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MONSTROUS DOMESTICITY

FAITH WILDING

The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers — one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place. — Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, 1929

To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women. — Rozsika Parker, The Subversive Stitch, 1984

The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender. — Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women, 1991

1.

On a recent visit to my mother, we sat on the couch together talking as she knitted a sweater for my 7-year-old nephew. She complained about her arthritis which was making it increasingly difficult for her to knit. As I watched her, my hands began to itch to knit. She offered to let me finish the sleeve, and I eagerly took it up and began to knit — for the first time in at least ten years. It was as easy as pie: the rhythms and movements of the fingers, the method of keeping the right tension, the techniques of increasing and decreasing stitches, the magic of looping a thread around steel needles and producing a fabric — all came back to me. My pleasure in practicing this long dormant skill was so great, that I forgot to count the pattern rows and soon had produced a monstrous sleeve twice as long as the other. It was this "potent limb" which suggested some of the lines of thinking I will follow in this essay.
As a practicing artist and activist feminist, my art work and thinking have been in constant flux. I have been influenced as much by my historical, critical, and theoretical research, as by the thorough training in skills and techniques which I had as a child. My work has also been informed by my teaching, and my participation in various cultural, political, and social movements since the 60s. In the 70s, I worked in media and forms which grew directly out of the discourses of feminism and 60s avant-garde art practices — performance, environments, collaboration, mixed media, street works, and the like. I also consciously re-worked craft processes which I had learned as a girl growing up in a self-sufficient commune in Paraguay — crocheting, weaving, knitting, embroidery, basketry, ceramics, leatherwork, and woodwork.

Needing and thread and bread dough have done more for preserving nations than bullets, and women who made homes on the prairies, working valiantly with meager tools at their command, did more than any other group in settling the West. — Edith Kohl, Land of the Burnt Thigh, p.297

When I made my original crocheted environment for Womanhouse in 1971, I was motivated by my research on women's work and lives in various cultures. I found that women's work of making homes and domestic environments has been pivotal (though largely unacknowledged) in the major cultural inventions of civilization. The transformation of "natural" materials by human activity — variously called "work," "craft," or "art"— has been practiced since the beginning of human history for at least two reasons — necessity (usefulness), and pleasure (uselessness). One distinction usually made between "craft" and "art" is that of usefulness (necessity) and uselessness (pleasure). Craft is generally thought of as unalienated (autonomous) work as opposed to the irksome, forced, necessity of labor, while art is related to non-rational work-as-play. Yet, as everyone who has made things knows, this binary is a false one; work, craft, and art are intertwined in complex ways which reflect actual lived experience in which the mundane (rational) is constantly inflected by the transcendent (nonrational). The division of labor not only divides work up by gender and class, but it also separates the pleasurable and necessary aspects of work itself.

In Western patriarchal culture (where binaries rule) domestic craft came to be associated with femininity, and high art with masculinity. In my crocheted environment, I wanted to pay homage to women's useful economic and cultural work, while at the same time producing a piece that was useless (non-practical) to demonstrate the falseness of the traditional distinctions between art and craft. As Virginia Woolf points out in the quote which begins this essay, women's creative capacities — honed by "drastic discipline"— have been squandered culturally by the restrictions of separate spheres (division of labor), which condemned middle and upper-class women to countless hours of "fancy work" (a work which was not taken seriously) while working-class women were exploited in tedious, alienated labor (work which men often refused to do) for which they were paid far less than men.

Obviously, an account of the history of women's work is beyond the scope of this essay, but female labor and the "feminization of labor" are crucial global issues today, and it is no accident that they should appear as important subject matter in contemporary cultural production. As a teacher, I have repeatedly seen female (and, increasingly, male) students revisit the gendered processes of "women's work" as a way of connecting to a history of skilled production, of making — and feeling (experience) — which is all but absent from their lives. These students — often daughters and sons of mothers who work outside the home and do not practice "home-making"— usually have no traditional domestic craft skills such as sewing, crocheting, knitting, or cooking, but they evoke a strong desire to make objects and/or place them...
in spaces which invoke domesticity with all its attendant meanings and feelings. In a way, what they are representing in this work is a certain loss, the absence of something to which they no longer have the connection of lived experience.

It is important for students to know the lineage of "women's work," and to be familiar with the excellent scholarship which has emerged from several decades of feminist art history and critical theory. It was largely for this reason that I agreed to reproduce the "Womb Room," for little of the actual "women's work" of the 70s has been seen by younger artists working today. Except for the Bronx Museum show, there have been no major historical surveys of this work, nor are there any significant museum collections of it. Womanhouse was demolished shortly after its exhibition in 1972. Many other important works of the 70s have not been publicly exhibited at all, or not for many years. For example, Mimi Smith's *Kitchen* (1973) — a work which looks highly contemporary and is every bit as complex and accomplished as a Sol Lewitt wall drawing (although it has a very different aesthetic origin and emotional content) — was only shown by a museum for the first time in 1994. Mary Kelly's pivotal work, *Post-Partum Document* (1974), has been shown in its entirety in the U.S. only once. Institutional preservation of such work is important for reasons of history, pedagogy, and access. Though some of the work loses force and meaning when divorced from its original context (this is certainly true for the re-creations of the rooms from Womanhouse) it gains a different legitimacy and re-enters the discourse in a new way. By bringing together signal works from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, *Division of Labor* encouraged a re-examination of the history of gendered art practices, and a contextualized critique of the 90s return to the processes, spaces, and subject matter of domestic craft and women's work.

...my own artwork addresses the issues of traditional women's handicraft and "sensibilities" in the context of mainstream cultural concerns. Through my choice of a construction technique (crocheting) that is considered a traditional women's handicraft, this work confronts issues of choice and privilege, as my access to techniques is no longer limited to traditional women's work. The feminine and the masculine are combined and constructed into objects that comment on identity, relationships and beauty. Additionally, the transcendental nature of the repetitive process of crocheting brings many questions to mind regarding what has been shared by generations of women who silently participated in various states of altered consciousness through enactment of repetitive activity inherent in women's work. — Tracy Krumm, "The Heroine" p. 25, unpublished paper, 1994

In *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Rozsika Parker outlines the historical connection between the rise of hierarchical divisions between art and craft and the creation of a code of femininity. "The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft." She suggests further, that it is precisely because the needle arts are so entwined with the creation of femininity that they are so intractable to re-definition as art. Thus she concludes that the introduction of "craft" into fine arts (painting) has modified masculinity more than it has changed craft (femininity). Many of the avant-garde movements of the 20th century (Russian Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism) called for an end to the distinction between art and craft, thus opening up a space for women artists. However, since women artists in these movements often worked in "domestic" spaces (artisan workshops; handicrafts schools; designing embroidery patterns and fashions) rather than "high art" spaces (professional studios, art academies, museums), their work was usually not recognized as art, nor did the definitions of femininity and domesticity change — even though some of the male artists became involved with craft processes.

