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MAINSTREAM MYTHOPOESIS

G. ROGER DENSON

In the war being waged for ideological control of the American cultural mainstream, a lead assault of the left comes from artists working in popular genres like cyberpunk, superhero, horror, and sci-fi. For genres such as these are subtly disseminating seeds of dissent against traditional closures of class, race, gender, sexuality, environment, and the family among populations generally indifferent to overt social activism. Some even model the principles of postmodern political theory, postindustrial ecology, multiculturalism, feminism, gender redefinition, and gay lifestyles as the subtexts of their plots — to the point that they may instill a desire for social activism, tolerance, and political parity, if not cultural relativism. And so, in this era when demands to meet the bottom line and the top dollar close in on the arts and entertainment industries, even as obsolete cultural positions like "high" and "low" art converge in an ongoing renegotiation of criteria, the pervasive, fantastic, technological, and hormonal arts are having the greatest impact on societal reorganization.

In 1993, many observers of popular culture saw a new egalitarianism take to the extreme when D.C. Comics decided to kill Superman, the consummate American, patriarchal myth of mainstream modernism. Although the man of steel's death was temporary, he was replaced for a time by a mélange of Supermen that included an African-American male. Similarly, Wonder Woman's mythos was altered by D.C. Comics and artist-writer George Perez in 1987 to explore and vitalize the debates of feminism and patriarchy, pacifism and militancy, and separatism and solidarity that her origin among the Greek amazons long implied. Whether super-tokenism or super-activism, D.C. Comics' revitalization of the Superman and Wonder Woman myths along lines of racial and gender parity epitomize some fifteen years of populist, political mythopoesis — the recreation, recharging, and radical transformation of myth — in the interest of a truly democratic redistribution that began with obscure, cult productions of the 1960s and '70s and gradually expanded to include some of the more lucrative icons in comic books, special-effects films, and fiction.

The notion of myth, expanded well beyond its archaic definition of ontological models that have lost credence, is today a ubiquitous, protean, living speech that spreads a consensus of esteemed meanings throughout a population. What is important to myth is not the claims to the truth or falsity of that meaning, for myth can be as real or fictitious as consciousness will allow;
rather, it is the intensity of the esteem with which myth is held that deter-
mines whether a motif transcends to the mythological. Myth can even be con-
sidered an active agent in the distribution of power, whether that be in the
ratification of the status quo or its radical rearrangement. In this pragmatic
and socialized view of myth, the mythic narratives of the mainstream seem
more capacious than they did by the criterion of the modernists, particularly
those forms that seek to co-opt the social, cultural, economic, and political
orders governing the industrial and postindustrial nations of the world to
effect an egalitarian redistribution of power.

Critics and mythographers can no longer afford to neglect what is proving
to be the largest dissemination of common and self-conscious narrative myths
in history. In this pragmatic, post-deconstructionist scheme, significant
mythropoesis attempts to direct the ongoing shifts in power by reclaiming
mythic representation for the peoples who were historically denied cultural
representation. This mythopoesis attempts to overturn conventional main-
stream mythologies that implicitly perpetuate the hegemony of one group and
the subjugation of another. Legitimizing hegemony has always been a prime
function of mythology. Those myths of history we can identify with specific
historical social orders are often the victors of social conflicts commemorated
in postbellum myth. The identities of the losers of historic conflicts have often
been symbolically displaced from the narrative myth, wiping them (or at least
attempting to wipe them) completely from human memory. In their place, we
are left with reductive, abstract orders that remain polarized and competi-
tive, as, for example, in the dualism between good and evil, fatality and
immortality, knowledge and ignorance, or survival and extinction of the
species.

By contrast, in living mythopoetic production, we not only glimpse the con-
vergence and conflict of identifiable social, cultural, economic, and political
orders as they cohabit and compete for prominence in the mainstream, but
also we are often solicited to champion one order over the other through the
sheer power of compelling rhetoric (in the literary arts) and artifice (in the
visual arts), or some combination of the two (in film, graphic novels, and
comic books). For as myth is contingent largely on consent, new myth is par-
cially vulnerable to shifts in the arbitration and fashions of thought, making
mythropoesis a severely competitive discourse seeking our participation in
determining which orders ascend to, or descend from, power and in determin-
ing who lives and dies with integrity.

The mythopoesis of present-day cyberpunk, superhero, science fiction, and
horror genres are experimental myths-in-process that can be worked out only
so far as the conflicts between the hegemonic orders of the past can be medi-
atied by political events and ideological protagonists in the present. But once
this dynamic, indeterminate collision is reconciled — most likely long after
current generations are dead — the vital, existential stuff that propels signifi-
ificant mythopoesis becomes still, and the mythopoesis refits in myth. Only a
small portion of the genres discussed here are mythopoetic; the rest are
mythic in upholding conventional social patterns and psychologies.

Although the hero myth never died out in popular culture the way it did in
modernist literature, to keep pace with the cultural development of postin-
dustrial Western societies, it is being reinvented and recharged with both the
postmodern sense of its historic uses and a democratic sense of its political
potential. In the most artistically, and often commercially, successful real-
izations of postmodern mythopoesis, like those in the Alien and Blade Runner
films, the cyberpunk novels of Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, Pat Cadigan,
and Kathy Acker, Anne Rice's Vampire Chronicles, and the comic books
Swamp Thing and Hellblazer, we are startled by exhumed realities that were
historically so deeply repressed by religious, imperial, and patriarchal hege-
monies that the mere glimpse at their revived visual and textual manifesta-
tions today causes violent psychic and social confrontations with the quotidi-
an, inveterate myths of normative societies. We won't find this confrontation
in mainstream heroic icons like the original Superman, Indiana Jones,
Batman, Luke Skywalker, and Captain Kirk, nor even in the feminine varia-
tions of the hero, like the pre-'87 Wonder Woman, who other than in their
heroic action perpetuate, rather than challenge, patriarchally defined roles
for women.

Mythic models such as those rely on patterns of the hero (and victim)
myths) that generally uphold the status quo because the larger, dominating
social orders of the conquering, ethnocentric, heterosexual patriarch is large-
ly responsible for the myth's generation, dissemination, and perpetuation at a
time when both the local mythic pattern and the local social order were at
incipient and confrontational stages of development. Thus the mythic pattern
of Superman is not mythopoetic; it perpetuates the established patterns of
Gilgamesh, Prometheus, Herakles, Beowulf, Lituolone, Wunzh, and
Quetzalcatl, myths that represented clashes between the hegemonies and
upstart orders of their respective societies. We know that conventional
redressings of historic myth (Star Trek as a redressed Odyssey, Superman as
Hercules and Apollo, Batman as Hades surveying the criminal underworld,
Luke Skywalker as a reconciled Oedipus or Orestes) make use of this reduc-
tivism, making heroism the inexorable sublimation of collective desire.

Today's critically mythopoetic narratives, however, confront and challenge
the circumstances maintained by the narrative myths of the status quo. In
the 1990s, as in the 1960s and 1970s, confrontational mythopoesis is support-
ed and reinforced by an explosion of agitpop — a class of popular art that
stirs up the representations of power in the mainstream, even stimulates ide-
ological and political dissent, by infiltrating and manipulating the systems of
representation through which power is upheld. Found in rap and rock music,
film, television, comic books, and fiction, popular mythopoesis is agitpop's psy-
cho-social consciousness in which the previously sublimated contents and
forms of civilization are churned in a stew with the socially repressed con-
tents and forms that have been dredged up by social and political dissent.
Like all myths broaching the issues of collective sublimation and repression,
agitant genres draw on socio-political conflicts that seek the elevation of
social orders (feminist, gay, multicultural, ecological, decentrist) that have
been systematically repressed by the mainstream.

One of the more copious examples of this confrontation in a popular mythopoetic narrative is found in the Alien film trilogy. In the three films, Alien (1979, directed by Ridley Scott), Aliens (1986, by James Cameron), and Alien3 (1992, by David Fincher), the courageous woman, Lt. Ellen Ripley (played by Sigourney Weaver), confronts a rapacious extraterrestrial xenomorph in a series of horrific battles that embodies the extremes to which the bipolarization of the self and the other can be taken. In this bipolarization, we subtextually confront two myths representing deeply repressed anxieties: the first is the more general anxiety individuals have been made to feel about their bodies and functions that arguably originates with the archaic circumscriptions and repressions of religion and metaphysics, a circumscription that is perpetuated implicitly by science, capitalism, and bureaucracy and is manifest in anxieties about illness, physical onslaught, decapitation, rape, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, gender restrictions, random annihilation — in short, all assaults on the body. The second is the more specific myth of Woman as She is represented as male-dependent by the patriarchies over the millennia in popular myths, particularly those in which She plays goddess or fair maiden (Astarte, Leta, Andromeda) to be saved by the splendid male god or hero (Baal, Apollo, Perseus) from the terrifying jaws of the serpent/dragon (Yamm, Python).

More relevant to a consideration of postmodern mythopoesis, however, is Ripley’s personal evolution, which transcends her subjective literary significance and psycho-social implications when, in Alien she was characterized merely as the technically proficient intellectual who found herself, and later her life, threatened extraordinarily. Ripley moves from the merely mythic, which is specific to the culture from which she emanates, and becomes mythological, by participating in a language that transcends the time-space of the Western modernity she emanates from. In Aliens, for example, her characterization enters a terrain of language already travelled by the myths of Demeter, Orpheus, Herakles, Isis, Wanjiur, Inanna, Izanagi, and Kutoyis, when she descends to the burning sub-basement of the refinery she is about to nuke (a techno-positivist equivalent of Dis and interpreted psychoanalytically as the ascent to the unconscious). Here she is to save the little girl Newt (who is mythically identifiable with Persephone, Euridice, Dumuzi Tammuz, Izanami). But then the mythic pattern switches to that example, her characterization enters a terrain of language already travelled by the myths of Demeter, Orpheus, Herakles, Isis, Wanjiur, Inanna, Izanagi, and Kutoyis, when she descends to the burning sub-basement of the refinery she is about to nuke (a techno-positivist equivalent of Dis and interpreted psychoanalytically as the ascent to the unconscious). Here she is to save the little girl Newt (who is mythically identifiable with Persephone, Euridice, Dumuzi Tammuz, Izanami). But then the mythic pattern switches to that operating in Beowulf, Kuan-Yin, St. Margaret, St. George, and Dargis, as Ripley becomes the destroyer of monsters and protectoress of humanity. This transformation from everyperson to hero, in the second film of the series, is followed, in the third film, with the metamorphosis of Ripley into a tortured, Siyyphean ascetic, a kind of existentialist Brahman martyr whose via dolorosa ends, like Herakles, the Buddha, and Quetzalcoatl, in a fire that cleanses, though this time its cleansing is of the corporeal form, with any extra-physical effect left to the inference of the viewer.

The gender pattern of the Ripley-Alien battle, however, displaces the patriarchal myth by resuscitating less well known myths representing

Woman as strong and courageous and personified by women (St. Martha, Miao Shan) who defend themselves from the serpent-dragon that would otherwise decimate them. Even more radically, Ripley assumes the value traditionally ascribed to male saviors by defending both men and women overwhelmed by the decapitating jaws (or psychoanalytically, the vagina dentata) and gorging larva (the obvious phallus dentatus) of the alien xenomorph. The breadth of Ripley’s dramatic characterization, particularly her courage and intelligence, have had few precedents in the literature of Western women heroes. Only Aristo’s adaptation of the Carolingian legend of Bradamante, the warrior maiden, in Orlando Furioso, and Spencer’s Britomart, heroine of The Faerie Queene — women whose knighthood faculties excel the male heroes whom they accompany — have sustained so great a physical heroism. And in her resolve and determination, few beside the dranmatist persona of Jeanne d’Arc and Antigone can match the portrayed detail of the psychological commitment Ripley has to moral principle.

