime examples being the confusion as to whether something is alive or dead...whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate."
until my death. This is like continuing to drink thousands of cups of coffee or eating thousands of feet of macaroni..."

In her transgression of libidinous boundaries, Kusama also mounts an assault on traditional feminine propriety and feminine lack. Her sculptures are a willful seizing of the phallus, a re-constitution of the phallic mother of the pre-oedipal phase when the child has yet to discover that her mother doesn’t have a penis. Kusama’s art-historical lineage of obsessiveness, transgressive eroticism and sly humor can be traced back to the 1930s, to the liberties Hans Bellmer took in reconfiguring the feminine lack in his Surrealist "Dolls." Kusama's obsessive reconstruction of her own missing organ finds a parallel (albeit more abstracted expression) in the reference to body parts in Eva Hesse’s post-minimal sculpture. A more explicit parallel is found in Louise Bourgeois’s compulsive re-presentations of the phallus, and recently, Rona Pondick’s sculptures recall Kusama’s displacement of libido onto the props of daily life and gender construction. Two years ago, Jessica Diamond discovered Kusama’s art and has since created wall paintings entitled "Tributes to Kusama" in which she “translated Kusama’s ideas”¹³ as opposed to appropriating her form. G. Roger Denson characterizes these tributes as "an emphatic art to ease the personal and cultural malaise of an eroded, overused conceptualism in the 1990s."¹⁴ And finally, a quasi-movement of transgressive (mostly) women artists is currently identified by the New Museum in a show entitled "Bad Girls." Defiant and outrageous, Kusama has been the embodiment of the Bad Girl (Mad Girl) and the concept of the wild and uncontainable "Carnivalesque" and "grotesque" body, that is cited on wall labels throughout the New Museum’s exhibition, places Kusama’s work, once again, squarely in the center of some of the most pressing issues of the art-world today.

In a statement that short-circuits the mutually exclusive categories between the artist who intentionally uses states of consciousness and the madwoman who suffers them, Kusama gives us the perfect parting shot. "As long as my illness plagues me," she writes, "I will confront it with the ax of my art..."

Notes
1. This paper was presented at the 1994 College Art Association Conference in NYC at the "Art and Insanity/Insane" Panel, chaired by Tom Fellner. All quotes by Kusama can be found in either Yayoi Kusama: A Retrospective, (NY: Center for International Contemporary Arts, 1989) or Yayoi Kusama: Driving Image (Tokyo: PARCO shuppan, 1986).
4. Sass, p.44.
6. Sass, p. 44.
7. Sass, p. 44.
9. Sass, p. 44.
10. Sass, p. 47.
THE BIRTH OF METATHEORY

DENA SHOTTENKIRK

The question of whether there is a contemporary definition of creativity is often asked as an oblique way of wondering exactly how it is that we evaluate contemporary artworks. For we all know that disagreement over how to judge a work of art is rampant. Some people go for a formalist approach, some political, some conceptual, and so on. Recognizing that a dilemma exists in a world devoid of an agreed upon standard of judgment, hope kindles that criteria might be located in creativity. Perhaps, the thinking goes, the whole activity of creating has changed, making the evaluation of contemporary art by outmoded standards the source of confusion. For if it is criticism that is the problem, then we are able to maintain hope and faith in the art itself.

The question: "What is a painting?" used to elicit responses that subscribed to the same algorithm: it is an object that mimetically relates to the external world and partakes of a certain number of variables that qualify it as an object of beauty. The two key components were 1) its mimetic relationship to the external world and 2) its relationship, via 1), to the abstract or universal categories of beauty and/or truth.

This position is an essentially pre-modernist, or more specifically, a pre-20th-century position. It has roots in both traditional materialist philosophy as well as idealist. The difference in the two schools of thought was with which leg they limped. The idealist tradition was to emphasize the second component with the implicit acceptance of the first, while the materialist position was to describe all the necessary variables that went into defining the first, while snorting at the second. (Courbet's dictum of "I've never painted an angel because I've never seen one" would have come in handy for those theorists.)