Postmodernism's boom in computer technology, virtual reality, and electronic communications, with its concomitant anxieties about the loss of the body and the "real" — as well as profound global economic changes, changes in the nature of work, devastating biological viruses, and socio/political gender, race and class "trouble" — have contributed in 1990s art practice (by both men and women) to a resurgence of work about gender and the body linked with domestic subject matter, processes, and craft techniques — traditionally, women's work. Many artists are "returning" to feminist work of the 70s without really knowing they are doing so — because so much of this early work entered the art mainstream, and was picked up by influential artists such as Mike Kelley, without acknowledgement of its sources. Much current installation art, as well as so-called pathetic and scatter art, mines the area of the everyday and the contingent — invoking tropes of home, family, illness, childhood, transitional objects, household detritus, clothing, bodily functions, victimization, love, loss, and the like — in work that strongly recalls the look of much 70s feminist art.

Feminist artists of the 70s set out to expose and reclaim the hidden histories of domesticity and women's lives; bringing them into public view in order to examine them, and to open up sites for critical interventions and new meanings. Some of this work attempted to rehabilitate areas of feeling (intimacy, the "sentimental") and experience deemed exclusively "feminine"; but much of it was highly critical of the institution of the family, and of the restriction of women to the domestic sphere — as well as questioning the division of labor, and the conditions of work itself. By contrast, much of the 90s art (by men and women alike) uses domestic tropes and gendered processes in works which tend to spectacularize, sentimentalize, pathologize, or aestheticize the domestic, rather than offering new critical insights. It must be noted that these artists are usually not working in the context of a strong socio/political movement such as the feminist movement of the 70s. Whereas when Duchamp placed a urinal in a museum as an art object it was not only an iconoclastic gesture, but could also be seen as a
specifically masculine one (which Meret Oppenheim more than countered with her sly, supremely female, fur-lined teacup), in the 90s, it is by now a truism that the signifiers of femininity can be (and are) freely used in art (and sometimes life) by men, and that the signifiers of masculinity are similarly used by women. But a mere reversal of gender signifiers (while often funny and consciousness-raising) does not seem to be enough to get rid of gender roles and stereotypes — or else we would have entered a non-gendered utopia long since. For example, Mike Kelley’s reclaimed crocheted afghans, chewed toys, and cloth dolls, scattered about in the Whitney Museum, somehow do more to reify his bad boy masculinity, than to address or change the codes of gender. Kelley’s work does not so much read “tough boys can be soft and play with dolls”, as it proclaims “I’m such a tough guy — even when I title a work *Half a Man* — that I can appear pathetic and a failure by working with this stuff.” The appropriation of traditionally female and domestic tropes by a famous white male in a retrospective museum show, effectively rehauls them for high art use (at least by men), but the connection to the feminist project which engendered this work is erased. As critic Terry Myers has written, “The overwhelming generative source for Mike Kelley’s work — in historical, aesthetic, conceptual, visual, political, economic, and/or institutional terms — is precisely the painting, sculpture, installation, video, performance, etc., that was made by women artists and art students in Southern California beginning in 1970 (the year in which Judy Chicago began the Feminist Art Program...).” The enthusiastic reception of Kelley’s work, and its considerable influence on younger artists, suggest that references to domesticity and traditionally female work are acceptable when presented as signifiers of the ‘pathetic’, ‘object’, or ‘failed.’ These readings do not lead us back to the critical projects of feminism which include re-valuing “women’s work” as necessary for cultural and economic survival (and therefore worthy of adequate remuneration), and uncoupling the gender codes of the division of labor.

Important precursors to much of the signal art of the 70s were the works of Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou. The hybridization of domestic and industrial (non-art) materials and processes used by both these artists, in works which speak of the replicable and fragmented body and psyche in the age of technological reproduction, were (and are) truly groundbreaking. Bontecou’s wire-sutured, lead-bound vortexes lead into (or out of) the abyss of darkness. Hesse’s meaning-filled repetitions suggest infinity in materiality. The combination of abstraction with obsessively repeated — *worked* — forms alluding to the body, machines, and nature, in both Hesse’s and Bontecou’s work, produces suggestive and “monstrous” (in Haraway’s sense) new possibilities. This work represents new, non-gendered ways of figuring the truth about the body in postmodernity.

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**4.**

*Labor is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.*

— *Among School Children*, W. B. Yeats

The subject of work (labor) itself is central in much “domestic” artwork. This is often expressed in the charged, obsessional quality given to objects or installations which have been personally worked by the artist. This obsessionality speaks about the body in time (a life-time) and ceaseless effort. The repition of bodily gestures and motions produces sameness with slight variations (a mimicry of the conditions of every day life), and a hypnosis state (altered consciousness) in the maker. An epistemology of *making* developments, which brings into play knowledge lodged deeply in the intersection of hand and material: making fabric, making substance, transforming, linking stitch to stitch, loop to loop, fragment to fragment, forming a web, connecting strand to strand, node to node, repeating, patterned, alternating, repeating — the magic of form coming into being through the “thinking hands” acting with material. The above could be a description of the processes of drawing, painting, crocheting, embalming, weaving, and the like — and even puffs of (longhand) writing.

Work which emerges from the desiring body (and affirms the body), which spins out from the laboring (female) body in crocheting, lace-making, knitting, weaving, — like a spider spinning webs out of her own body — seems always to have aroused great anxiety in men. Why should this be? And why should drawing, writing, painting — which also emerge from the body — be considered superior (male) practices? Western philosophy posits that art, though grounded in materiality, transcends the every day (usefulness), and that its meaning outlives the body which produces it. “Domestic” handwork produces useful objects — which are usually as beautiful as the producer can make them — objects which adorn and comfort the body, objects which make life possible. Yet these objects, like bodies, wear out in daily use — they are not immortal or transcendent. Thus they remind us of mortality, and they are regarded as lesser (less human) than art objects. This split reflects a culture which still fears the body (the female), and the life of the body — and which may be perversely embracing cyber technology precisely because it seems to vaporize and sanitize the body and distance mortality.