We can also observe feminist mythopoesis gradually saturating the male adolescent preserve of superhero comics, where the new Wonder Woman, Storm, Rogue, She-Hulk, Power Girl, Crimson Fox, and Captain Marvel are combatting the villainy of patriarchy before it takes hold. Marvel Comic’s Phoenix character has the extraordinary function of reclaiming for female myths what patriarchy stole from neolithic matriarchies the world over: the primary representation of creation. Phoenix isn’t so much a character as much as she is a universal force of creation that finds the character Jean Grey in X-Men (The Uncanny X-Men and X-Factor) a suitable avatar to experiment with human limitation. In keeping with the narrative requirements of comicdom, the experiment of containing a fraction of the limitless power of the cosmos in a small human frame goes horribly wrong when she evolves into Dark Phoenix, the chaos-bringer. If Ripley, in the Alien films, embodies the humanization of the neolithic triple aspect of the Goddess, Phoenix is the unabashed reprisal and glorification of her imagined omnipotence. Initially portrayed without sexuality, Phoenix’s first manifestation as Jean Grey is that of a young woman awakening to the unconscious anxieties and desires of her ripe corporeality. She is a mutant version of the virgin, Kore, the inner soul of Mother Earth to the Greeks; at the French temples of Kerlescan, Keradro, and Kermario and among the Britons she was Ker; she was Car to the inhabitants of Carnac and Cardia, variously called Q’Re, Cara, Kher, Ceres, Kauri. The creators of the virginal Supergirl in the early 1960s must have known this, for they named her Kara. When she saves the universe from destruction, Phoenix is Kali Ma or Durga, the preserving Great Mother; in ancient Egypt she would be Hathor; Ishtar among the Babylonians; Mari-Anna among the Semites. When she can no longer contain the energies hostile to life and consumes an entire solar system, Dark Phoenix activates associations with Uma-Kali, the Destroyer and hungry earth of India; Cerridwen, the Celtic death-dealing Sow; Atropos the Cutter of the Greek Fates; Nebhbet, the Egyptian vulture goddess of death and rebirth; Macha the Great Queen of Phantoms of Ireland and Macha Alla, Central Asian moon goddess; she is also Hecate, Hel,
Eresh-Kidal, Queen of the Ghostworld, Queen of the Underworld, Queen of the Shades, Persephone 'the Destroyer.' In Barbara G. Walker's words she is "all the forms representing death, winter, doomsday, the waning moon, and other symbols of the inevitable destruction or dissolution that must precede regeneration."

But the embodiment of the universe in Woman's image — the reprise of myths like the Sumero-Babylonian Tiamat, from whose formless body the universe was born — is more than just a feminist reclamation of the creation-preservation-dissolution myth. As Vern L. Bullough points out, the basis for many assumptions about gender and sex often appears in a civilization's creation myths, usually involving the earth and the sky. "Western culture in general is built on an old assumption that the earth is female, mother earth, and the sky is male, the heavenly father; this deeply ingrained mythological assumption has served as the norm for sexual relations with the male on top, the female underneath." In light of this ideological genealogy underlying the Western legislation of gender, Phoenix takes back the representation of the sky, outer space, the planets, and symbolically, sexual choice, for Woman; she does not run to the fatherlover for protection in the sky, as did the count­less myths of patriarchy, but equally shares the universe with him.

The mutant Ororo, a.k.a. Storm of the X-Men, also takes back the sky with her ability of riding the winds and shaping the weather, but though her powers are finite and earthly, she is more complex and multifaceted than Phoenix, or for that matter most other superheroines. An African by birth, Ororo spends her childhood as a thief in Cairo after her mother was murdered. In her teens, she is living in Kenya when the X-factor in her genetic makeup manifests her ability to soar through the sky and command the weather to her liking, a power that inspires the local population to worship her as a fertility goddess who legislates the growth of crops and the replenishment of the rivers. In her twenties, Ororo is sought out and brought to the U.S. by professor Xavier, founder of the X-men, a team of super-powered mutants whose incarnation in 1970 is one of the first multicultural assem­blies in comic history, comprised as it is of a Native American, a Russian, a German, a Japanese, and an African. Ororo, taking the public moniker Storm, inspires such loyalty with her formidable intellect, swift reflexes, boundless courage, and chivalrous code of honor that she soon wins the team's place as leader. For some twenty­odd years (in real, not comic time), Ororo leads the X-men against every manner of adversity in every manner of reality.

The conjunction of womanhood, African blood, and leadership of a Western based league of heroes in the person of Ororo is no mere accident or act of caprice; rather, it is a premeditated design to reverse the patterns of forced cultural regression that beset both Africans and women over the past two or three-thousand years, a reversal that was at least partially the designed effect of repeated political conquests. Ororo is a character created entirely in deference to the source of all ancient female myths, the black African mother. She is a significant mythopoetic symbol for the anthropological, his­


torical, and political termination of Eurocentric patriarchy and the complete abjuration of the historic forces that effected the decline both of the great pre­modern civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa and the great matrifocal societies of the Neolithic age. In this respect, Ororo positively influences the youth of the world as a comprehensible African role model at a stage in their lives when they most need one to deflect the negative images and metaphors of racists and misogynists. For Ororo comes to them years before they're likely to understand the contributions of Africans and Americans like Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Jesse Owens, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Shirley Chisolm, Angela Davis, Steve Biko, Thurgood Marshall, or Nelson Mandela.

The X-men that Ororo leads are mythopoetic of a larger otherness or of the struggle against being perceived only in the capacity of being other. Defensively self-described as "homo sapiens superior," the mutants are born with an X-factor in their genetic makeup that empowers them with fantastic abilities at some time during adolescence; but it also causes them to become different from ordinary humans, and, as a result, they are despised and per­secuted. Whether in narratives that stress the heroic or anti-heroic, difference, with all its postmodern connotations, is the predominant buzz word addressed in multiculturalist popular culture. In standard heroic myths, difference is treated with awe and is culturally sublimated; with the antiheroic, difference is portrayed as something widely feared and culturally repressed. In either heroic or antiheroic mythopoesis, however, the differ­ences we sublimate and repress are forced to consciousness until they enter the mainstream where they are desperately resisted.

As one of the more successful and lucrative comic serials distributed around the world, The Uncanny X-men disseminates the current anthropolog­ical wisdom that no matter how anatomically similar groups of humankind appear, the diversity even within that group is too great to allow for a verifi­able partition of humanity into races. The difference between people is homo­geneously distributed throughout the human race, not distinguished merely as anatomical groupings, just as difference is homogenously spread across all nations; a principle of continuity that puts us simultaneously in concert and dissonance with the world. The X-men thus illustrate a point that even many ethnolo­gists and theorists of gender miss: that both difference and solidarity are use­ful as notions only in express relation to one another.

As societies scrutinize one another, and as their languages interface, the invertebrate, hegemonic orders react by projecting the myths of the other (the infidel, the heretic, the damned, the spy, and now the genetically inferior) onto the "newcomers," isolating, identifying, and controlling the behavior of the "other" so long as the traditional order remains in power. The X-men chal­lenge, for they possess superhuman powers — the dream stuff of every disenfranchised and subjugated people — that liberate them from the obso­lete authorities and restraints of the old orders. The rebellious X-men repre­sent the dreams of the political prisoner, the downtrodden, the rape victim, the abused family member, the drug addict, the whore, the welfare recipient,
and the criminal; the X-man is anyone who, imagined as "other" by some centrally defined "same," has ever been slandered, ostracized, persecuted, and exterminated by some deluded, but empowered, agent of "sameness."

NOTES

1. See D.C. Comics, The Adventures of Superman #600, June 1993. See also, Superman #75, Jan., 1995, in which the original Superman dies.

2. The "mainstream" is itself significantly mythic as it reinforces, and is reinforced by, other myths such as the status quo or community.

3. Demeter, Orpheus, and Herakles are well known from the Greek, and Isis from the Egyptian, but readers will be interested to find that the African Wanjiru, the Mesopotamian Isinna, both female, the Japanese Inugami, and the Blackfoot Kutoyis, both male, resemble one another by descending and attempting to rescue some beloved victim from the dark underworld of the dead.


7. The symbol "X," that refers to the fictional mutant X-factor which appears in certain DNA structure with random and variable results is a variable in the mathematical and logical sense. It has nothing to do with Malcolm Little's public moniker, though the comic serial's first publication in 1963 coincided with many white American's first acquaintance with the black leader.

MOM AND POP ART

In 1994, The Whitney Museum of American Art presented the exhibition, "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," organized by Thelma Golden; once again, the emphasis was on "Representations" rather than on "Art." This distinction relates to the politicized context in which contemporary art is being considered. The relation of theory to art practice, especially in regards to curating, exhibition, and acquisition, has decreased the pleasure principle in art, with an increase in the ideological construct of cultural production. Simply put, the more you get involved in the current artworld, the less you seem to need a liking for art.

One of the problems with writing about art at this time is that everything is so politicized, any statement you make seems to be wrenched out of any logical context and smashed into some context of allegiance or ideology. In addition, there seems to be a confusion about art, with literalism taken to be congruent with expressivity. Michael Fried once characterized Minimal Art as "literalist," and contemporary art now seems to be taking that literally. The "Black Male" exhibition is symptomatic: the assumption behind the show is that by showing representations of black men (often by nonblack artists), you are providing a meditative project which allows for the deconstruction of how black men are seen in our society. In short: the aim is to provide an aesthetic experience, but a political experience. The most egregious example of this tendency is the recently opened George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian. The museum has been designed, not as a display of objects and art works, but as an audiovisual polemic which ultimately overwhelms the objects and art works. You're not supposed to go to look at the objects and art works, you're supposed to go to receive a lecture. (It reminds me of Yvonne Rainer's comments when she began making movies, and would include a lot of written material. How much written material should you put in a movie or performance? Her response was that if you put in too much, better your audience should stay home and read a book. You can't make that joke anymore, since now people have made installations where you are supposed to stand around and read a book.) Inherent in the current situation of the arts is the notion that the arts might be irrelevant to contemporary American society. The spectre of legislative battles over government arts funding has been raised, exacerbating the already battered situation of the arts. But the notion that art and art appreciation might be things people enjoy, and that such enjoyment might be its own justification, seems to be hopelessly outmoded.
We think we're so sophisticated, because we analyze art now in terms of the ancillary attributes of art, that is, the social, economic, and political aspects of the artwork. But all this sophistication turns to sophistry, because it fails to account for the complex emotions which art generates. The notion of contemporary art is that a lot of art is being made to fit ideological preconceptions, art, in short, is being made that won't generate complex emotions. We now look at the conditions of production, exhibition, and dissemination, although one of the problems with the theoretical framework which is being used is that the framework itself is biased, and much of the biases go unexamined.

Jean Baudrillard is the *eminence grise* shading so much of what passes for theory in the artworld, and that shadow certainly enveloped the three retrospectives at The Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1991-92 art season, the retrospectives of Alexis Smith, William Wegman, and Richard Prince. The shadowland of the simulacrum is an inevitability in today's artworld.

During the 1970s, when much sculptural work would involve Process, there was the sense that the visual arts could engage in the performance of gesture as primary process. This can be seen in such works as the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt, the polyurethane throws of Lynda Benglis, and the felt drapings of Robert Morris. As Robert Pincus-Witten said, "By 1970, Benglis' pictorial sculptures no longer ratified the horizon of the earth, but begin to engage the entire environment. With the endless environment as the ground for the frozen gesture, she embraced the notion of the theatrical, not just because so much of the work derives from the media but inasmuch as literalist work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for..."
Adam Gopnik noted, in his essay "William Wegman's significance may be seen in his designation as a populist artist. For the audience that Prince addresses is the enclosed system of the museum audience, because Pop promised that what was in the museums was easy: Warhol lured the philistines in with the promise of cheap thrills, and they remained, bewitched, to gawk at the high-priced merchandise. But you can believe that Pop art is popular only if you have never spent much time around actual museum audiences... But the popular audience hates Pop — it sees it simply as a fraud, a bad joke, an imposture. Pop art wasn't easy, it was hard. It was a series of jokes and puns — some good, some obvious — on previous styles. It was an insider's art, written in code." Prince has taken this position seriously; he has created series of paintings in which he has printed jokes. What is interesting about the catalogue on William Wegman is the insistence of the commentators that Wegman's art is tied to the insider's art of post-Conceptualism.