Idealism focused on art's ability to instantiate the universals of beauty and truth. Hegelian critical views revolve around this position, revelling in the abstract principles of formalism. Materialists adopted the opposite position and emphasized art's mimetic relationship to the physical world. Marxist interpretations get their clues from this direction.

But the question has elicited a different set of responses from theorists in the last century. The algorithm of imitation of nature has been replaced by the idea of non-mimetic representation: the art object represents the external world via the subjective and expressive interpretation of the artist.

This insertion of the subjectivity of the artist is the basis for the absolutely radical departure in interpretative possibilities. Art was no longer expected to imitate nature. This dictum wasn't granted by the theorists but was a result of the forces of the modern world. Art was an expression of the artist's reaction to the world — be it mediated through theory or emotions.

It was Gombrich in 1960 who debunked the notion of the virgin eye, and this notion must be extended from the realm which Gombrich mapped out — of the tainted relationship between the theorist's eye and the cultural history of the artwork — to the realm of the relationship between the theorist's ideas and the cultural history from which those ideas spring. Gombrich's point was that we don't see anything for the first time. Every visual evaluation carries with it the baggage of all past evaluations, both conscious and subconscious. That's the basis on which advertising exists. We fall for things because we've fallen for something like it in the past. The little neurons have been excited along that pathway before and are eager to do it again. In other words, nothing is confronted as an ontologically naked fact.

This recognition of unseen influences must be extended from the realm of the eye to the realm of the theory. No theory is an ontological naked fact. Every theorist comes dragging the baggage of his or her past acceptances of the world. Arguments cannot be understood on the supposedly neutral ground of their logical foundations, separated from the context of the art historical situation. It is a mistake to assume that aesthetic differences can be debated from an outsider's virgin eye, an aesthetic tabula rasa, so to speak. That one can debate the merits of a traditional, physicalist point of view, a la Hume or Kant, versus an interpretationalist view like Danto or Gadamer, from an objective, purely logical position, would be absurd. What they are both doing is describing the conditions for existence for works that they have, previous to their philosophical writings, included in the definition of art. Aesthetics does not start with a tabula rasa but with an already established group of objects that are ascertained as art objects. The working definitions are a priori to the philosophical definitions.

This is the difficulty in discussing the issue of creativity. It can only be discussed within the framework of art. In other words, it can only be discussed by referring to certain artworks, and not in a void. But if you already have a class of objects that you have decided are artworks, then you have already decided what it is that constitutes an artwork. And if you have already decided what it is that constitutes an artwork, then you have implicitly and a priori decided what creativity is, for creativity is the act or state of mind that has produced the artwork. The artwork is the physical result of the creativity; its physical manifestation, as it were. To legitimate one is to define the other.

There is a circularity here that is troublesome and often overlooked. What we accept as art changes our ontological view of what art is. This may seem to be a too obvious kind of tautology, but I think it is one that is often missed. Theorists are often viewed as a leader of the pack: the one who makes the rules, so to speak. He or she is the person who appears to be laying the groundwork for others to build on; articulating the areas of concern. But the truth is quite the opposite. The art is chosen before the theory is articulated; the theory is a verbalization of the art and not a prelude for its existence.

No theory incorporates all examples of art. Of the plenitude of art prod-
ucts, each theorist picks only a portion of those and creates a theory encompassing those particular examples. For instance, of all the art that is shown in New York City, including Madison Avenue trinket shops, 57th Street seascapes galleries, Soho's conceptual spots, and the various museum's official sites, no theorist makes a theory that can explain all those manifestations. Susan Sontag just doesn't talk about the more mundane things, and her theory doesn't explain their existence. Likewise with philosophers such as Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto. Everybody picks and chooses.

What does this mean for a theory of art, or more specifically, for a theory of creativity? It means the theory follows the art and not vice versa. Theory really only has explanatory or heuristic value and never formative or generative possibilities. It's only a footnote for the art that it has selectively chosen to describe.