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5.

Contemporary artists who seek to address gendered work and the domestic in the 90s need to take into account recent economic, cultural, and sociological developments, as well as considering how technological innovations are profoundly altering both public and private work and life globally.
"Women's work," "feminized labor" and "the homework economy", are intimately entwined with the problems of the assault on poor women (and children) — through the attacks on welfare, health care, public education, and abortion — now going forward with such vindictiveness and cruelty in the United States Congress. Recently, Katha Pollitt called this assault the crucial issue for feminists, because the situation of poor women in the U.S. as it now obtains, will increasingly be that of more and more people in the global technological society. Thus, ironically, "women's work" has once again become a central symbol and an image for the world-wide division between the wealthy and the poor, of those who have access and those who do not.

In her influential essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway sketches "one vision of women's 'place' in the integrated circuit" as seen from the point of view of advanced capitalism: *Home: Women-headed households, serial monogamy, flight of men, old women alone, technology of domestic work, paid homework, re-emergence of home sweat shops, home-based businesses, and telecommuting, electronic cottage, urban homelessness, registration, module architecture, reinforced (simulated) nuclear family, intense domestic violence." In short, not a pretty picture — and certainly not the one envisioned by utopian social activists and sexual liberationists of the 60s and 70s.

"Home" has always been a complex concept — especially for women — and one that appears to be ancient and inescapable, even mythic. As a newcomer to the Internet, I note the references to (virtual) domestic architecture, place and process: "World Wide Web", "home page", "domains", "windows" "netscape." The incommensurability of virtual space is made user-friendly by such allusive designations (since vehicles made for physical human travel have always been fitted out with domestic furniture and accouterments, why not our cyberconveyors?) Humans seem to need to carry home with them, to make themselves at home wherever they go. Without "home," it seems, there can be no life. "Home-making" has traditionally encompassed many skilled activities: passed on from grandmother to mother to daughter. Cooking, sewing, knitting, washing, candlemaking, spinning, dyeing, gardening, weaving, nursing, food-preservation, making storage vessels, and the like, were usually skills which were taught one-on-one. Accompanying this teaching was a rich tapestry of stories, songs, poems, rituals and family history, anecdote, gossip, proverbs, recipes, riddles, spells, incantations, secrets, as well as a good measure of "women's" lore — instruction in the codes and arts of femininity.

The survival of skills (and the skills of survival) depends on a lineage of teaching and learning which has traditionally taken place in the private sphere, in the home. Today however, largely because of women's vastly increased roles as family breadwinners, the private home as a pedagogical site has increasingly been replaced by public institutions, especially schools. This means that "domestic" skills are now often not acquired at all by young children, or that they are learned in a "professionalized" and often depersonalized (though not a de-socialized) environment. On the one hand, this can have a liberating effect, as the acquisition of the skill or technique is not accompanied by the stultifying lessons of femininity. On the other hand, there is a loss of the context and culture, the history and content, the feeling of the skill — part of which, as Rozsika Parker has demonstrated, is how skills have been used by women as secret weapons against their enforced domestic roles. Furthermore, the realms of public and private are undergoing a confusing and alarming shakeup and redefinition, largely to the detriment of both, and with the immediate result of reifying gender roles by intensifying the divisions of class, race, and sexual identities. Increased specialization of skills, consumerism, and a greater stratification in the division of labor, have also contributed to a general loss of widely practiced every-day survival and craft skills, and a concomitant estrangement from immediate sense experience. Under such conditions, these traditional "hand" skills are increasingly, and inappropriately, fetishized, and nostalgic sentiments are woven about them, which again separates them from every-day life.

Domestic processes and subject matter have entered the mainstream of art and are used by men and women alike. In this metamorphosis a 'feminization' (but not a "feminism-ization") of the artworld is occurring, which parallels the feminization of popular culture. Art which explores "emotional" or "personal" (identity) themes and subjects, such as childhood, AIDS, cultural and ethnic difference, body art, clothing, love, loss, and sexual identity, is ubiquitous — but it has done more to amplify notions of masculinity (men who knit) than abolishing connotations and definitions of femininity as lesser; nor has much improved in the opportunities for women artists. As the 1995 Whitney Biennial attests, there is an effort being made to bring back painting at the expense of all the installation/political art at the previous Biennial. Work which serves as a critical and engaged vehicle for the examination of female experience, gender roles, and feminist analysis of women's lives and work, is seen more rarely. I shall discuss two contrasting examples of contemporary re-presentations of women's lives (both in the Bronx show) which draw on past feminist art making strategies, and which raise crucial issues about the "feminization of labor".

6.

"In her performance and installation *Hermes Mistress* (1994-1995), Regina Frank succeeds in collapsing the distance between the managerial and labor aspects of post-industrial production. Wearing a beautiful red silk dress, Frank communicates on the Internet via modem, saving fragments of text on her Powerbook computer — some of which the artist later painstakingly transcribes by hand-sewing tiny beads onto the dress."

Frank's piece engages contemporary issues of women's work, and the uses of old and new technologies, in complex ways. Visually, the work is a stunning spectacle. It replays the fairy-tale of the impossible task—spinning straw into gold; sorting mountains of seeds; carrying water in a sieve—given to beautiful girls, upon completion of which they will be freed from evil...
enchantments to marry handsome princes and live happily ever after. But the artist is already a princess, and a fashionable one at that — as her high-heeled red shoes and handsome silk peignoir, shed carefully in the performance area, attest. Our eyes cannot help but follow her voyeuristically, as she slips into the monumental swirl of luxurious red silk dress, and jacks into the World Wide Web. The fairy-tales are a metaphor for women's never-ending task to render the mundane transcendent, and every day life comfortable and beautiful for others, and here she is doing it again.