Prior to the opening of the Wegman retrospective, articles appeared in a great many periodicals (everything from Smithsonian to The New York Times Sunday Magazine) which stressed the popular appeal of Wegman's art, and how his work had been embraced by show business (appearances on the Tonight Show, Saturday Night Live, and so on). Yet the thrust of the catalogue is to subvert this easy acceptance of Wegman's work, to insist on its esoteric nature. Wegman is placed within the specific pantheon of post-Conceptualism (Duchamp, Arte Povera, Baldessari). As Martin Kunz writes: "When Wegman zeros in on the missionary earnestness of his ascetic avant-garde peers, he uses the same devices; to shift the associative field of his subject matter to more quotidian, prosaic regions where conceptual games become so trivial and banal that they suspend the claim to art in the sense of the traditional drawing, much like Duchamp's ready-mades did half a century ago." In his witty note on Wegman's recent paintings, Peter Schjeldahl writes: "Such voices would lament a capitulation to the culture of commodities, in which the present market for paintings recalls the seventeenth-century tulip mania of Holland. As an apologist for the 'new Wegman,' I would answer — and will answer, arguing with myself — that at issue in this art is something more fundamental and drastic than the social constitution of one's audience. At issue is the primitive reality of personal being, which persists darkly in face of attempts to render it rationally lucid in social-democratic systems or to blend it into the oleaginous feeling-stuff of capitalist mass-culture." I hope that there is irony to some of this writing, because the exaggerated claims seem to be totally beside the point in relation to the crowd of exhibited works.

William Wegman's work is poised between the extremes of conceptual knowingness and ironic innocence. As in the case of Richard Prince, Wegman's work conveniently divides into separate periods. This brings up another aspect of their work: the extreme artworld-consciousness. It should be remembered that, by the late 1960s, many young American artists had had retrospectives at major museums, including Frank Stella and Claes Oldenburg. The idea that their work would be similarly collected and shown in such comprehensive surroundings was not inconceivable to Wegman and Prince. That their work...
divides rather neatly into periods (the rough-and-ready black-and-white works, the more formal large color photographs, the recent paintings in Wegman's case; the rephotographed works, the jokes, the car hoods in Prince's case) is indicative of their awareness that a historical overview will be applied to their work. This is what is meant by "artworld consciousness" as opposed to mere art-consciousness. It is not just the reference to the history of art, especially recent art; it is seeing yourself as a figure in the history of art.

If Richard Prince suggests the extremes of knowingness, William Wegman’s art persona is based on faux-naïvete; in the interview with David Ross appearing in the catalogue accompanying the retrospective, Wegman states that his dog, Man Ray, appears in only a small fraction of his early work, but his reputation has been established as the guy with the dog. Wegman’s faux-naïf status is the excuse for the primitive technique as a painter, the sloppy quality of the early photographs, the cute slickness of the current photographs. The faux-naïf quality accounts for the doubling of Wegman’s art, the duplicity which is supposed to allow for the mass audience to enjoy the work while the insider audience shares in the critical attitude of irony.

The installation of the Wegman retrospective was crowded with works, often with works placed not just side by side but on top of one another. The serial nature of the works thus was emphasized, with the repetition of motifs and subjects exhaustively obvious. The question remained as to whether the crowd of the exhibition actually translated into crowds of attendance. Was the claim of populism made for Wegman’s art valid, or was it another example of the disengagement of the artworld from the actual values of the artgoing public? This question, which may seem trivial in critical terms, is crucial to the sociopolitical context in which contemporary art is situated. Just because major art institutions endorse certain trends in the arts does not mean that those trends have found a public address. In the case of Wegman, the claim of populism is important, because it validates the notion that there is a place for art in the capitalist culture of America. The obviousness of the parodies is seen as a ploy to entice the public into an appreciation of the irony of the postmodern agenda.

In the catalogue accompanying the Richard Prince exhibition, Lisa Phillips pays obeisance to the usual deities of the postmodern, but she does so in order to account for intentionality; citing artists such as Troy Brauntuch, Sarah Charlesworth, Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and others using “appropriation,” Phillips writes: “Though the replicative strategies of these artists were in fact quite varied, their primary devices were seriality and repetition, appropriation, intertextuality, and simulation. They appeared to seriously question many reigning modernist myths and assumptions about autonomy, authenticity, originality, and the fundamental antipathy between high and low art. Their lineage clearly extended from Duchamp and Dada to Warhol, to the Conceptual work of Joseph Kosuth, John Baldessari, Gilbert and George, William Wegman, Ed Ruscha, Dan Graham, and Hans Haacke — artists who had already broken with cherished modernist paradigms.”

However, even Wegman, an artist supposedly poised on the precipice of mass culture, does not break with the paradigm of the artworld as a closed system, a sociopolitical entity with its own infrastructure in which these artists operated. This system was devised to accommodate the presumption of theoretical intentionality, thereby defying these activities as art. Thus, with Wegman, the “dumb” aspects of his work find themselves in quotation marks, so that lack of technique becomes technique, primitivism becomes sophistication, and the obvious is actually the esoteric. The narratives of the photographic series and the videotapes are haunted by the metanarrative of theory, which presupposes that what you know about the work is not commensurate with the experience of the work. For this reason, Richard Prince and William Wegman must come with extratextual exegesis.

The extratextual in Prince and Wegman is actually the ur-text of the artworld, the attempt to reinstate the aesthetic as an aristocratic position, a posture about the importance of art history; Phillips pays obeisance to the usual deities of the postmodern, but she does so given that the work of art must come with a critical narrative to stipulate meaning. The early paintings of Frank Stella might be cited as an example, in the sense defined by Rosalind Krauss when she wrote that she “could visualize the logic of an argument that connected hundreds of separate pictorial acts into the fluid clarity of a single motion,” acts which served to concentrate on the pictorial plane of painting, the flattening out of visual space to achieve the surface present in those early Stella paintings. Yet the knowledge of this art history changes Stella’s paintings from mere design to art.

In his recent essays on people with autism, Oliver Sacks has raised the point of defining an artist: can an autistic savant, who has extraordinary gifts of draughtsmanship, or the gift of perfect pitch, but who has no cognizance of the meaning of these gifts, be considered an artist? Yet this question is never asked in the artworld, with the assumption now that theoretical proclamation is art. Even during the heyday of Conceptual Art, the artists were at pains to provide an aesthetic experience to their art; Mel Bochner once stated that if the art were simply congruent with the idea, it would be superfluous. The art had to provide something else, some quality of sensuality or symmetry, which would provide some quality defined as art. But with the arts collapsing distinctions, the definition of art remains in doubt. The necessity of artworld participants to proclaim allegiances has divided the artworld into constituencies, but these constituencies have demarcated specific sites for exploration. At this point, nostalgia for an artworld which can be manageable is no longer a viable option. Every aspect of our culture now has become part of these partialized, fragmented, entirely partisan systems. One could cite endless examples, but cataloguing the inequities of a social system recognizably out of control is no longer going to change the situation. Even analysis has been compromised, because criticism either is irrelevant or is coopted into the system. The cultural systems continue to move, but the fact that there are separate systems and demarcated dominions has created a disastrous casuistry in discourse. The recent elections have shown the national nostalgia for anything resembling cohesion in the social structure at the same
time as the artworld has attempted to accommodate feminism, queer theory, ethnic studies. In the 1970s, there were many feminist collective, as women artists asserted the specificity of their art. For many women artists, the ut-
text of their art was the assertion of a specifically female identity.

During that period, many women artists were involved in creating work
which would incorporate, and, possibly, validate domestic experience and quo-
tidin verities. The work of Alexis Smith derives from these impulses, as she
mixes elements of popular culture, texts from pulp fiction or popular music,
and serial imagery to create combinations which retain a highly personalized
sensibility. There is never any doubt that the work derives from a feminine
sensibility; in this sense, feminism is the extratextual theory supplying the
meaning of her work. In works such as the series of collages titled
Chandliers, the fact that it was a woman quoting lines from Raymond
Chandler's fiction was important, as this provided the reflection of the harsh
delineation of gender roles in detective fiction, which combined with ambigu­
ous visual renditions of femininity to create satires on the whole macho ethos.
The miniaturization of the images was an obvious, and extremely funny, defla­
tion of the heroic in pulp fiction.

At the Whitney Museum, the first installation in the Alexis Smith retro­
spective was a reconstruction of an installation from 1981 called Cathay. The
installation was in the alcove usually reserved for the name of the exhibition,
the opening text, and information on funding. Here, the walls were painted a
pale green, with a series of texts and images arranged in sequence across the
wall; in the center of the wall, where the doorway to the galleries was, there
was placed around the doorway a wooden frame, painted bright red. The texts
were from many sources, including lines from the 1932 movie Shanghai
Express (“I can't replace our ideals, but I'll buy you a new watch when we get
to Shanghai”); the images included pages from Hong Kong popular journals.
The references to “orientalism” were witty, pointing to the stereotypes of popu­
lar culture. The continuity of the installation suggested a narrative, but the
ellipses denied strict causality.

By introducing the retrospective with Cathay, the temporal nature of
Smith's work was emphasized, grounding the viewer in the expectation of nar­
rativity, an expectation which was not disappointed. By contrast, the works of
Wegman and of Prince were made to be apprehended in an instant, once the
joke was understood. But the point of these exhibitions was the theoretical
reference of taste does not seem to advance the cause of critical discourse.

Just as a personal assertion of taste reduces criticism to connoisseurship, so
the pretense of objectivity has rendered theory into solipsism when con­
fronting the aesthetic. As a statement of personal preference, i would say i
found the Richard Prince retrospective hopelessly attenuated, i found the
William Wegman retrospective ultimately tedious, and i found the Alexis
Smith retrospective to be surprisingly enjoyable. But these assertions of taste,
while important in terms of my orientation when navigating the course of my
comments, are not the only aspects of consideration; it seems more important
to view the entire map in order to gauge the direction towards which these
exhibitions point. The pastiche quality of these exhibitions continues to
declare centrality to our culture.

As an example: during the 1994 New York Film Festival, the most
widely acclaimed movie, and the most crowded press screening, was Pulp
Fiction. I happened to run into a professor of cinema studies, who wouldn't
design to lower herself to see Quentin Tarantino's commercial triumph; she had
rushed to the press screening of Aleksandr Sokhurov's Whispering Pages. Yet
what was the difference? Tarantino's movie is a pastiche of gangster movies,
top cop shows, boxing melodramas; every moment is a reference, the whole
movie is one very long quotation. It was the movie to make middlebrow film
critics feel happy as pigs, because they could catch the references (the glowing
box out of Kiss Me Deadly, the dance around the room out of My Life to Live,
etc.). Sokhurov's movie was the pastiche for highbrow: they could get the ref­
ences to early Soviet cinema (Pudovkin, especially), to Griffith and Dreyer
(the girl in Whispering Pages is as arch and fey as Rena Mandel in Dreyer's
Vampyr), mixed in with a narrative derived from themes of classic Russian lit­
erature (Dostoysvksy, especially). Pulp Fiction is the pastiche for the middle­
brow, Whispering Pages is the pastiche for the highbrow, but neither movie
has anything to do with art as a reflection or a commentary on life. Both
movies are removed from experience, existing solely in an aesthetic founded
on the self-referentiality of the postmodern. Tarantino does it with junk and
trash and violence, Sokhurov does it with what the James Stewart character in
The Shop Around the Corner refers to as "high literature."

Regardless of the differences in quality of the three Whitney exhibitions,
the unifying nature of pastiche signals the diminution of experience as a
source for art. So much of contemporary art's subject is not "life," but "art;", as
was stated in Jean-Luc Godard's La Chinoise (1967), "Film is not the reflection
of reality, but the reality of that reflection." In his Nobel Prize address, Saul
Bellow had noted that novels used to be about man-in-society; now, serious lit­
erature is about the writer’s consciousness. Even the return of figuration in
painting has become a matter of quotation. This leads to a lack of affect in the
the most distinctive mode of discourse. The presentation of, not one, not two,
but three retrospective exhibitions devoted to purveyors of post-Conceptual
Pop within one season posits a position (aesthetic, cultural, and social) being
taken. That position has implications, manifest in current policies exempli­
dified in the "Black Male" exhibition and the 1995 Biennial, which adheres to
a retrotdataire nostalgia for modernist formulations of painting and sculpture.
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art, because the assumption is that the apprehension of consciousness, the awareness of art as art and the reminder of art within art history, is a theoretical, and, at the widest extreme, a political act. The solipsism of that apprehension is never addressed, which is why so much of art activity wishing for the appellation of “the political” so rarely is. Admittedly, my delight in the Alexis Smith retrospective comes from my knowledge of southern California, from my knowledge of the malls and the swap meets and the rummage sales, from the oddity of the mass media culture that defines southern California. But does it matter? Does it matter that the retrospective seemed a truly personal response to an actual geophysical culture? Perhaps we have reached the point in our culture when such questions are outmoded because naive, just as art has reached the point where critics and curators no longer care about art, but about theory.