So I will accept a class of objects, say 0(1)....0(9), and someone else, perhaps named Critic McNo, will accept a class that is similar but not exact, say 0(1)....0(10). Say our point of difference is that he likes Rauschenberg and I don't. As Rauschenberg is not in my class of objects that I am going to consider when I derive my theory. Furthermore, say 0(1)....0(9) are all examples of Abstract Expressionism. His theory has to incorporate Rauschenberg into something that will also accommodate the A.E. guys, which will take some expanding of the terms. Heroic individualism will have to include mass produced images. This dilemma that Mr. McNo is faced with is roughly analogous to the problem of definition that all contemporary critics face. It's easier to get a definition of dogs when your class consists of varieties of terriers, than to get a definition when you have to include the examples of poodles, shetlands, alaskians, invisible unicorns, dogs pretending to be horses, constantly mutating species yet to be classified. The latter instance is more like the contemporary art world.

This problem of a defining class is a completely unspoken premise much of the time but it is the deciding factor in the form the theory takes. How do I define creativity? Well, it completely depends on what objects make up my class of creative objects. If I include 0(10) or not include 0(10), my theory will vary accordingly. This fact is extremely relevant for the contemporary crisis in criticism. Previous to the 20th century and its insertion of increased subjectivity into the algorithm of creativity, the art object could be evaluated on the mimetic constraints relative to the current cultural views of the day. A stable hierarchical view was firmly embedded in not only cultural attitudes but in the whole of society. Rules did exist, they were made by those in control, and they were rarely subject to change. Art was made for the church fathers, and the subject-matter was religious, or it was commissioned by a wealthy patron, and the subject-matter was a self-exalting portrait or a landscape of owned property. The chain of command was direct and the marketing simple.

By the middle of the 19th century all of this had changed. The invention of photography, the revolutionary discoveries in science, political demands for democracy and the voice of the common man, the mass industrialization of factories and its resultant urban growth, the increased secularization of society, universal education, and the booming opportunities for the entrepreneurial middle-class all contributed to the demise of a strict hierarchy of standards. No longer did the upper classes have a lasso on the neck of value: competition was exploding and the winner was named not on the basis of pre-existing class but on the popular success of the goods marketed, be they a new fashion, a new political theory, or a new art style.

There was a profound change in the way we believed the world was constructed: our sense of the ontology of the world went from the traditional model of real, solid forms to a model of nebulous, vaporous forms with shifting meanings and transitory relations. A vaporization of value occurred. Modernist painting, beginning with Courbet and continuing with the Impressionist, Post-Impressionists, and on into the 20th century, has the same format. Built into modernism is the notion of the avant-garde, which is, by definition, the replacement of a new style, created by the younger generation, that undercuts and replaces the old style which came before it. In other words, a constant change of styles. Although visual art did not tinker with the recycling of the esthetics of the ancien regime, the new styles of modernism were equally doomed to obsolescence.

The switch from one avant-garde movement to the next plugged in nicely with the new consumerism. Art's "revolutionary" tactic worked well with the industrialization of capitalization and its incumbent need for advertising mechanisms demanding the replacement of the old with the new. The art producers of modernism could be marketed alongside the other products of capitalism. The point was invariably to consume "the new."

That aptly named movement, post-modernism, should be viewed as part of the same process, just in high speed. With its similarity to a 19th century tangle of styles but presented at the breakneck speed of late 20th century, post-modernism cannot be seen as a break in the essential pattern. Modernist styles have always changed as soon as the consuming public became inured or when a new generation of artists came up and wanted to piss just a little bit higher on the fire hydrant of art history. Production is inextricably tied to consumption and consumption to desire.

The real change in the structure of post-modernism is that styles have become increasingly short-lived. As the speed of our technology and information transmissions increase, so does the rate at which styles change, to the present day point where culture has a teton coating so thick that no style can adhere. Constant change is incompatible with a stable unchanging standard of taste. That is the crisis of criticism.