Visually, the piece also re-presents woman as the eternally immobile waiting one, the object of our gaze — a cyborg mistress — who wiles away her time piecing together an endless incantation (gleaned from texts gathered from the Internet) against annihilation and oblivion. Through the Net she has access to the world of thought, text, language, information. But it seems that this profits her no new way of being in the world as she still sits beautifully transfixed, sewing alphabet beads onto her silk dress. If she is a "manager", she is mainly managing her appearance (representation) as a beautiful woman, not her action in the world. Although the piece suggests interesting possibilities, to my mind, the hybridization it represents appears to reify, rather than question, women's traditional role and representation, and to offer a problematic promise of cybernetics as a liberation from the humdrum and limiting aspects of the experience of domestic life and work. On the other hand, it could be argued that the piece represents this cyborg mistress as a pleasure machine — her own pleasure, as well as ours.

A ghost lurks in this machine: the ghost of women's unseen (alienated) work in the global garment and electronics sweatshops — the new "home-work economy" — which parallels that of the domestic and factory sweatshop. Haraway points out that "women in Third World countries are the preferred labor force for science-based multinationals in the export-processing sectors, particularly in electronics." Yet access to computers, the Internet, and advanced electronic communications and services is still largely restricted to First World businesses, academics, and middle class professionals and their kids, and electronic technology is still popularly regarded as a male province. Here then, we have the classically alienated position of women producing things which they themselves will never have access to buying or using.

Frank's piece derives in part from her work as a seamstress making beautiful, precious garments for other women. Thus it also relates not incidentally to the fashion business, and by extension, to the global garment industry which is intensely stratified as to class, race, and gender, as well as being among the lowest paid "feminized labor." The use of large amounts of expensive silk fabric (Atlas silk) sets the wearer of this piece apart from the makers of this fabric — the traditional prerogative of managers is that they get to dress better. The viewer becomes an envious voyeur of experiences which are not available to large numbers of people: access to the Internet; luxury materials; the freedom (leisure, money) to make\wear something beautiful and impractical. This piece aestheticizes and conceals the conditions of many contemporary women's lives and labor — or evokes them only through absence. I miss a more activist and critical component to the work — which could have been supplied by a different kind of performance of the text. But we read the text through the object of beauty offered to our gaze (we also hear/see her read it virtually, in a sing-song monotone, on a TV screen); it flows through her fingers onto the red silk. Though a woman is mediating language here, she is not changing the codes of representation — thus, she becomes again the mediator of someone else's text, not the generatrix of her own. Hermes' mistress serves time here as a silenced messenger of texts which cannot free her (or us) from the spell of enforced femininity and ceaseless labor.

To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that makes a mockery of a limited work day, leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. — Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 1985

Lynne Yamamoto's installation Untitled, 1993 (Wash House) uses a terse text consisting only of verbs inscribed on flat nailheads to drive home the story of her "picture bride" grandmother's backbreaking life of labor as a laundress on a sugar plantation in Hawaii. The verbs replay the monotony of female domestic labor: "cook, " clean, "iron, "wash, "scrub, "fold," as well as telling the secret story of female sorrow "worry, "love, "weep," which is also part of "women's work". The long row of nails on the wall creates an inexorable iron line of demarcation of experience from which there is no deviance. They are nails in the coffin of this stunted life which ends starkly in "drown." Here repetition is not an aesthetic device but rather a semiotic one, repetition is the meaning — and the meaninglessness — of this life. The relentless line of nails is an apt visual image for the "drastic discipline" Woolf speaks of. In the metaphor which encapsulates this particular life, in the spaces between the words, there is room to read the stories of countless other lives. While many of the words refer to gender-specific work, they also refer to the survival labor still performed in the U.S. by millions of immigrants of various races and classes (and by large numbers of the American working-class and poor) as well as poor people (both male and female) the world over. In her eloquent, yet unsentimental, work, Yamamoto reveals a biography of domestic and survival labor which has not vanished from the world in spite of major technological inventions. The piece offers hope in that it makes us conscious of the differences between two generations of women. The granddaughter has become an artist who uses language as well as objects; she can give voice to a silenced past; she moves in a larger world where her work can contextualize and illuminate the lives of her foremothers; her work is not forced, not alienated, not bitter — and she is using it to enlarge our understanding of the (needless) sacrifices of millions of lives.
The ideologically charged question of what counts as daily activity, as experience, can be approached by exploiting the cyborg image. Feminists have recently claimed that women are given to dailyness, that women more than men somehow sustain life, and so have a privileged epistemological position potentially. There is a compelling aspect to this claim, one that makes visible unvalued female activity and names it as the ground of life. But the ground of life? What about all the ignorance of women, all the exclusions and failures of knowledge and skill? What about men's access to daily competence, to knowing how to build things, to take them apart, to play? What about other embodiments? ... Race, gender, and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts. — Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women, pp. 180-81.

In conclusion, I return to the monster sleeve I knitted in my mother's living room that winter afternoon in Vermont. I return to the crocheted "Womb Room" I re-created with two young women artists — to whom I had just taught crocheting. Our hands moved surely, freely, playfully, wielding crochet hooks and looping Woolworth's cheapest 'Sweetheart' yarn to make a fanciful, airy, complex webwork full of forms variously suggesting body parts, domestic furniture, pot-cloths, wash-cloths, sweaters, chandeliers, the Brooklyn bridge, stalactites, chains, grottoes, ladders, cells, umbilical cords, dollies, and lattices. The web invokes the experiences and objects of everyday life and work, yet it is visually abstracted into a three-dimensional "drawing" created by means of the simplest of "domestic" techniques. Because it can never be finished, it speaks of time and timelessness. Because it is "useless" and beautiful, it evokes feeling and the nonrational. Because it is made with cheap materials and easy to learn skills, it does not mystify the viewer.

The process of its making provided other surprises, for while we crocheted we became inhabitants of the Museum and somewhat reshaped its daily "life" around our work. As we crocheted, we talked—about our lives, our work, our bodies, computers, machines, feminism, politics, love, our mothers and our grandmothers. Museum workers and visitors stopped by to touch our work and marvel at the spinning forth of substance; they told us stories about their childhoods, their mothers, their families. We exchanged gifts of food, advice, friendship, and solidarity. Working together intimate in a public space connected us in new ways. It created an example of affinity based on unalienated, creative work. None of us lost our autonomy, we all learned from each other and made something more various and inventive than one individual could have made by herself. I do not wish to freight this work with too many interpretations, but to me it did become a suggestion of new possibilities for my own work, and for collaborations with others.