NOTES
until the present which sought to practice the traditional arts of the book (letterpress printing, hand papermaking, illustration, relief printmaking, and hand bookbinding) in nontraditional ways. My books are by no means "experimental" when taken in the context of books made by visual artists in the last 30 years. They are at least innovative, however, when seen alongside small press literary books of this period as well as a fine press tradition of literary publication which my friend and fellow bookmaker Mary Jo Pauly (also a believer in the conjunction of literary and printing explorations, but a staunch critic of the "craft-is-everything" tradition) often refers to as "the boring genre" of the book arts. This vision also came out of an allegiance to the work of a very few individuals, like Johanna Drucker, who believe in the book as an art, as I have come to direct a large public center for the book arts.

For Robert Johnson, they are a practice of immaculate craftsmanship and fine printmaking. Robert may take years to complete a book for his Melia Press, which publishes deluxe fine print literary books. In these books, the text may be doggerel-like children's poems by haiku master John Wills — poems about peanut butter sandwiches and supermarket shopping trips. Robert would disagree, but I believe the poems here are inconsequential, vastly overshadowed by the production of the book, titled Tickletoes, which prints many colors of abstract images on each page, nearly always in textures produced by sand and other materials being laid on the printing plates before printing the blocks in which the images are carved. Literally thousands of times, paper went through press to produce the final result. The very large book was then bound by hand by master binder Jill Levine in blue and yellow, with an enclosing box made of binder's boards covered by a silky and luminous blue cloth. The book is beautiful, sensual. It is certainly a finely crafted book produced by an artist; it may or may not be considered a book for children. It carries a several hundred dollar price tag and exists in an edition of approximately 50. Johnson is currently at work on a book of twenty-year-old poems by Robert Bly, rather moody and sentimental offerings which occasion a somewhat darker vision by the bookmaker, but nonetheless a book in the same vein as Tickletoes. I'm not certain there is a place for books such as these in my vision of what is important in the book arts, but the work is certainly a major part of what actually occurs in contemporary practices of bookmaking.

For Byron Clercx, the book arts are another world from Johnson's colorful craftsmanship. Clercx's Freud's Bat is a sculpture of a baseball bat, placed in a black case lined with red velvet. The bat is Freud's because it is actually made of the pages of Freud's complete writings, which have been cut from books and laminated together, then carved into the shape of a baseball bat which looks entirely real, as though Kirby Puckett might put one over the fence with it at any time. Once the viewer realizes what the work of art is (materials and sources), she gets the joke. The work is thus an elegant hitter (Paul Molitor, meet Sigmund Freud) which stresses the power of the book in our culture, and perhaps makes an implicit connection between traditional psychoanalysis and American devotion to sports. There are many other possible implications of the work, but the work itself only implies them; it remains static, essentially a one-liner. It stands with other works of contemporary artists, such as hanging paper sculptures made of Janson's History of Art, and Barton Benes's ceramic sculpture of a book object closed by a zipper. Again, such works have no place in my vision of the book arts, but they are here. In fact, in the art market as defined by galleries and museums, such sculptural works have the highest cachet of any practice in the book arts. They are collectable and presentable as fine art in a much more ostentatious way than works that require actual reading or turning of pages.

For Katherine Alexander, age 5, the book arts are primarily the act of making anything on paper that can be gathered into pages and fastened together in some fashion; or, conversely, first gathering pages together and then drawing, writing, and/or pasting cut-out images on them. The materials are often construction paper or lined notebook paper; favorite binding techniques are Scotch tape and stapling, but glue is sometimes used as well. Such practice may not seem to belong in a presentation of visions for the book arts and a discussion of contemporary practice by artists. Yet probably more children are working (playing?) in the field of the book arts than are adults. Teachers are learning to incorporate the book arts into their curricula, and there is a strong belief that bookmaking by children strongly supports language learning and strong, positive senses of identity. Not surprisingly, this area of the book arts is to many funders (government, corporate, foundations, and individuals) the most appealing. It may have important social consequences — the bookmaker Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., who works primarily with very young (second grade) inner city children in bookmaking projects, believes that these children are at risk, and that "book building saves lives," as it allows children, at a time when they are first coming to understand their powers of expression, to make something which is their unique statement of self. Such practices as this, as well, have no place in my vision for the book arts (a vision which incorporates a belief in literary practice which specifically abjures the practice of writing as primarily validating identity of the author), yet I can not deny their power, their necessity.

What are the book arts, then? Have I left you as confused as I am? Or can this field of ancient and contemporary practices begin to define itself as a community of diversity. Perhaps my vision is only one of many possible visions, none of them having any more importance or validity than the others.
ers. I have not even touched on what is perhaps the most common adult prac-
tice in the book arts, one that was recently brought to my attention when I
was made aware of criticism of directions in which I am leading Minnesota
Center for Book Arts, i.e. that the center is unfortunately getting away from
its predominant historical “craft-based approach” to the book arts. Most
adults who have any experience with the book arts want to make well-made
paper or prints (typographic or other methods) or books. They want to learn
the crafts of papermaking, letterpress printing, and bookbinding. Once they
learn the basics, they want to get better at these practices. To these people,
my own contention that craft for the sake of craft is not very interesting, is
not particularly palatable. And I wonder, since these people are perhaps
eighty percent of the adult audience of a book arts center, whether they are as
correct as I am. I have tried to bring critical and intellectual considera-
tions, even the development of a cultural criticism, into the book arts. I have
tried to do so through a symposium like Art & Language: Re-Reading the
Book as a Book, which presented fourteen artists, writers, gallery directors,
press directors, and critics talking about their work and the state of the book
arts today. I have tried to do so by bringing writers, artists, and critics to
speak about theory and meaning in relation to their work. Yet most of the
audience for the book arts, I find, would rather attend a talk by a bookbinder
presenting newly developed methods of how to bind a codex. People want to
make things, and to constantly make them better. This is not an ignoble
enterprise. While it may not be a part of my personal vision, I am learning
that any vision for a book arts center, any vision and criticism of the field of
the book arts, must encompass what is actually present in that field.

Once again, what are the book arts? Between 1950 and 1980 changing
technologies of printing made letterpress technology cheaply available to any-
one who wanted it. This meant that writers and others concerned with litera-
ture began investigating type and printing books. Some of these people were influ-
enced by a fine press tradition with a long history but narrow base. Some
craftspeople and visual artists, whether with printmaking backgrounds or
newly acquired interest in letterpress possibilities, also began making works
of art using letterpress methods. In addition, and particularly in the last half
of this thirty-year period, visual artists dissatisfied with a narrow and elitist
art market began making books to disseminate their works and ideas (these
artists included conceptual artists and others artists whose primary tool was
language) in highly portable, relatively affordable formats which generally
circulated outside the gallery and museum markets. As both of these prac-
tices grew, related interests in materials and technologies grew, such as
a renaissance in hand papermaking and an exploration of bookbinding possibil-
ities. Relations were forged with so-called “high art” (the sculptural books
mentioned earlier) and with very “low art” (mail art, rubber stamp art, and
more). From 1975 to 1985 much of this work was organized and institutional-
ized, with the formation of centers for production of artists’ books such as
Pyramid Atlantic, Nexus Press, and Visual Studies Workshop, with collegiate
book arts programs such as those at Mills College, the University of Alabama
at Tuscaloosa, and the Center for the Book at the University of Iowa. This
period also saw the formation of the two (if there are more by this time, I
apologize, and I know there are more in various stages of formation) public
accessible, community oriented centers — the Center for Book Arts in New
York, founded by an artist central to the development of the field, Richard
Minsky; and Minnesota Center for Book Arts, founded by a non-artist, art
organizer and activist Jim Sitter, and programmed by a curator, Betty
Bright, whose exhibitions provide perhaps the widest knowledge currently
available about the book arts. With the institutionalization of the book arts
came the development of educational programs for adults and children as
well as the education of the public (through events and exhibitions) about the
book arts, two vital aspects of the field which are both in their infancy.

What are the book arts? Perhaps little is known about them beyond their
practitioners because there is no market for the book arts. Yes, one finds
something in a museum shop in Atlanta, one store (Printed Matter) in New
York (although it only represents a portion of the field), in-house shops which
lose rather than make money at book arts centers, but nothing that consti-
tutes a publicly recognizable market. They are not centered in New York
(although there is a center there), nor anywhere. Their decentralization may
be an advantage, as the book arts may mount guerrilla warfare with ease, if
only people would pay attention.

I maintain that the book arts need a critical component, and that it is
essential to make a link between innovative practices in bookmaking and
other arts, including the literary arts. Yet in a field as diverse and unfocused as
I see the book arts at present, I don’t foresee this happening soon, and I
believe it will be difficult for it to happen at all. Drucker will continue to
develop a criticism of the book arts which incorporates avant-garde history
and cultural theory. She is writing a history of 20th-century artists’ books to
be published in 1995 by Granary Books, New York; I will continue to develop
specific conjunctions of experimental literary and bookmaking practices;
Betty Bright (probably the finest and most provocative curator of book arts
exhibitions in the country) will write the first complete history of the last
half-century of the book arts; Katherine Alexander will continue to tape
pieces of paper together to make books. All of them are part of the messy
landscape that makes up the book arts. It is, in the words of the poet Charles
Olson, "an actual earth of value," but the determination of value differs
throughout the landscape.

What are the book arts? I still do not know if this is the right question.
Where are they going? Everywhere, simultaneously.

NOTES
Johanna Drucker currently is on the faculty of Yale University. She has written sever-
al books on the history of typography and other related issues. Her original book arts
works include letterpress and offset printed works.

Betty Bright was curator at Minnesota Center for Book Arts from 1985 until 1993.
She is currently working on a dissertation, later to become a book, on the recent history of the book arts. To date her many exhibitions are documented in various catalogues available from Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 24 North Third Street, Minneapolis, MN 55401.

Perhaps the most broad-ranging exhibition, whose catalogue contains an introduction of which I directed the collaborative writing, was the team-organized Breaking the Bindings: American Book Art Now in 1983 at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin. The catalogue may still be available from the Elvehjem Museum.

Several of the talks given at the 1994 symposium at Minnesota Center for Book Arts are being published as a book (as yet untitled) which will be issued in late 1995. Please contact Minnesota Center for Book Arts for information.

WAYS OF SEEING DE KOONING

BARBARA FLUG COLIN

It's 4:45. A man who looks like de Chirico guides a flock of benefactors through the de Kooning show at the Metropolitan Museum. "Confectionary colors . . . the romance of the paint itself . . . woman splayed," I hear him say.

Next week I'll bring the sixth grade from the Henry Viscardi School where, as writer in residence, I use music, poetry, and visual art to inspire poems in second grade through high school classes of physically challenged students.

Many classes looked at de Kooning painting reproductions in books and postcards. Tzvi saw in de Kooning's painting Excavation: " . . . a lot of things hidden beneath the paint . . . / Beneath the paint are special fires of love / dark skies."

Without being taught, children see a lot that is hidden. Encouraged to say what they see increases their ability to articulate their own hidden "fires" and "dark skies."

One sixth grade class focused on details in Excavation. The class poem began with "fire . . . a road . . . a king . . . a train . . ." and ended with " agony. " Then shy Christine beckoned, pointed to her de Kooning book, excited. Her finger traced, in the maze of vague black outlines, two large figures. One art critic saw one woman reclining but Christine's "man on the right" is the same form as de Kooning's Woman (1948), a painting Christine hadn't yet seen. She felt the motion in his most active painting so far: "The man and woman are dancing," she said. She had no problem with distortions, missing body parts, abstraction: "Her face has an eye, teeth, a nose."

I join the benefactors listening to the guide who is perhaps a museum board member or curator. "De Kooning looked to Matisse . . . " he is saying in the first room of the show.