The inability of an all-encompassing theory often looks like a problem in art. It is clear that no theory can congeal itself around a large enough group of objects, each theorist picks only a portion of those and creates a theory encompassing those particular examples. For instance, of all the art that is shown in New York City, including Madison Avenue trinket shops, 57th Street seascapes galleries, Soho's conceptual spots, and the various museum's official sites, no theorist makes a theory that can explain all those manifestations. Susan Sontag just doesn't talk about the more mundane things, and her theory doesn't explain their existence. Likewise with philosophers such as Nelson Goodman and Arthur Danto. Everybody picks and chooses.

What does this mean for a theory of art, or more specifically, for a theory of creativity? It means the theory follows the art and not vice versa. Theory really only has explanatory or heuristic value and never formative or generative possibilities. It's only a footnote for the art that it has selectively chosen to describe.

So I will accept a class of objects, say 0(1)....0(9), and someone else, perhaps named Critic McNo, will accept a class that is similar but not exact, say 0(1)....0(10). Say our point of difference is that he likes Rauschenberg and I don't. As Rauschenberg is not in my class of objects that I am going to consider when I derive my theory. Furthermore, say 0(1)....0(9) are all examples of Abstract Expressionism. His theory has to incorporate Rauschenberg into something that will also accommodate the A.E. guys, which will take some expanding of the terms. Heroic individualism will have to include mass produced images. This dilemma that Mr. McNo is faced with is roughly analogous to the problem of definition that all contemporary critics face. It's easier to get a definition of dogs when your class consists of varieties of terriers, than to get a definition when you have to include the examples of poodles, shetlands, alaskians, invisible unicorns, dogs pretending to be horses, constantly mutating species yet to be classified. The latter instance is more like the contemporary art world.

This problem of a defining class is a completely unspoken premise much of the time but it is the deciding factor in the form the theory takes. How do I define creativity? Well, it completely depends on what objects make up my class of creative objects. If I include 0(10) or not include 0(10), my theory will vary accordingly. This fact is extremely relevant for the contemporary crisis in criticism. Previous to the 20th century and its insertion of increased subjectivity into the algorithm of creativity, the art object could be evaluated on the mimetic constraints relative to the current cultural views of the day. A stable hierarchical view was firmly embedded in not only cultural attitudes but in the whole of society. Rules did exist, they were made by those in control, and they were rarely subject to change. Art was made for the church fathers, and the subject-matter was religious, or it was commissioned by a wealthy patron, and the subject-matter was a self-exalting portrait or a landscape of owned property. The chain of command was direct and the marketing simple.
see with our eyes is not all there is to the story. Art movements from Impressionism through Surrealism have dealt, in some way or another, with a new awareness of an other, more real world, which was separate from the world we superficially accepted. No object was complete in itself and nothing was what it seemed. The mimetic relationship had been severed. Art accurately reflected the newly established mediated reality of the world.

In our own times, the examples are many and varied. When Rebecca Horn makes two brushes mechanically kiss each other, the comment clearly is about something other than the brushes qua brushes. It is the reality behind the visual object that counts. In other words, it is the story the artist is telling you: her view of the world. That is what you're meant to focus on. The same is true of Barbara Bloom's vision of the Titanic, or Nancy Spero's rendition of the history of the image of woman: each artist is presenting her individual take on the events of the world. The art is not meant to correspond to the world but to the subjective truth of her point of view. The referent of the art object is the artist's own subjectivity and not the world itself. Representation is not to be identified with resemblance.

Today, the referent of the creative act is not an object which mimetically relates to the world and has been materially formed according to the standards set by the rules of aesthetic taste; it is the byproduct, in whatever material form, that results from the subjective state of individual creativity itself. When Danzo takes Duchamp as the model for his discussion1 or when Goodman accepts appropriated art into the class of art objects— an addition that fits in well with his nominalism — the judgement of the individual artist has replaced society's standard of taste. The referent is the individual artist's creativity; a nebulous object at best.