While thousands in this country flock to Martha Stewart's "hyper-idealized version" of the simulated nuclear family, becoming devotees of her hyper-consumerized activities of "home-keeping" and "garden-keeping" which capitalize on the contemporary "need for balance, the sacredness of family rituals and holidays," millions of poor workers (all over the world) sleep in shifts in bunk beds, crowded into dilapidated urban dormitories. Those of us who have the fortune to resist such sacrificial lives of repetitive, numbing toil, must strive to create new models for envisioning the pleasurable, non-gendered reconstitution of life and work. I suggest beginning with the lessons of the pleasure of libidinal making, the pleasure of daily competence, the pleasure of practicing skills for their own sake — and for the sake of new inventions, new formations, new embodiments. Technology demands learning new skills, but let's not abandon all those we already know. Let's resist the coercion to over-specialize, to become mono-skilled, for then it is too easy to enslave us, or make us obsolete and redundant. Haraway suggests that it is through new combinations of the hand-made and the machine-made, new graftings, the re-generation of potent, aberrant limbs, that we will have to negotiate our way in the treacherous world of global economics and re-imagined (work) lives. Let us resist the harnessing of new technologies to old ideologies and mythologies which perpetuate gender roles, exploitive division of labor, and other stratifications. Hope lies in new practices of monstrous domesticity; of potent craft, harnessed to a vision of the re-generation of a home for all in the world.

NOTES
2. Lydia Yee, catalog, Division of Labor, 1995, p. 6.
3. See for example the special issue on feminism October 71 (Winter 1994); the "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum in 1994, etc.
4. Mimi Smith's retrospective was at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1994. Kelly's Post-Partum Document was exhibited in its entirety at the Yale Center for British Art, 1984; portions of it were included in New York exhibitions in 1983 and 1984.
6. Here I am paraphrasing from a talk by David Deitcher, "Compassionate Use" given at DIA Center for the Arts on April 9, 1995.
8. Seminar on May 8, 1995 at CUNY Graduate Center.
10. According to Tamar Lewin in The NY Times, Thursday, May II, 1995 "More than half the employed women surveyed — including single and married women — said they provided at least half of their household's income." p. A27.
11. "Children of the seventies—whose mothers worked and brought home Chicken Delight and were taught by a newly liberated McCall’s magazine to make friends with their dust-balls—are perversely drawn to Martha (Stewart) and what she represents. In art schools now, crafts and needlework have become subversive media. As seventies feminist artist Faith Wilding told M.G. Lord in an interview in The NY Times, My

12. Lydia Yee, p. 29.
13. In the 70's part of the show, the continuously running Womanhouse film includes Wilding's “Waiting” performance which critiques such enforced passivity and constriction of women's domestic lives.
14. Haraway, p. 166. "Although he included the phenomenon of literal homework emerging in connection with electronics assembly, (Richard) Gordon intends 'homework economy' to name a restructuring of work that broadly has the characteristics formerly ascribed to female jobs, jobs literally done only by women. Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women."
15. Haraway, p. 166.
16. In private conversation Regina Frank told me that very few women artists in Germany had computers or modems, or were computer literate.

BRAVE NEW ART WORLD
A SYMPOSIUM

Lenore Malen

The conference "Brave New Art World: Patronage, Politics, and the Public Function of Art" was held on April 1, 1995 at Tisch Auditorium of The New School sponsored by the BFA and MFA Painting and Sculpture Departments of Parsons School of Design. Participants included Debra Balken, Michael Brenson, John Clauser, Lisa Corrin, Eric Gibson, Thelma Golden, Michi Itami, Irving Sandler, Ella King Torrey, Martha Wilson, and myself. What follows are excerpts from some of the papers delivered at the conference.

The topic for this conference was conceived in October 1994. I saw it as an opportunity to make some sense of the vast economic, aesthetic, and structural changes we've been seeing in the arts community. Some of these changes are for the good. I am referring to the relative, but still slight empowerment of groups of artists of diverse backgrounds and the greater visibility of certain kinds of art to which the public was previously denied access. Some are for the worse in that funding is much more precarious for all art forms and for cultural institutions - and reduced funding obviously means less public access to art and a greatly diminished ability of artists to produce that art.

I also sensed, in the present political climate, a feeling of uncertainty and doubt about our purpose as a community. It was clear, even before the November 1994 elections, that we could no longer take for granted the cultural framework for the arts that had flourished for 30 years. But in October 1994 it was impossible to predict the political convulsions that have thrown our entire country into a tailspin — with a Republican majority in Congress for the first time in 40 years and with the Christian coalition electing 60% of its candidates. Changes on the national level are being echoed here in New York state. Will this reaction pass quickly? Are those in power reading this country's sentiments correctly and will this be the nature of our government for years to come? A variety of trends suggest that those who support the arts may have a tough time competing in political battles to come. Changes in the electoral landscape include the South's switching from solidly Democratic to Republican and the continuing erosion of the power of cities (where artists usually congregate and where art is made) to that of exurbs and suburbs.

This conference addressed this precarious situation as it relates to the arts and considered alternatives to present structures that are on the verge of being dismantled: the changing nature of public patronage (and I mean the
public in the broadest sense) and the impact our community of visual artists, critics, and curators has had and will have on our larger culture. Have we been effective enough as a community? There are changes afoot in America. This country isn’t the same as it was 30 years ago — ethnically, demographically, economically. The center has not held. And this conference was finally about the struggle over what culture or cultures will predominate and who will provide society with its symbols and values in the years to come.

I think we have to accept the fact that what is happening in Congress is not an aberration, but a distinctly American phenomenon, really a cultural swing. Historically, there has been little trace of the reverence for the state as the body which takes care of things in the way that we have seen in Europe. And we have to acknowledge that many Americans still harbor suspicions about art because it is perceived as a luxury and a pleasure — and therefore dangerous. Our forbears — who were poor, rebellious, and persecuted — considered art a propaganda tool of monarchies and the church. Also, this country still holds tenaciously to the ideal of rugged individualism or “no free lunch” as one farmer in Minnesota was quoted as saying in April 1995 when he attended an NEA-sponsored art event. These American attitudes persist, as we have unfortunately come to see.

Many people, artists included, say that it doesn’t really matter if there is an NEA or not. I disagree. The notion that artists do best without financial support is rubbish (even though there have been periods when artists have done so). The notion is a vestige of a romantic view of the artist suffering to express a vision at odds with society. But throughout history the eras in which art has been great and artists have flourished, have seen heavy support by enlightened patrons, monarchies, states, or the church. Art has always had its patrons and the relationship between patron and artist has always been a difficult one. There are battles and we should expect them.