Without being taught children often reflect an artist's views. When Keith, an 11th grader, returned from the Matisse show he said "The Morroccans was strange I liked it best." De Kooning did too.

Learning by discovering is more engaging than being given information so I created mysteries to solve: "Can you find a painting where de Kooning pasted on a mouth cut from a magazine? Can you find a painting where de Kooning half erased an image?" I used de Kooning's words to frame poem exercises: "de Kooning said Woman I reminds him of being near water in his childhood. Can you find a painting that reminds you of water?" Theresa, a fifth grader wrote of Ruth's Zowie:
It is a magnificent waterfall!! It feels like golden sprays of life!! It looks like shooting stars over a sunset!!

Patrick identified the water feeling in an Untitled with his own memory of water: "When I was under water I felt that I was free from all space." I suggested they test de Kooning techniques in the art room: use a palette knife, different sized paintbrushes; wipe a painting with newspaper to see how it stays on as it did in Easter Monday; create visual and verbal collages.

In the second room our guide is saying: "... and de Kooning looked to Miro whose imagery combined human and animal ..." Before the Miro show the eighth grade liked Miro's Dutch Interior better than its 17th century inspiration, Sorgh's The Lute Player which they found "too perfect, boring." Like de Kooning, Chris liked that "the man, table, woman, and cat look combined." Like de Kooning, Antonio liked the imaginative freedom: "Miro's painting is loose and free just like Michael Jordan was when he played basketball."

As the curator whizzes us through the central rooms, he says, "woman becomes landscape, color is form," reminding me of the third grade's first take on a de Kooning painting in a class poem: "... orange is dancing / red is singing ... white and blue and red and brown are making water waves and wind."

As the curator is saying "Interiority ... exteriority ..." I think of Nicholas' poem on Seated Man, "The wall is open and I can't see outside / because it's behind me."

Next week when the sixth grade class gets to this exhibit, Gabriel who rarely calls out will wheel his wheelchair to one corner: "Here's Standing Man" though he's too far from the painting to read the title. Tiffany will do the same from the next corner and Evan from the next.

Because of familiarity the excitement will be great and they'll notice the actual pencil, charcoal, and brushstrokes in Execution on an abutting wall to Attic which we'll compare to it then discuss what we value. They'll see thumbtacks left in a collage; newspaper left on Easter Monday.

Because, as Donald says "You get more concentration and it's clearer in a museum," we'll spend time with North Atlantic Light. And as discoveries rapidly generate discoveries, the sixth graders will excavate this abstract blue painting: "A wave ... a whale's tale ... a man in the bottom ..." Then Lucas, who has great difficulty speaking and articulating his thoughts will cry: "There's a sailboat moving through the painting." So they will see "an island" and "ocean" and "dark sky" and "river" and "rapids" and "sand dune" and "peninsula." Then someone will say, "The sailboat looks like it's being tossed onto land." And someone will add, "It looks like it will crash." And looking will have become seeing; and saying will be on its way to poetry.

Next the class will vote to go on, across the museum, to the Origins of Impressionism show. Though unprepared for this show, they will be as excited by it as they were by de Kooning. Faraz will stop at the threshold of one room, exuberant: "I have the shivers." He and Jon will stop before a Bazille and disagree in answering my question: "Who is more important, the woman or the flowers beside her?"

In the other sixth grade class that I prepared for this show but the trip was cancelled because no nurse was available, Anna saw Bazille's Study of Flowers as "... people at a mall ... / white, black and Hispanic ... men and women and children ... / but very alike ... / ... because they are living together on this earth." Nestor saw Monet's Bodmer Oak, a leafless tree, as a "spider web."

The whole class will stop before Manet's large portrait Le Fifer beside his student Eva Gonzales' Enfant de troupe and discover by comparing the two in dress, posture, instruments, and face ("their hats are the same ... like a carpet folded up ... that background is darker ... like a dirty sky ...") that "one of them tried to copy the other." So they'll approach the title plate, "we'll tell by the year." And Tiffany will say, "You could step into the Gonzales," and they'll disagree on which painter is more imaginative, original, the two words we value for our poems in class.

When we return to the classroom the vote will be split between a preference for the two shows.

The curator twirls a blond woman in the next to last room so she can glimpse it as a whole. It's 5:05. The guards have already warned spectators to leave by 5:15. The curator suggests the final room is a return to de Kooning's beginning drawings and he rushes the group back to the beginning room.

Kristin, an eighth grader, sensed something of this return in her de Kooning poem.

Different shapes of rain
Ziggzags float and unwind.
Dogs with no personality howling. Deafening howls that fill the air.
Sharks eating meat found on an ocean's shore.
Mouse holes. Mice go to sleep and dream.
Dream about rain, zigzags, dogs, and sharks.
Dreams that have no tomorrow.
CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI: A DESIRE TO SITUATE YOURSELF IN REALITY

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI
by Lynn Gumpert, with "Texts and Interviews" by Christian Boltanski, Translated from the French by Francis Couper
Flammarion, Paris; distributed by Abbeville Press, NY, 1994, 182 pp., $24.95

Christian Boltanski, born in 1944 in Paris, works in diverse media, including painting, film, video, photography, artists' books, and installations. His art takes as its subject the idea of biography, the story of a life: specifically, his life and the lives of other people. But, in his words, it is "a biography that is totally false, and that is presented as false, with all kinds of false evidence." For example, he often presents a photograph of a person with accompanying words that claim to identify it, describe it, or tell a story about it, while providing clues that the story is an invention. Yet while these clues unmask the actors they celebrate the play, giving the game away by deliberately stamping it as amateur, awkward, handmade. The work is neither cynical nor ahistoric. Artifice, of course, could be said to be a property of all art. What distinguishes Boltanski's work is his ability to create stories-made-out-of-images that are convincing and compelling presences, that succeed in generating an identity, atmosphere, or whole environment, despite our knowing that they are not what we think they are, or perhaps because we know that they are not what we think they are. Thus these stories-made-out-of-images summon up the realm of the noumenon, which Webster defines as "a ground of phenomena that according to Kant cannot be experienced, can be known to exist, but to which no properties can be intelligibly ascribed."

The art of Christian Boltanski thus satisfies two impulses rarely entertained simultaneously: the impulse toward magic and the impulse toward philosophy. The first is fun, even when terrifying, and the second serious; the first we might call a desire to be deceived and the second a desire to find truth. Yet encounters with magic of great enough power leave us not with an impression of sleight-of-hand but with a memory of revelation, that we have had a momentary glimpse of something real yet usually hidden.

I have seen two magicians I would include in this category: one in the New York subway caused money to appear in folds and pockets of passengers' clothing; the other, at the Magic Castle in Los Angeles, a magician's magician, made

a small elephant, as well as a series of birds of escalating size — a canary, a pigeon, and finally an ostrich — appear "out of thin air." Both experiences had about them a definite religious quality, touching asationally as they did a capacity within myself for faith, of which I had been previously unaware.

Similarly, Boltanski's creations — employing such various and sundry materials as newspaper articles, used clothes and furniture, found photographs, dolls, figures made by hand from metal or cardboard, and shadows — touch upon sites of recognition and memory within the viewer. They demonstrate the wonderful ability to appear that is inherent in all things visible. In an interview with Delphine Renard conducted on the occasion of his 1984 exhibition at the Pompidou and included here in translation, Boltanski discusses a series he began in 1975, entitled "Model Images," an investigation of the cultural predilections and stereotypes peculiar to color photography:

I don't want viewers to discover; I want them to recognize. For me, a work is in part created by the people who look at it, who "read" it with the aid of their own experiences...

I try to find images that are sufficiently imprecise to be as widely shared as possible, vague images that spectators can emboiler as they see fit.

In my little book Les Histoires, I showed a series of images taken from a history book that we all remember from our childhood; under each picture I placed captions that read, for example, "That day the teacher came in with the principal." Each image has to have the power to call to mind an infinite number of phrases of that kind, and each person thinks up their own.

What is it in these images we are recognizing? How can we recognize something as real without identifying it? Boltanski presents images that call up within us this sense of recognition of something personal, unique, and meaningful, while twirling around each of these three words and showing us their other side: impersonal, common, empty. Creating gyroscopic models of the elusive, Boltanski's themes might be classified as threefold: (1) the conundrum of identity; (2) time, memory, death; and (3) the nature of representation.

This book is the first full monograph on Boltanski in English. Beautifully illustrated and produced, it is smart in regard to such aspects as the selection of comparative illustrations and the integrity of text and design. The work is presented chronologically, broken into three sections: the early work; work from around 1975-85; and the work since then.

The early work plays with biography in a manner suggestive of Gertrude Stein, who insisted that there is no such thing as repetition and that one has no identity no real identity when one is in the act of doing anything. In the late sixties and early seventies, Boltanski engaged in highly repetitive, obsessive activities, a kind of homage to the noumenous. For example, he made over three thousand balls of dirt, revealing the impossibility of creating a perfect sphere, and carved over nine hundred cubes of sugar into abstract
shapes, each unique. He went on to document his actions and even his gestures, entitling these efforts “reconstitutions”: among them was a series of comic photographs of Boltanski as an adult reenacting everyday episodes from his supposed childhood between 1948 and 1954. He reconstructed lost toys, utensils, and clothing, fashioned knives and traps. Boltanski has often employed vitrines and controlled the installations of his artworks in such a way as to play on the history of the art museum and its original connection to museums of natural history, which in turn derive from early European private collections of stuffed birds (some of the more modest “trees” of which were later acquired as artworks by French surrealists). Boltanski created inventories of his own objects and those of others recently dead, the latter inspired by a story told by his father about a pair of his father’s shoes that kept their owner’s shape after his death. Clearly transfixed by the arrested image, object, environment or face as still life, nature morte, Boltanski went on to become involved in the use of amateur photographs in such installations as Album de photos de la famille D., 1939-1964 (1971), and Les 62 membres du Club Mickey en 1955 (1972). In the first he borrowed the family photographs of the “family D.”, had them reshoot by a commercial photographer, arranged them in a manner he conceived of as chronological and assigned the persons photographed imaginary identities. In a later interview, he stated that “I realized that these images were only witnesses to a collective ritual. They didn’t teach us anything about the Family D. . . . but only sent us back to our own past.” Lynn Gumpert interprets these works as “using photography’s connection to death to dramatize that the children pictured in 1955 [in the Mickey Mouse Club work] no longer existed”; here, as elsewhere throughout the volume, she sets Boltanski’s artwork within the context of simultaneous developments in cultural analysis and conceptual art, and provides the fascinating information that Boltanski’s brother Luc collaborated with Pierre Bourdieu on a book about the sociology of amateur photography. Gumpert is careful to state that Boltanski claims to have never read literature from the discipline of sociology nor from that of his other brother’s field, linguistics, simply suggesting that Boltanski’s brothers “may have” stimulated his interest in these themes. In a book on an artist whose work clearly illustrates how much we are creatures of our own time, how our “unique insights” evince collectively held, often unconscious, views, it’s nice to see an art historian appreciating collectivity; Gumpert does not suffer from the anxiety of influence syndrome yet is thorough in her research, tracing art history with a deft and precise hand, as if engaging in the old art of manuscript illumination.

Boltanski’s work from 1974 included a new persona – that of a clown. In Boltanski’s recognition of the limitation of images – for example, when he states, as quoted above, that the images of the Family D. “only sent us back to our own past” – is his recognition of their power. To be sent back to one’s own past: here the image plays a critical role as valuable evidence of a past as real as any we might imagine, a substantiation of what is irretrievable. Gumpert obliquely comments on this by including a quote from Boltanski, a non-religious Jew:

“I remember the years just after the war, when anti-Semitism was still strong in France, “feeling . . . different from the others.” I fell into such a state of withdrawal that at age eleven I not only had no friends and felt use-grounds, the images remnants of the landscapes of Japanese woodblock prints, but with all horizon and perspective knottod for a loop. These compositions in turn gave way to the spectacular Ombres (1984), Monuments (1986), and Bougies (1986). In Ombres Boltanski suspended the figures from a makeshift metal frame whose supporting legs ended in mounds of clay. Three slide projectors, camouflaged with pieces of crumpled aluminum foil, were trained on the figures, thus catalyzing their shadows onto the surrounding walls. Revealing the work’s jerry-rigged nature, the electrical cords from the projectors created a disordered web on the floor. A small fan in one corner of the gallery gently set the marionette-like cast of characters into motion. Kept at a distance, spectators viewed the shadows from the doorway of the gallery and, in later variations, through small windows in specially constructed rooms.