This renders irrelevant, as standard for judgement, the materials or format used for the thoughts expressed. The Pandora's box of subjective desires has been released. When modernism set in motion a continually shrinking class of people that determined standards — from the class of the wealthy and powerful before modernism, to the much smaller class of the in-the-know avant-garde, to the post-modern state of every man for himself (sic) — the obvious result is a real lack of standards by which to judge anything.

More important, it has shifted the referent of the art object from the objects of the external world to the inner subjective responses of each individual artist. The art object refers back to the artist and not to the outer world. The relationship between the art object and the outer world is not one of imitation; it is not mimetic. It is a relationship of representation. And that representation is completely via the artist's eye. The object is about the perception and not the perceived.

It is the artist who determines what is art. Thus, the artist's intentionality is the key to determining the meaning of the work. Was it meant to be art and what are its justifications? Duchamp determined what object was to be art and gave his seductively oblique reasons for it. And they convinced. The meaning of the work then refers directly back to the subjectivity of the artist: who the artist is and what's his or her viewpoint.

This art historical shift has radically changed the way people discuss creativity and define art. Because the referent of the work of art, the fact that it refers to the artist's subjective viewpoint and not the physical world itself, has fundamentally changed with modernism, so have the discussions about both the ontology of the art object and the nature of the referent itself. The point that I am trying to make is the link between the two. The culmination of social, political, and economic changes of the 19th century wrought not just changes in visual style, but fundamental changes in the way the culture at large viewed itself. The concrete world gave way to the ephemeral. The referent of art went toward the individual and the subjective, and as it did it forced concomitant changes in ontological theories: art simply was not the object it had previously been.

And if art is not the object it had previously been, then even more so, theory is not the activity it once was. If the referent of the art object is each individual artist, then it is quite obvious that no theory can encompass enough of those individuals to make it fly. For we have seen that choices in the objects that one considers as art are a priori to the theory that is developed. And no theorist can choose every object. That is why each critic settles for a little slice of the population.

The problem that we have is in our definitions and our theories, not in our ability to create. This is obvious since the existence of the art precedes the theories that define them. Art gets made independently of theory. The difficulty that theorists have in making a coherent explanation of all that is happening points to the historical dilemma that theory is now facing as a result of the referent of art switching to the artist's subjectivity combined with the rapidly changing demands for the new. No theory can encompass enough, for long enough, to make itself legitimate. Theory is now replaced with metatheory. In other words, we can make a theory about art theories, but art theories in and of themselves are impossible. Thus, there is a problem with theory but not with art, nor with metatheory.

What the art will eventually coalesce into, (since a period of time like post-modernism cannot continue to run on the spent fuel of what it is not, namely modernism), is one of those unutterably foolish questions which seems to beg others to don their witch's hats and whip out their crystal balls. The Baroque period lasted one hundred and fifty years, and people had trouble defining it then as they do now. Vagueness is sometimes in vogue for a long time.
My name is Dr. Kurt Schwitters. Some years ago a one-armed man broke into my house and killed my wife. I was arrested and convicted of the murder despite my innocence. On the way to prison, I escaped during a train wreck. Hiding from the authorities, I began my work as an artist.

With the publication of pppppp, the one-armed man is out of the bag and on his way to the dustbin. For the signal importance of Kurt Schwitters is that his work moved along a spectrum from poems and conceptual works to collages and easel works to sculptures and environments. To understand any one aspect of this total art project, it is necessary to know its complements. Rothenberg’s on his way to the dustbin. For the signal importance of Kurt Schwitters is that his work moved along a spectrum from poems and conceptual works to collages and easel works to sculptures and environments. To understand any one aspect of this total art project, it is necessary to know its complements. Rothenberg’s comprehensive, buoyant collection and translation of Schwitters writings makes this possible, for the first time, in English.

The radicality of Schwitters’s practice of collage becomes apparent in reading through the final “poetics” section of pppppp:

Today even the striving for expression in a work of art seems to me deleterious to art. Art is a primordial concept, exalted as a godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and pointless. The work of art comes into being through the artistic evaluation of its elements. I know only how to do it, I know only my materials, from which I take, I know not to what end...