As for those critics of public funding who say that it is fine to make provocative art, but taxpayers should not pay for it, there are many possible responses. One thing is clear: if a society has hopes for its future, it needs to support the individuals who are charting that future in all fields irrespective of whether they take a critical stance. (This goes for science as well as art.) Obviously, not all paths will be productive.

In the 1980s the arts community has taken great pains to point out in the press that the NEA is not an elite institution. And they have done so effectively. What I am thinking of are the recent reports from the NEA itself (written in part to appease the likes of Jesse Helms), and the many letters to the editor in The New York Times and other media (including a March 22, 1995, New York Times letter titled “No need to be elite to love the arts” by a professor at CUNY). I think it’s important that we distinguish who the NEA’s critics are. Are they groups who are genuinely disenfranchised and who are pointing out inequalities and should be paid attention to or are they politicians who are scapegoating the intellectual and artistic community? Elite, cultural elite, cosmopolitan, are words that have been used historically by demagogues from the right and the left to fan discontent, envy, and rage among those who feel politically disenfranchised, at the same time that they are raising deep seated racial and sexual anxieties. When the intellectual community is scapegoated and is on the defensive — because it has a conscience — it unwittingly aids in silencing its own voice as a conscience. In his article in Art in America Douglas Davis quoted from an October 1994 editorial in the Wall Street Journal by Irving Kristol. Kristol said “thenceforth all political wars will be primarily cultural in nature” and, according to Davis, Kristol explicitly targeted the academic and arts community.

The panelists were asked the following questions: In what way have existing structures shaped cultural production? What effect has the support for experimental art forms had on production and creativity? What effect have changes in funding patterns already had on art? Who is the public and who represents them? What role have context and locale and the introduction of diversity into American culture had in shaping art? Are there strategies that can allow artists of all media access to the public, bypassing established means of support and traditional venues? What can we learn from the community and from grassroots arts programs that have always functioned without art world support and what role will they play in the future?

I entered the art world in the early 1950s because Abstract Expressionist painting engaged me more intensely than anything else I knew of. I tried painting for a year but found that writing about art was much more intense, so I became a critic. To support myself, from 1956 to 1959, I worked for three afternoons a week managing the Tanager Gallery, the leading artists cooperative on Tenth Street. My pay was roughly $1.00 an hour which came to $20 a week, and my rent was $17 a month, which meant that I could meet my rent by working 17 hours a month, but more of that later. Because of organizational skills that I had, I began to arrange the lectures and panels at the Artists’ Club in 1956 and continued to do so until 1962. I also turned up at the Cedar Street Tavern most every night around ten and stayed until about two. So much for personal history.

What were the worldly expectations of artists in the 1950s, the time of the triumph of American painting? The opinions of other artists counted for most and were enough to sustain artists. Art News and Arts Magazine reviewed all shows, and that was a help, although most reviews were generally about 50 to 300 words. There were few sales. In the three years I managed Tanager Gallery, I sold only one work of art, for $125, and I almost botched that, but sales were not expected. Government help was not forthcoming or expected, with the exception of Fulbright grants for study abroad. New York museums were more open to avant-garde art after 1952, particularly the Whitney whose curators monitored the dozen or so galleries that showed New York School painting and sculpture. But the mass media on the whole was hostile. As late as 1956, Time dubbed Pollock “Jack the Dripper.” Because of
this kind of hostility, lack of public recognition, and sales, avant-garde artists justly considered themselves alienated bohemians. They condemned public taste and mass culture as philistine. They even welcomed alienation for the privacy and freedom it guaranteed in order to concentrate on their own art, cultivate their own gardens, as Meyer Schapiro advised them. They even believed that this would make them, in Schapiro's words, "the most moral and idealistic of beings" and role models for Americans generally. Artists believed that worldly success meant that the art had sold out. Accepting money from the establishment, including the government, was also suspect—a sign of compromise. The artists were ambivalent, to be sure. Most wanted worldly recognition and success. We know the Abstract Expressionists through the famous group photograph that appeared in Life magazine. Remember that Life was the exemplar of kitsch—the enemy—and yet the artists met to pose for that photograph.

How did artists get by economically? They took vows of poverty. They worked at any old part-time job, and as the 1950s progressed, they got teaching jobs. We tend to overlook the fact that the great patrons of the arts in America were our universities and colleges, and the drying up of teaching jobs now will affect artists more drastically than loss of government aid. In the late 1950s, the economic situation changed. The boom market began. The catalyst was the sale of Jackson Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* to the Metropolitan Museum in 1957 for $30,000, an unheard of amount in those days. The following year, Jasper Johns' show was successful, and then in 1960, Willem de Kooning's. The boom was exemplified for me in a story told by Lee Eastman, de Kooning's accountant. Sometime in the 1960s, de Kooning called the phone company and, as everyone knew, he never used the phone. Eastman answered: "You got it wrong. That's not your bill; it's your dividend." Nonetheless, de Kooning found it difficult to come to terms with his new affluence and sunk huge sums of his money into the white elephant of a house and studio he had custom-built on Long Island. He once said to me bitterly, "I didn't paint today; that cost me $10,000." But what bothered de Kooning most was the relation of success to the meaning of his art. What did it say about his art if the public that once hated it began to love it?

Then in 1965, the NEA was launched. It came about at a time when both public attitudes and art world attitudes to government support of the arts had changed. A growing public was increasingly sympathetic to advanced art and in response artists felt less alienated. Artists could abandon their bohemian life and become Men of the World, as Allan Kaprow said they should. Now, as Americans, as citizens, artists expected the government to recognize them and their art. As they saw it, the government could do no less. I reflected this new attitude in the preamble of a position paper I wrote for the NEA's Works of Art in Public Places Program. I said that the government could not avoid taking a position on the arts in America. It could either support them or not, and my assumption was that it had no choice. The Federal government not only supported art but also allowed artists in peer panels to decide who would get grants, and that, to me, was the most remarkable and innovative thing about the NEA.

Recently, the situation has again changed. Now artists are condemned by the Helmses and their kind as irresponsible pornographers, traitors, and what have you. And the demand is that government funds must not go to artists, period. We must, of course, fight these libelous attacks, but how? How can we convince the general public that art, in this difficult time, that deals with serious public issues, involving economies, race, gender, and sexuality, that probes social and other taboos, that is aesthetically difficult, ought to receive tax monies? I don't have the answer and I don't know if we can succeed, not at this time.