In the 1986 Venice Biennale, Boltanski exhibited in the Palazzo delle Papi'one, a former prison, and later that year in La Salpêtrière, a chapel in Paris. After these installations, both in semidarkness, the three works mentioned above were collectively titled Leçons de ténèbres (Lessons of Darkness). These works are replete with allusions to religious conventions, full of candles, photographs of children, and the projected and voluble shadows of suspended angels constructed from cardboard and feathers. Boltanski’s extreme attention to details of surface, color, lighting, framing, and installation constitutes both the display of a painterly sensibility and an investigation of how we construct identities, plots, stories, “moving pictures” out of collections of actions, objects, and images we find in the world — how we tell stories to ourselves. He seems to say that what we make out of things may not have any true relation to those things; that what we find is imperfect and what we make of it is imperfect; and that we keep finding and making. “Take me, for example. I ask a lot of questions about art and its purpose or non-purpose, but at the same time, in some vague and inexplicable way, I still believe in art.”

Boltanski’s investigation of the relation between image and text, his exploration of the nature of representation, keeps moving between our constructions and their de-constructions, our identities and what Stein called our “entities,” moving, as I wrote above, like a gyroscope, free to rotate on its intellectual axis and to achieve the artist’s stated goal of making people laugh and cry, of directly communicating emotion. 

In Boltanski’s recognition of the limitation of images — for example, when he states, as quoted above, that the images of the Family D. “only sent us back to our own past” — is his recognition of their power. To be sent back to one’s own past: here the image plays a critical role as valuable evidence of a past as real as any we might imagine, a substantiation of what is irretrievable. Gumpert obliquely comments on this by including a quote from Boltanski, a non-religious Jew:

“I remember the years just after the war, when anti-Semitism was still strong in France, “feeling . . . different from the others.” I fell into such a state of withdrawal that at age eleven I not only had no friends and felt use-
three decades in many fields from poetry to psychoanalysis to film the focus has changed from the perspective of the individual within the relationship "character" to the relationships between people or among people. An interesting parallel can be drawn in the shift of paradigms from the focus on the individual to a focus on the relationship in the development of the "decentralization" of the "hero" and the authorial "I" in literature, for example, to the development of the "object relations" school of psychoanalysis. One particularly unforgettable manifestation of this tendency that became a touchstone of this issue for me was Stan Brakhage's "Metaphors on Vision" in 1963. Eerily similar to Godard's apocalyptic ending to his recent JLG by JLG Brakhage writes as an inscription to this book (which in many ways emphasizes the fluid relationship between the poetic process and the process of film creation):

"By Brakhage' should be understood to mean 'By way of Stan and Jane Brakhage, as it does all my films since marriage... Ultimately 'By Brakhage' will come to be superfluous and understood as what it now ultimately is 'by way of everything.'"

In Helen Keller or Arakawa Madeline Gins takes such concerns and places them at the center of her focus:

"Sometimes people are disgusted by the effusiveness or expressiveness of others. I tend not to be. This is just as well, because the perceptions and feeling of others stand out for me as amongst the strongest landscapes I'll ever know.

But this is only the beginning for Gins. Her writing tends to emphasize the elements in common between her "characters." What we ultimately experience is a focus on the perceiving process itself.

The second sentence of the book reads as follows:

"I was definitely born on July 6, 1936, or it may have been June 27, 1880 or was it actually November 7, 1941?"

Using this device, Gins blurs the boundaries between the three main characters of her book. By taking onto herself (themself) the qualities of a deaf-blind person Gins seems to be suggesting that it is a given that we are all essentially perceptually challenged. Although many possible antidotes are offered, Gins brings to mind the genesis of the Zoroastrian god who is said to have thought itself into existence.

But how are we to contend with a reality which consists of an ongoing multilectic of innumerable voices? The most direct answer to this question, albeit a demanding one, is to learn to be more comfortable with the various and sometimes conflicting identities within ourselves. As we read through Helen Keller or Arakawa we start to recognize that a particular benefit we might gain by developing the necessary sea legs for hanging in through the never-ending shifting tides of identity is the ability to tolerate multiple viewpoints, or shared or alternating perceptions, a kind of "surround-sound" of
human experience. Helen Keller's arduous voyage of conscious discovery, item by item, of the world around her becomes one of many allegories for just this process:

As the cold water gushed forth filling the mug, I spelled 'w-a-t-e-r' in Helen's free hand ... A new light came into her face.

This literally "touching" passage is immediately juxtaposed with an evocation of a work of Arakawa's called Bottle and Cup (1966):

In learning to abstract, I had to learn to open up that significant yet barely perceptible bit of spacetime between mug and the liquid it contained.

Gins further reflects on this episode with a critical/poetic flourish that immediately expands the Keller allegory to include the perceptual identity of all human beings within the communal experience of the functions of language:

Take for example what went on in the previous chapter. Helen Keller's getting of language seemed to be explained by the water episode. Well, hardly. It can be shown that she had language in her through and through well before this ... she had, like every child before or since, ceased being a single individual to become, in order to be, a communal being.

This, in turn, is expanded to include a still larger concept of identity:

For we know that there is something like spirit, which is not self-consciousness as an individual point, but rather a 'world' which, because it is social, lives by reciprocal recognition.

Perhaps another function of this necessary "letting go" of the individual identity in order to expand the perceptual process has to do with the multiple senses which it combines in our apprehension of experience. In order for our senses to function as reliable witnesses of our experience we must learn to allow them to be creatively coordinated, and not place complete reliance on one or another of them. Our cultural landscape is replete with both artistic and scientific experiments which have helped us learn to experience the underlying synaesthetic nature of our perceptual system. The frequently propagandistic and materialistic nature of much of the communication we are bombarded with continuously has a terribly malignant side effect of tending to divide various functions of our perceptual system with the perhaps frequently unconscious, yet all too frequently, manipulative goal of controlling our beliefs and behavior, of hypnotizing us into accepting the current zeitgeist of one system by and within which we live, or another. Never has it been more important for our survival that we learn to see and hear for ourselves. For this we need new perceptual processes, imaging processes and conceptual/intellectual processes in order to crack the codes of the social/political trance-machine.

Characters appear and disappear as we hurtle through H K or A like Quarks, now virtual, now actual, in a particle accelerator. In one discussion, apparently between a physicist Ivor Plenum and a group of "voiced figures" we learn that:

Very much the way a child who's learning to walk will pull itself along from one object to the next, so too does the act of perceiving pull itself along from figure to figure. The perceiving process ... pulls itself into shape or texture.

Later, this idea is further elaborated by means of numerous examples including a fascinating discussion of the development of infantile proprioceptive mechanisms. Bit by bit, each of the themes of the book is gradually developed, until a strangely apropos but most unusual parallel arises between the visual world of line, shape, dot, fissure, cleavage, and the internal world of sight, hearing, touch, feeling and consciousness of self and other. In describing the qualities of one of the book's minor characters named Voluntar we learn that:

She, whose name is short for 'voluntary action' constitutes free will, yours that is. With her, the times she is most herself are when she assumes the role of being the free will of others (!!?) The Zeitgeist in its pupae stage?

This merging of identities, like the merging of senses, has the quality, for me, of a process of the development of empathic connection between subject and object. The division of beings, like the separation of senses, appears to have its origin in the wish to exploit the individual sense or person with the object of covering more ground or seeing further. Gins' book helps us to see that the price of such a limited mode of perception would perhaps be unable to recognize that:

When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door we do not see the one which has been opened for us.

Although some may find Gins' tone pedantic, or her preoccupation with the work of others overly idealizing, I feel that Helen Keller or Arakawa offers us not only a description of a possible new aesthetic of identity but a kind of exercise book we can use to puzzle out what such a philosophy might feel like to live by. Yet to reconfigure my multiple perceptual systems and identities I might:

have to live far more 'fragmentedly' than do the deafblind, but . . . find continuity/sincerity by letting myself become totally multiple, letting one fragment after another serve as the whole of me . . .

—Nick Piombino
by Jacques Derrida
Translated from the French by Peggy Kamuf

In Specters of Marx, the eminent French philosopher Jacques Derrida advocates the importance of re-examining Marx in a post-Marxian world. In Chapter One, entitled "Injunctions of Marx," he states the following: "It will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx . . . ." He goes on to say that the kind of reading he refers to is not merely scholarly reading. With the disappearance of what Derrida calls "the dogma machine" and the "ideological apparatuses," there is a responsibility to keep reading Marx. Derrida goes so far as to claim:

There will be no future . . . without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits. For this will be our hypothesis or rather our bias: there is more than one of them, there must be more than one of them.

This statement sets the tone for the book and for Derrida's thesis: that in an age after the disappearance of the "ideological apparatuses" — namely Communist states, effective party structures, and leftist trade unions — responsible intellectuals must be alert to not only the spirit of Marx in history, but also to his specters; that is, the appearance and reappearance of the many ghosts that appear amid the contemporary machinations of a world-wide market economy.

It is, therefore, appropriate that Derrida spend a good portion of Chapter One quoting from Shakespeare's Hamlet, especially the scene where the ghost of the King appears to the protagonist during the nightwatch of Marcellus. In distinguishing between spirit and specter, Derrida later uses the French word revenant in referring to the appearance of ghost or the moment the ghost appears. He quotes the line from Hamlet's voice, "The time is out of joint," and thus connotes the disjunction of coming to terms with Marxist theory at an historical moment in which the evidence of the apparatus seems hidden from view.

In proposing this title, Specters of Marx, I was initially thinking of all forms of certain haunting obsessions that seems to me to organize the dominant influence on discourse today. At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neoliberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts. Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony.

It is interesting to compare Derrida's thesis with an early essay by Clement Greenberg, called "The Flight of Culture" (1953), later included in his book, Art and Culture. Greenberg cites T.S. Eliot's book, Notes Toward the Definition of Culture, as an example a "conservative" approach which, for Greenberg, only foregrounds "The omnipotence of Marx." The relationship of Greenberg's comment to Derrida's specters is further revealed as the critic states: "It is to Marx, and to him alone, that we have to return in order to restate the problem in such a way that it has a chance of receiving fresh light."

While Derrida's analysis is of much greater complexity — indeed, more dialectical and, therefore, more discursive than either Greenberg or Eliot — the point to which Derrida directs his method is occasionally lost in the detours and interstices of the deconstructive rhetoric. This comment is made neither to discredit the importance of Derrida's thesis nor to dissuade readers from the potential significance to be gleaned from his reevaluation of Marxism — particularly as a rebuttal to the popularized neo-capitalism of Francis Fukuyama. Yet parenthetical remarks in relation to Marx's philosophy in which Derrida constructs such phrases as "a rather heterological tauto-ontology" appear unduly cumbersome in keeping the argument on track.

Chapter Two, "Conjuring — Marxism", is one of the best and most clearly argued chapters in the book. Derrida offers a view of Marxism that suggests a phase or what he calls a "wearing in expansion." By this he means that the reception to Marxism is changing or shifting because "the very functioning of government has changed, not only in its technical condition, its time, its speed, and its speed, but, without anyone having really realized it, in its concept."

In Chapter Three, Derrida introduces the rationale for his subtitle "The New International" as referring to "a profound transformation, projected over a long term, of international law, of its concepts, and its field of intervention." This is stated after a somewhat detailed "ten-word telegram" on the plagues confronting the "new world order." The fact that the world is "out of joint" becomes ever more clear in Derrida's thesis as one realizes the absence of coordination between world powers on some of the issues that he presents, ranging from unemployment to homelessness, from economic wars to the foreign debts, from the arms industry to inner-ethnic wars. This is where Derrida acknowledges the inability to please all Marxists and therefore the limitation of a single spirit of Marxism. At the same time, he will not renounce this. Rather Derrida is interested in using the spirit of Marxism to reinvigorate a self-critique.