...by harmonizing different types of materials among themselves, I have an advantage over mere oil painting, for besides playing off color against color, I also play off line against line, form against form, etcetera, and even material against material...

To begin with I concerned myself with other genres, for example with the art of poetry. The elements of poetry are letters, syllables, words, sentences. Poetry arises from playing off these elements against each other. Meaning is only essential if it is to be used as one such factor. I play off sense against nonsense. I prefer nonsense, but that is a purely personal matter. I pity nonsense, because until now it has been so neglected in the making of art, and that’s why I love it.

— 1920, from “Merz”

Collage for Schwitters — whether verbal or visual — is an open-ended process that enters into a modernist “hyperspace” which refuses preordained conceptions of homogeneity, fit, order, genre, or unity, while at the same time resolving (or “harmonizing”) the collage elements. Schwitters’s most famous visual works are known for the exquisite modulation of elements in the compositional field, comparable in many ways to the “analytic” cubism of Braque and Picasso. In contrast, many of his literary works are more overtly comic in their choice of materials and in their coefficient of incongruity.

Schwitters’s futurist vision becomes apparent when he states his goal in violating the unity of individual genres: “My aim is the total Merz art work, which combines all genres into an artistic unity... I did this in order to erase the boundaries between the arts.” As such, Schwitters’s work marks an acute intersection, through his collage method, of verbal and visual art.

Schwitters’s poems are among the least known, yet most important, of radical modernism, prefiguring the most innovative directions of the postwar years. Schwitters describes his work as “abstract” — less interested in “meaning” than “wordfeeling”: “the only essential thing is giving form.”

In analogy with Merz painting [merz poetry] uses as given parts complete sentences from newspapers, billboards, catalogs, conversations, etcetera, with or without changes. (That is terrible.) These parts do not have to fit in with the meaning, because there is no more meaning. (That is also terrible.) There are no more elephants either, there are only parts of the poem. (That is terrible.) And you? (Design war loans!) Determine for yourselves what is a poem, what is a frame.

— 1919, “The Artists’ Right to Self-Determination”

As a poet, Schwitters’s first great — and surprising — success was “An Anna Blume” in 1919 (“Anna Blume Has Wheels” in Schwitters’s own 1942 translation):

Blue is the colour of thy yellow hair.

Red is the whirl of thy green wheels.

Thou simple maiden in everyday-dress,

Thou dear green animal,

I love thee!

Thou Thee Thee Thine, I Thine, Thou mine—we?

That belongs (by the side) in the glow box, ...

Schwitters did not repeat this particular style, preferring to work in a number of new forms of verbal art, which in addition to what Joris and Rothenberg call his “Dada and proto-Surrealist” poems, include sound poems (the entire text of Schwitters’s milestone “Ur Sonata” is included in pppppp), visual poems (the several color reproductions of Schwitters’s collages of verbal materials provide a crucial context for collection as a whole), and, finally, the wonderfully madcap prose extravaganzas (suggesting directions later taken by such writers as Raymond Federman and Carla Harryman) that are, for me, the most unexpected works in this collection.
The "futurist moment" is poised in an *avant guerre*, "before the war" in Duncan's sense of that facing, whose next stanza is always catastrophe. Schwitters's giddy "proses," his invocation of a *zaum* (transence) "or" language not bounded by national tongues, represents a search for frames to contain, mark and perhaps transcend difference. This quest remains urgent.

... We live, because we remember, And go on living, because we hope. Time is change all around us, Space is Dead. We are the measure, For Time and eternally, infinite Space. We grope, because we know, If we were, when we were. — 1915, "If I Were, When I Was"

Rogelio López Cuenca and the Ordinary

*Do Not Cross Art Scene*

*by Rogelio López Cuenca*

*exhibition catalog, Kunsthalle, Basel, 1990*

*Home syndrome and Home Swept Hole*

*by Rogelio López Cuenca*

*exhibition catalog and book, Sala José M. Fernández, Malaga, 1993*

The ordinary is blank. It's ordinary because we don't notice it; or is it that we don't choose to notice it? Like ideology in a fully functioning system, the ordinary is transparent: our parent that we cannot see but all the more insist on the way words are used in the language play that is their home and in Michel DeCerteaux's *ars de faire*, in which the small inversions of order a worker might make on the job create a tactical opening of space.