It is in good measure because of our inability to convince the public of the need for difficult art that the NEA is under threat. I don't believe it will be abolished, but I do believe that its most interesting programs—grants to artists—will be eliminated or emasculated.

As I see it, what is most important for artists is the survival of the individual artists' grants programs and the peer panel system. If the latter goes, the NEA doesn't count for much. And don't think that all who support the NEA support artists' grants program. Listen to what Winton Blount wrote in defense of the NEA in an Op Ed piece for *The New York Times* on March 22, 1995. In a response to what he termed "the self-indulgent and the contemptuous few who caper on the edges of the art community," he wrote: "It is reasonable to demand corrections in the peer review process. It is to those corrections that we should be directing our attention now." And if we didn't, Winton Blount said, we would "deny millions of people access to the pleasures of the arts." If the NEA's major function has become fostering art education and public entertainment and supporting museums, then it has lost its primary use to artists. We must be wary of NEA funding of programs that encourage folk dancing or kiddies' classes and the people who support them. They are also the enemies of serious art. This is a crucial issue.

But then it may be time to take a hard look at the NEA. How important was it really to the creation of art? What did it contribute to artists? Was the money that important? Was the recognition? What do artists lose if the NEA or the artists' grants programs are abolished? What will artists gain if the NEA survives only to support folk dancing and establishment art institutions? But what will artists do if NEA funding vanishes? What they have done in the past. They will take vows of poverty if they have to, support themselves as best they can, and carry on. In one sense, they may have it easier that the artists of the 1940s and 1950s did. There now exists a mass constituency for art, sympathetic art institutions, and a market as well, and that will continue. It is important to recognize that there does exist a mass audience for art, an audience of millions—probably nowhere near as large as the public that wants to abolish the NEA and certainly not as vociferous, but a mass-conscious audience nonetheless, and that is not going to disappear. In another sense, it will be harder for artists now than in the 1940s and 1950s. Given what rents are today it takes more money to survive. You can't do it on part-time jobs the way
we could back then.

We must fight to save the NEA. The art world must organize itself for political action, and more than that, as Douglas Davis suggested, "find common ground with the sciences, the university community, progressive women's groups, advocates of public broadcasting and a wide range of communities concerned with civil rights, the First Amendment, racial justice and economic equality." We may even find allies in the ranks of wealthy Republicans who constitute most of the trustees of museums. Can the art world quickly organize itself at this time and link up with the AAUP, ACLU, NOW? I hope so.

At the same time, the art community must think more about itself as a community, how to sustain itself and how it might sustain them. How can artists support one another? How do we sustain organizations that artists need for survival without governmental funds? Maybe too, it is time to consider other than the art world as we know it. It will take a drastic change of attitude. Can artists and art professionals stop believing that the sign of artistic success is acceptance by the New York art world? And if they can, can regional art centers be made viable?

As an American citizen and, I might add, a patriot, a role that I insist upon as much as Jesse Helms, I will fight like hell for the continuation of the NEA, the artists' grants, and the peer panel system. Still, I don't think Government support of living artists has added up to all that much but however it has helped artists, and it does, it makes me proud. To eliminate the NEA will make our country look like an ass abroad, and that bothers me. But, whatever happens, artists are not going to stop making art. And the art-conscious public won't stop needing art. And that's what really counts.

Michael Brenson

This is a vulnerable time for artists. Private as well as public funding is drying up. With the Contract With America, any semblance of a Federal contract with artists is in danger of being broken. America is again being given license to despise artists, as it did in the 40s and 50s, before the National Endowment for the Arts came into existence, when some of the artists who would come to define American art, like David Smith, could feel like expatriates in their own country. Targeting artists is now high on the list of political cheap thrills. If some demagogue wants to mobilize group anxiety, all he or she has to do is mention Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, or Karen Finley. If you want votes, talk about a threat to American values and point toward gay, minority, and women artists supported by the Endowment. If you want a successful ad on television, mock abstraction, or mock some art-world straw man you can identify with a doomed challenge to the middle-class family, and the product will energize itself. Through all the scapegoating of the artist and the Endowment, Bill Clinton has been silent. Our President has sent the clear message that the artist in America and the freedom of the creative imagination are not worth fighting for. Artist know that almost no one in political power is going to defend them. For the first time since before the Endowment was founded midway through the Cold War 30 years ago, artists are asking themselves if they are homeless in America.

I am not going to focus on the situations of the National Endowment for the Arts, or on those politicians who are as easy targets in their own ways as Serrano and Finley. I am more interested in trying to understand what the responsibility of the art world may be in the crisis in which artists and the Endowment, and a great many people who care about the place of the artist in America, now find themselves. For some time now, I have been trying to come to terms with the general failure of the art world to deal effectively with the Endowment crisis. I have asked myself often—most recently after Lytne Cheney's March 10, 1995, Op-Ed piece in The New York Times, given the inflammatory title, "Mocking America at U.S. Expense"—some basic questions. How have the enemies of the Endowment been able to set the terms? Why have defenders of the Endowment been so ineffective in taking the initiative back? I have also asked myself why the culture community has tolerated the devastating distortions of the Endowment controversy in the press, and the astonishing gutlessness, throughout this controversy, of American museums. I strongly believe that we can't get out of this mess without considering the failures of the custodians of art and culture, and what each of us might have done to contribute to the dramatic situation the Endowment, and art in America, are in. While art and artists are under attack from the outside, they have also been undermined from the inside. It is this inside failure, combined with the outside attack, that has made the situation of the artist so precarious and turned more and more artists away from the culture institutions that exist, in principle, to support them.

Let me give you an example of how the resolve of the art world has been weakened from within. The attack on the Endowment began during a period in which everything about art was being studied and picked apart by some of our most persuasive intellectuals. For some scholars, a painting is now essentially no different than a journalistic illustration, which is no more and no less a source of political and social information. When Mrs. Cheney says the concepts of originality and formal values have been stripped of their authority in the academic world, she is, of course, right. So have notions of heroism, genius, greatness, individuality, imagination and transcendence. I am not going to argue against the theoretical attacks on these notions, many of them in race, class and gender terms, which Mrs. Cheney considers intrinsically anti-standards and anti-American. I consider them indispensable. Many demand attention. The fetishizing of originality, of heroism, of the artist's touch, in part because of the power of these words to turn the objects with which they are identified into expensive commodities, are real problems. These words are so hackneyed that I don't use them. The only one I feel totally comfortable with is imagination, which in the last couple of years I have been using all the time.