In Chapter Four, "In the Name of the Revolution, the Double Barricade," the concept of mourning is discussed in relation to the aftermath of trauma. He explains that "mourning . . . is work itself, work in general, the trait by means of which one ought perhaps to reconsider the very concept of production . . . ." Also, Derrida reminds the reader, in reviewing Marx and Engels Manifesto (1848), that on the first page one reads that "A specter is haunting Europe . . . ." The specter is, of course, communism — the terror inspired in the powers of old Europe. Yet, as Derrida explains, the specter, as
described in the Manifesto, "was there without being there." It was a specter in the form of an omen. "The specter appears to present itself during a visitation. One represents it to oneself, but it is not present, itself, in flesh and blood."

The final Chapter Five, "Apparition of the Inapparent," subtitled "the phenomenological conjuring trick," is a lengthy discussion involving Marx's conjuring of the phantom in The German Ideology as compared with his affirmation in Capital. The major issue is the defining of the commodity and its effect on production and the process of socialization. "The capital contradiction does not have to do simply with the incredible conjunction of the sensuous and the supersensible in the same Thing; it is the contradiction of automatic autonomy, mechanical freedom, technical life." The discussion is a complex one; it ends with the admonition that the ghost is necessary to watch over. It is our responsibility. In speaking of the future intellectual, Derrida maintains:

He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist . . .

It is interesting to speculate after the fact that the ghost of capital — not terribly distant, it would seem, from Baudrillard's third order of simulacra — has now become a perennial part of memory — indeed, of history — even in an age of mediation, perhaps, even more intensified as a result of the intensity of media exchange. The question as to the role of production in such an invisible aura of appearances and disappearances raises some real questions as to the future of art — not so much the nature or definition of art, which is ultimately an aesthetic and ontological question — but as to the sociology of art.

Put another way, what is the future for art on a sociological level where the production of signs keeps appearing and disappearing according to the demands of the market economy, especially if art is reduced to the status of a commodity, as it seems to have been in the Postmodern eighties. Even Conceptual Art is not exempt in an era in which ideas can be exchanged at a price, even if it is not the same price. The production of signs keeps appearing and disappearing, even if they do not exist . . .

Robert C. Morgan

GEORGES BATAILLE: SURREALIST-AGONISTE

THE ABSENCE OF MYTH: WRITINGS ON SURREALISM

by Georges Bataille

Translated and with an introduction by Michael Richardson

Verso, London, 1994, 211 pp., $29.95

In a circular letter of 12 February 1929, André Breton, leader of the surrealist movement, demanded that those receiving his letter declare their willingness to undertake common revolutionary activity, presumably under his authority. Among those who bothered to respond was Georges Bataille. His well-known reply stands as a refusal in no uncertain terms: "too many fucking idealists." Later that year, Breton published the Second Manifesto of Surrealism, a document remarkable for the vituperation the author hurled at former friends and allies. Among the names of those calumniated, Bataille's is prominent. His supposed crime consisted in creating a rival to surrealism with the group he gathered around the journal Documents; he was accused, in other words, of founding a heresy.

Thus we would seem to have Bataille and Breton as heretic and pope, respectively. This is how it appeared in 1929, when Bataille found himself at the center of a group of defrocked surrealists who, having provoked Breton's censure, were read out of the group. But were Breton and Bataille as far apart in goals and outlook as they might have believed themselves to be in 1929? No, as subsequent events would prove. By the mid 1930s, they had begun to work together on an anti-Popular Front project, and by the time these essays were written, each in his own way had acknowledged his respect and even admiration for the other.

Drawing its material from Bataille's Oeuvres complètes, this book collects Bataille's writings on surrealism. Most of the pieces date from immediately after World War II, a time when surrealism was trying to regroup a leadership and constituency scattered by the war, and reassert itself as a driving force in a France that had changed drastically since the movement peaked in the 1930s. Bataille's engagement with surrealism was complex. The book opens with Bataille's savage attack on Breton — the "castrated lion" of that essay's title — written in immediate response to Breton's Second Manifesto. But the hostility displayed in this first piece is exceptional. By the mid 1940s, when Sartrean existentialism and the French Communist Party (PCF) were ascendent in French cultural life, Bataille believed that surrealism was "the only movement of the mind in our time which seems to me to matter." This belief did not prevent Bataille from taking a critical position on surrealism. But he shared the surrealist vision of uncompromising moral revolt and a dismantling of the self that purported to revive the life of myth.

The surrealist movement, as Breton conceived and announced it in a seemingly endless stream of manifestos and declarations, entailed nothing less than the intransigent revolt against the social order and against reality itself. Breton had adopted as the surrealist motto a fusion of Marx's dictum to transform the world, and Rimbaud's call to change life. Nothing less would do. Thus Bataille's emphatically stated definition of surrealism: "It is gen-
unruly virile opposition — nothing conciliatory, nothing divine — to all accepted limits, a rigorous will to insubordination."

If surrealism stood for moral revolt, it was revolt driven by a motivation Bataille described in religious terms. For Bataille, surrealism aimed toward a "state of mind which reaches toward unification... an existence beyond the self is expressed as a spiritual authority in whose name it is possible to speak." This accords with Breton's assertion, in the preface to 1935's "The Political Position of Today's Art," that surrealism was above all a "method of creating a collective myth." But Bataille, as the surviving transcript of a 1948 lecture at the Club Maintenant shows, was more specific. The bridge from revolt to myth, he claimed, begins in an "act of rupture" that breaks a certain utilitarian "enslavement" that is inherent in language. And through this rupture with the world of utilitarian demands and human needs, surrealism drives toward the "destruction of the personality itself." For Bataille this was the goal of the surrealist vision: the annihilation of the sovereignty of the individual, within the context of which myth can be fostered.

In order to understand the validity of Bataille's critical emphasis on the communal goal of the surrealist project, we must look briefly at Breton's own position. For Breton was not consistent on this point. Throughout the 1930s, his declarations on politics oscillated between acceptance of the dominance of the collective over the individual on the one hand, and a call for the "splendid revenge" of subjective life on the other. By 1938 Breton, co-authoring with Leon Trotsky the manifesto "Toward a Free Revolutionary Art," stated with less equivocation that individual action undetermined by external demands would be the best hope of intellectual creativity in the service of human liberation. If anything, Breton's waiting so long to come to this conclusion is testimony to his stubbornness in refusing to legitimize unequivocally demands would be the best hope of intellectual creativity in the service of human liberation. If anything, Breton's waiting so long to come to this conclusion is testimony to his stubbornness in refusing to legitimize unequivocally

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The relationship between Breton and Bataille appears to have been that between one who dares himself to do something, but cannot, and one who, seeing this, calls the bluff of the first. With Breton, one gets the feeling that he pushed himself to be an uncompromising revolutionary but that he could not carry out that dare when its consequences would entail real sacrifices, whether of his authority or his physical security.

Bataille’s insight into Breton’s character is apparent in his 1952 review of Camus’ The Rebel. The piece begins with a description of the public disagreement then raging between Camus and Breton over the remarks on surrealism appearing in Camus’ book. Breton was offended by a number of Camus’ comments, as Bataille observes, and particularly by Camus’ less than reverent reading of Lautreamont’s Poesies. Bataille, understanding that this was a legitimate difference of taste, plays the role of the conciliating mediator, but in doing so, he does not overlook the part Breton played in inflaming the controversy. Breton inflated such differences of opinion into grave offenses simply because he was given over to a ‘“rigorous development of thought with an audacity”’ that derived more from strong feeling than from logic, and inevitably resulted in impassioned statements lacking in real meaning.

In those sections of the review devoted to the controversy between Breton and Camus, Bataille’s comes across as the voice of a balanced humaneness. This is remarkable given the harshly vituperative tone of much French intellectual discourse at that time. But this balance is a strength that runs throughout these essays, and Bataille reveals himself to have been an astute observer of surrealism as a finite phenomenon associated with a certain group of people situated in a particular time and place, with all of the compromises, hasty judgments, and regrets that entails. Perhaps this was because of Bataille’s relatively isolated position. After 1944, Bataille was almost alone among French thinkers in choosing the path of non-engagement, and was one of very few to take up the cause of surrealism at a time when it seemed moribund not only as an organized movement, but also as a source of relevant ideas.

If Bataille’s strength lay in his acute evaluation of Breton and surrealism, his weakness lay in his tendency to analytical thinking. He was apt to extrapolate sweeping conclusions from the sometimes strained analogies he drew between the situation or work at hand and what appears to have been an uncritically assimilated miscellany of anthropological notions he borrowed extrapolate sweeping conclusions from the sometimes strained analogies he drew between the situation or work at hand and what appears to have been an uncritically assimilated miscellany of anthropological notions he borrowed.

Yet it also derives from the logic of Bataille’s key notion of sovereignty. Sovereignty, in Bataille’s aphoristic formulation, is “defined by the fact that it refuses submission and is, above all, the fact of existing in the world with no end other than to exist.” It is this gratuitous dimension of sovereignty that links it, in Bataille’s mind, to the squander of sacrifice. Beyond this, sovereignty is something approaching an absolute value. The will to sovereignty, like the sacrificial instant, entails the rejection of the practical “essence of work” as well as the refusal to produce something useful to be put toward a future; thus human aspirations to be absolutely other than servile or subordinate to the logic of others naturally lead them to the will to sovereignty. Inasmuch as Bataille equated revolt with the will to sovereignty, it is not hard to understand the enormous affinity he came to feel for surrealism. It is difficult to see how the murder of another — regardless of whether or not it “replacing the name of the sacred — erases the difference between the killer and the victim. On the contrary, this difference is only accentuated. The killer certainly is not killing him- or herself, and at the end of the act, life remains to only one of the two, who are now separated by the insuperable barrier of death’s finality. (One woman in this context about translator Michael Richardson’s report of “dubious” rumors that Bataille had actually attempted to make arrangements to perform a human sacrifice around 1937.) Such an act, if carried out, would make grotesquely literal the destruction of personality, and the attempt to explain it in terms of Bataill’s ephemerism is “suppression of the object” — does nothing to change the fact of physical violence culminating in annihilation.

Appalling as this sacrificial scenario may be, it follows from Bataille’s idiosyncratic reworking of an inherited problem. Bataille’s account of human sacrifice must be understood as a breathtaking refiguration of the Hegelian concept of Versöhnung, or reconciliation, by which opposites would be overcome in such a manner that both would be preserved.

Even before he began attending Kojève’s lectures on Hegel, Bataille had been wrestling with the problem of the reconciliation of opposites. This preoccupation can be detected in some of his best-known work. Denis Hollier, for instance, claimed that The Story of the Eye “may be read as an effort to bring out the ‘unity’ in terms that are apparently contradictory.” And in Eroticism, sexual excess is offered as the way by which opposite terms can be made to coincide. But as Hollier shows, Bataille’s early thinking on this subject was not consistent, and Bataille was as likely to reject the identity of opposites as he was to try to formulate conditions under which it could be brought about.

For Bataille, the question was this: How could one imagine a de facto identity of opposites without denying the alterity of the other in its assimilation to the same? His approach was to relocate the problem to the plane of language. Here he set up an opposition between discursive reason and poetry. Discursive reason epitomized the practical realm, while poetry refused even “the slightest [practical] meaning.” Any identity of opposites achieved through discursive language would necessarily put the other into a position of servility — simply by virtue of the practical ends toward which discursive
language must aim. Poetry, being "a means of expression...foreign to discourse" would do no such thing.

Bataille reasoned that the difference between genuine reconciliation and the destructive enfolding of the other consisted in the difference between gratuitousness and the pursuit of practical ends. To assimilate the other in the pursuit of one's ends is to destroy alterity; to assimilate the other gratuitously is not. It is in this context that Bataille's remarks on human sacrifice fit; sacrificial waste, like sovereignty itself, is presumed to be gratuitous, and therefore anything done in its name by definition avoids the reciprocal defilement of same and other by practical instrumentality.

Bataille realized that this vision of sacred wastefulness could not easily be returned to a practical, secularized society. Nor could an unproblematic vision of revolt be brought forth. For Bataille recognized that since the end of the 18th century, the appeal to divine authority as the basis for legitimacy had been replaced by the notion of revolt against authority as the ground and justification of human striving. Thus he concluded that the absence of myth had itself become the underlying myth of the age he was later to name the "era of revolt."