You can't break down the distinctions between everyday life and art because everyday life is always a bit ahead of this game. This is why Duchamp, contra postmodern mapmakers, is the high modernist artist par excellence, & it is why modernism, up to the second world war, could synthesize high and low, popular and esoteric, while in the postwar cultural economy, related efforts, as by Warhol — in his "fine" art though not his movies — give up on everyday life, switching focus to commodification of persons and things. Breaking down the distinction between art and packaging proved a more lucrative enterprise than breaking down the distinction between art and everyday life. This is where the work of the Spanish artist Rogelio López Cuenca takes its original turn. To exhibit the ordinary in an aesthetic context is by now an empty gesture, since a hollowed-out or banalized ordinary is more or less the characteristic content of "postmodern" high-art commodities.

López Cuenca sites the everyday not in content, to be appropriated without intervention, but in the specific forms of the contemporary urban environment, above all the signage of public spaces — the parking & traffic & information signs of streets and airports. How make these visible? — so that we can look at, not simply obey, their regulation of flow & punctuation of environment. López Cuenca does not recontextualize, as it were aestheticizing, signage: he is actively intervening in the process by which signage operates unseen. He rewrites the signs so that we might rewire our lives.

I say that López Cuenca does not aestheticize quotidian signage as such, repeating and emptying the Duchampian gesture. Rather, he reverses this process, bringing the aesthetic into the everyday — his works, derived from public spaces, are, for the most part, re-sited in public spaces. But before this re-siting, López Cuenca transforms the content of the signs, creating a poetic space within these signs that contests the neutrality of the forms that house them. It's as if López Cuenca had created a working model for Charles Sanders Peirce's idea of language as a clash of signs by replacing the informational content of the signs with language that conveys no information.

I've placed one of López Cuenca's signs in the hallway just outside my classroom. The sign has the exact color scheme and shape of a famous midtown Manhattan traffic sign. At the top, replacing "tow-away zone," a work of everyday life — his works, derived from public spaces, are, for the most part, re-sited in public spaces. But before this re-siting, López Cuenca transforms the content of the signs, creating a poetic space within these signs that contests the neutrality of the forms that house them. It's as if López Cuenca had created a working model for Charles Sanders Peirce's idea of language as a clash of signs by replacing the informational content of the signs with language that conveys no information.

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apparent lack of content. For if the space of official information is negated, then the authority of all such sanctioned transmissions is undermined. It's certainly not that anyone would mistake one of López Cuenca's signs for a "real" parking sign, but its presence, next to identically designed, "functioning" signs, creates an unacceptable discrepancy. This violation of social order is not of the outrageous type with which we have been so comfortable; a different, subliminal, erosion is at work here.

— Charles Bernstein

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Subside to Maintain

SUBSIDING 4 FLOORS 1 WALK

I was particularly impressed by the way in which the building was designed to allow natural light to penetrate deep into the structure. The use of large windows and open spaces was a key feature of the design, and it seemed to work well in practice. The materials used were also very high quality, and the overall impression was one of durability and longevity.

I was also struck by the attention to detail in the building's construction. Every aspect of the design seemed to have been carefully considered, from the placement of the windows to the choice of materials. It was clear that a lot of thought had gone into creating a building that would be both beautiful and functional.

Overall, I found the Subside building to be a marvel of modern architecture. Its innovative design and attention to detail made it a standout example of what can be achieved when architects and engineers work together to create something truly exceptional.

End of Report
M/E/A/N/I/N/G #15

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CONTEMPORARY ART ISSUES

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