This conclusion raised a dilemma for Bataille, however. For he acknowledged that with the delegitimation of divine authority, there could be nothing in relation to which human desire could rightly be denied. If the absence of divine authority would grant a right to revolt, the logical outcome of this right to revolt would be the corresponding right to sovereignty. And yet the right to sovereignty, though the key ideal for Bataille, is a far cry from the end to personal interest that he saw as the legitimate goal of the surrealist revolt. Thus it is interesting that Bataille devoted a section of his review of The Rebel to a story in which the death of kings is presented as the necessary expiation for the crime of their sovereignty. Bataille concludes that sovereignty is "guilty" by nature and must be brought to restraint through the retributive mechanism of its guilt.

The allegory of the king brings to expression the ambivalence that runs through these writings. It arises from Bataille's attraction on the one hand to surrealist revolt and the pursuit of sovereignty, and on the other, to the abolition of personal interest and the refusal of temporal power. To the extent that he acknowledged this dilemma, his vision of revolt was tempered by a call to self-restraint — a call that, ironically, took him beyond surrealism and brought him closer to Camus' Greek-inspired humanism of moderation.

— Daniel Barbiero

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 225.
4. Ibid., p. 122-123.
Of course there are larger issues here. What motivates artists, who are engaged in a fundamentally individual endeavor, to gravitate into groups? Whose interests does the group serve? And what is the glue that keeps a group together? In fact, why group at all?

I feel I am in the somewhat sentimental mode of Susan Bee and Mira Schor. I have a genuine desire to see people interacting over common interests and helping each other to achieve mutual goals. My personal interests add a different facet to the equation... but more on that later.

The Milwaukee scene exists, but in a curious state of alterity. Just by being Here, as opposed to There, we are Others. We already feel once or twice removed from the vital community of the artworld. We should find common ground in our Otherness, but instead it seems we treat each other as Others, as well.

So I have become one of a few attempting to enliven a faint scene here. I've heard nothing but positive things about opening a progressive gallery. All of the familiar faces have made an appearance at openings and symposiums. Reviews have been published in our single art-oriented organ. But outside of my circle of friends and the perennial gallery-hoppers, outside interests have been sparsely represented. True, this is due in part to my lack of advertising, and my lack of connections to the upper echelons of the art community, but it also points to what I see as a sense of hopelessness; a loss of interest in establishing and maintaining a vital local community. Of course, early on no one was interested until the symposiums presented them with the potential for an opportunity to show. Indeed, self-interest has become the central notion of community. Or has it always been that way, a fact simply glossed over by most art chroniclers? The few outside visitors have come here mostly out of self-interest. They hear a new gallery has opened and here they are, slides in hand. Who could blame them? With the relative dearth of exhibition opportunities, any new hope is quickly exploited and pounced upon. It is the same people competing for the terribly limited space. There should be twenty spaces like this one, and each could sustain a group of quality artists.

Where do we find a balance between self-interest and the interests of the group? Many art movements begun by groups have produced only a relative few successful careers. Individual interests supersede those of the group at some point and the group fragments. But the existence of the group has served at least part of its mission: to provide an aura of community and strength which gives a sense of greater purpose to individual endeavors. Some good has come out of the grouping, though I'm sure that one individual's success can produce envy and bitterness in the others.

Back to my own self-interest in all this. I am an artist living in Milwaukee. I, like many others here, wish that there was a more energetic scene to support my enterprise; I have taken a step towards providing a spark of energy. Yet my own work remains unrecognized and I feel the same sense of isolation. But recognition can take many forms: just to be part of an exciting movement can be help enough in combating the feelings of isolation.

The Forum on Community in M/E/A/N/I/I/N/G #15 has provided me with the impetus to share my personal thoughts on the subject with a larger community of artists and theoreticians. I am an artist, and the operator of a small independent gallery. All of the familiar faces have made an appearance at openings and symposiums. People seem to come to the gallery for reasons of support, congratulations, or self-interest, rather than a genuine interest in the ideas presented. If, as said in Jackie Brookner's essay (M/E/A/N/I/I/N/G #15), quoting Adam Smith, "... narcissism and self-interest are a good basis for a community..." then I have helped to create a community.

LETTERS

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If we as individuals can set aside our immediate goals for response and sublimate them to the more generous idea of interaction, all would benefit. Really there is no personal sacrifice, it's just a matter of seeing the larger picture. I have heard of many exciting and subversive moments in the New York art world that are made to circumvent the constrictive and overly competitive commercial scene. Your endeavor, for example, has produced a community that reaches far beyond the New York art world. I hope my response shows that the dialogue you have started there can reach far beyond a limited group; the issues you deal with are keenly felt even by those of us who don't have regular access to your world. There is a wide audience hungry for voices, and for a discourse that many of our own communities lack. There are other examples of what I'm doing around; at least four that I know of in Chicago (the Uncomfortable Spaces). We are people more interested in community than commodity, and who are willing to set aside personal goals to help create a wider set of opportunities.

We can balance our cynicism with progressive naivety. We can establish community-oriented projects without watering down the environment of healthy competition. Let self-interest have a redefined notion of Self to include the community of Selves and lift us all up. Those of us who are trying know how much better off we all would be.

Viva M/E/A/N/II/N/G!

Nicholas Frank
Director, Hermetic Gallery
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

A PROPOSITION

"Life is fragile and death holds the power. That life, occupied as it is with loving, hatching, watching, caressing, singing, is threatened by hatred and death, and must defend itself."—Hélène Cixous

I read the "Forum: On Creativity and Community" in M/E/A/N/II/N/G #15 with great interest. I was especially engaged by the last question: Are there contemporary redefinitions of creativity? This is something I've thought much about. Trained as a visual artist, I now am writing my second book about postmodern aesthetics, especially the moral and broadly religious dimensions of artistic creativity—a subject that clearly concerns some of the artists who wrote for the "Forum." Susan Bee talks about utopian dreams; Jackie Brookner about the anguish of the world and passionate engagement. Robert C. Morgan asks what the purpose of art is. But I don't agree with everyone: Daryl Chin suggests that aesthetics ("the very definition of") may be in its death throes; Bailey Doogan and William Pope I. seem to esteem isolation. I want to speak. I liked the image Mira Schor gave for the community that surrounds (and expounds in) M/E/A/N/II/N/G: "a card catalogue of subscribers in a red box in my studio." I'm part of that community, but you don't know me. Here is my answer to the forum: a proposition.

With the questioning and overthrow of avant-garde values in the twentieth century, it is by now a commonplace to say that the artist can no longer be seen as a privileged or idiosyncratic visionary with special access to the prophetic sphere. This view—that the artist is possessed of a semi-divine power of genius—was held by German Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge, the French and Russian Symbolists, and members of the Russian avant-garde such as Kasimir Malevich and Mikhail Matiushin. Some contemporary artists also believe that they have a special gift related to these historical traditions. I have for many years been interested in the possible transmogrifications of the prophetic in the present.

I propose that the artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. This definition of the nature of artistic activity implies both prophetic-visionary consciousness and action. What can these terms really mean today?

We live near the end of the 20th century in a time of growing disparities between nations and even between the citizens in this country. Our present moment in the U.S. is characterized by relative economic decline for the majority of people, unprecedented public and private debt, short term profiteering, inadequate education, stubborn refusal to use resources in the public sphere, and erosion of civil society, which means the inability to transmit values concerning the meaning and purpose of life in general. Market values triumph over human values of love, community, and justice as Cornel West has pointed out in Prophetic Reflections. If this situation continues, we may be faced with increasing social disorder, even chaos.

In this context, the roles we define for the artist have moral and ethical consequences. When the artist is primarily an entertainer, attitudes of complacency, satisfaction, and acceptance of the status quo tend to be inculcated. The ramifications of the artist as prophetic critic and visionary move out in quite another direction.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. Who or what is an artist? Carl Sandburg once said that "artist" is a praise word, not to be taken as a self-appellation, but offered by a community to the one who creates. Such an interpretation is very far from any contemporary understanding of how an artist is formed or of what constitutes the artist's community. Our cultural milieu is pluralistic (some would say nihilistic) about the core. No consensus of opinion exists about who may be an artist or about what art is. In our era, everything about art is up for grabs. "Art" is whatever anyone wants it to be at a given moment.

I take a middle path between these two extremes, between Sandburg's conservative stance and the excessive openness of some
The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. To speak of reclamation implies that something has been lost. It has. Assessments of what has been lost in contemporary society vary tremendously depending upon one’s ideology. I am especially concerned with the loss of awareness of the sacred and the loss of the ability to imagine the future, rather than the loss of “family values” or other such notions. For many in our largely secular context, especially those for whom the sacred is associated with the exercise of ecclesiastical power and a patriarchal God, to speak of the reclamation of the sacred and the future is controversial. What is sacred for one culture or one individual may remain profane for another. I wish to call attention to a profound sense of mystery and creativity that pervades life (and death) and all things organic and inorganic. To reclaim the sacred is to recover that sense of mystery and an awareness of the productivity that characterizes all living processes.

But I also must ask, what about the fragile, the precarious? What about the earth’s ecosystem? What about humans, as individuals and as a species? Both are fragile. Any definition of the sacred that creates a bifurcation between the body, the earth, and that which is beyond human comprehension is dangerous. We are reaping the benefit, if indeed it can be called a benefit, of an attitude that has revered the sacred as something remote from human life and the environment in which it could flourish.

I have explored the nature of spirituality and how it is translated through the senses. Spirituality is a vague term. It conjures the ineffable and mysterious; it points to the beyond or to the deepest inner core. It transcends denomination and religious tradition, for there are many diverse expressions of spirituality in different traditions and cultures. Communities share forms of spiritual practice. Prayer and meditation are both public/collective/shared and private/individual/solitary. Through spiritual disciplines we reach into the greater world and into the self. Spirituality is visionary: it sees what is there, what could be and should be, but probably will not be because of our greed.

To me, spirituality and the divine are linked to the world, especially to the mysterious processes of creativity that encompass both birth and death. Such processes are ongoing; humans participate in them and we strive to give them meaning. This creativity happens, and is expressed, in matrices of relationship, interconnected networks of people loving and hating one another. Artistic creativity is a special case of this ongoing creativity in the world; and I believe that artists have a vocation to take their work seriously as an expression of the sacred dimension of existence.

What of the future? I suggest that moral imagination and conscience, as well as moral action in the world, are linked to our sense that life is ongoing. What happens when people no longer think that there will be a future? They said there is nothing worth dying for. One young woman also said that she did not expect to live a long life. When such atti-
tudes are widespread, then, as Dostoevsky put it so succinctly in *The Brothers Karamazov*, everything is permitted. All forms of exploitation and violence can be committed if nothing is sacred and the future is unlikely. Or, how is imagination of the future shaped in and by popular culture, especially through film, since the formative 1982 *Blade Runner* and up to the latest violent cyborgian nightmares? This, finally, is related to the last phrase of my earlier proposition.

The artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying. The understanding of the vocation of the artist that I sketch here is based on a particular assessment of our historical moment: ours is a situation of chronic global crises vying for attention. I began with a statement by Hélène Cixous that is related to my convictions about the importance of the prophetic function. Life—all of life, species, forests—is threatened with death, but not a “natural” death. The death that we face is the annihilation caused by human activity gone awry. As Buddhists have always understood, human greed and hatred spiral toward death. In the face of this pervasive power of death, we need to affirm life, to affirm the possibilities of the future. A fundamental change in human values and life, is necessary for both human and planetary survival.

We live and act in a contingent world. This means that profound uncertainty about the results of our action is unavoidable. Despair and nihilism often result from both our individual and collective confrontation with contingency. But even in the face of contingency and uncertainty, creativity—both in life and in art—does not end. Creativity is an ongoing, everyday, ubiquitous activity. Metaphors of birth and regeneration, of decay and death, describe physical and cultural processes of creativity. How artists participate in those processes makes all the difference.

— Deborah J. Haynes
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CORRECTION to Issue #16: Johanna Drucker's talk "The Future of Writing" was presented originally at Parsons School of Design at a symposium on "The Art Object in the Age of Electronic Technology" organized by Lenore Malen at the New School on April 16, 1994.
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