This being said, however, I believe absolutely that the ideas represented by these words have value. I believe in the importance, now as much as ever, of heroic art, although I have my own way of defining it. I do believe in great-

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ness. I have worked with artists whose ways of processing information and transforming observations, feelings, and thoughts into multilayered poetic images are so miraculous that I do not hesitate to say that they have a touch of genius. I have been around artists my whole life, and there is no group of people I would rather be with. Steve Oliver, one of the most devoted art patrons I know of, is in the construction business in northern California. He is also on the mostly corporate boards of many institutions. Last summer, addressing the crowd that had gathered for a tour of the sculpture on his ranch, he said: "I have been around many different kinds of people. Artists are by far the smartest people I have known." So I resent the ways theoretically sophisticated art historians who have little or no experience with living artists spread their demystifications about artists among scholars only too eager to be told that artists are in fact no more imaginative or intelligent than they are. I know damn well what art can be and what artists can do. I know how much they matter.

My point is that the devaluation of these key words and the discrediting of the most within many of the most influential segments of the contemporary art world is one reason why the kind of conviction about art that is needed to counter a Lynne Cheney has been absent. My point is also that we need to think about these words in fresh ways. They always need to be reimagined, redefined. Renouncing the term has a price. If they are undermined without putting anything in their place, the terms for defending art are inevitably more prosaic, and the ground for defending the spiritual and moral dimensions of art to many people far from academic conventions is weakened.

The issue of language is posed most dramatically by the word quality. To many people who see their mission as preserving the rule of tradition, this is a sense of control. To them, it means almost everything worth fighting for. Among many Americans, the word quality represents legitimate authority and control and the very possibility of continuity and respect.

Within influential sectors of the contemporary art world, the word has been discredited. I don't need to go into all the reasons. Suffice it to say that for many people, including me, the word has been identified with an essentially monotheistic, monoracial, monocultural, monosexual system. In the art world, the people who have been insisting on the word are, to my knowledge, without exception white conservative curators or critics who never struggle to define it, who are almost allergic to work that does not resemble traditional painting and sculpture, who believe quality is incompatible with insult or provocation, and who have little or no interest in exploring the needs and traditions of contemporary artists from non-European cultures. Their obsession with normality, propriety, gentility, and convention means that almost every truly imaginative form of artistic expression eludes them. They use the word not as a means of deepening discussion about the range of creative possibilities but of closing it off.

To give you an example of why the word quality has become, for me, so tainted, I want to comment on a paragraph in the Op-Ed article in which Lynne Cheney gives examples of the decline of standards. "In the art world,"

Mrs. Cheney writes, "the works of Andres Serrano (who portrayed Christ immersed in urine and who has now turned to close-up photographs of corpses) and Karen Finley (who makes a statement about the oppression of women by smearing her breasts with chocolate sauce and bean sprouts) are considered not mistakes but examples of outstanding accomplishment." Mrs. Cheney's characterization of "Piss Christ" is instructive. "Portraying Christ immersed in urine" misrepresents what Serrano did, which was to immerse in urine the kind of small, cheap plastic crucifix that for many people is emblematic of the trivialization of the Christianity in which Mrs. Cheney clearly deeply believes. To me, putting a cheap plastic crucifix in urine or covering your body with chocolate sauce to make a feminist statement has little or no intrinsic value. The results could be good or bad, facile or profound. What is important to recognize is that for Mrs. Cheney, the very fact of creating these images, or for that matter of taking close-up photographs of corpses, which led to some of Serrano's most moving works, is inherent proof of the decline of standards. Quality here is determined by content. If the content is perceived to be anti-Christian, anti-traditional woman, or anti-American—or rather anti-those parts of America that are assumed by The Times to be synonymous with it in its headline "Mocking America at U.S. Expense"—the art cannot be good. Quality is unthinkable if it challenges certain beliefs. This is not an intellectual or aesthetic argument, which is the way Cheney presents it. It is a religious and an ideological argument. Part of the painful confusion of this moment, at least for me, is that the people who present themselves as champions of the esthetic and accuse everyone who challenges the word as being ideological are so blinded by their ideological obsessions that they have almost no ability to understand what the esthetic now needs to deal with in order to breathe.

Please bear with me a couple of minutes while I summarize my own position with regard to the word quality. Nearly five years ago, I wrote an article for The New York Times in which I tried to articulate what a minefield the word had become. Near the end, while arguing against any either-or view and answering: "Probably not. If it is used negatively, to criticize an artist or a body of work, it should be with extreme care." In a 1991 lecture in which I went a good deal further in defining my own experience of quality in art, I also stated more emphatically that the word should not be used. I said: "The current uses and politics of the word quality have had a tendency to obscure the fact that quality can be present in many kinds of art produced by all kinds of people. The word quality tends to prevent artistic quality from even being recognized."

In 1992, speaking in front of the National Council of the Endowment, I elaborated on that remark. I said: "To insist on the word quality is now to insist upon control. Some of the most influential contemporary art challenges a sense of control. It is only through a relinquishment of control that a full experience of any art is possible." I added: 'The most serious question is this: If we do not use the word
quality, is there any way of assuring that the very particular aristocracy of experience that the best art offers—an experience that carries within it a recognition of all that human beings are capable of and share—will be respect­ed and preserved?"

I answered: "I believe this experience can probably only be respected and preserved now if the word quality is put aside. I also believe that right now the weight of responsibility is not so much on the wielders and brandish­ers of the word as it is on those who resist it. The value of art that has been overlooked or that has not yet been appreciated cannot simply be claimed; it is not enough to write about art offering historical and political analysis and con­textual information. All the art that convinces and endures has been written about with knowledge, passion and poetry, and with a built-in responsiveness to respected ethiotic positions either openly hostile to that art or disinclined to take it seriously."

I felt very sure about what I was saying. Each time I made a statement about the word, I declared my own belief in the idea represented by it and my commitment to defining its presence in all the art that mattered to me. I chal­lenged other people who also had trouble with what the word had come to be identified with to be more rigorous and imaginative in defending the art they believed in. I took for granted that it was the job of intellectuals to struggle with difficult issues, and that we, as a group, would never accept, in principle, that any idea is beyond questioning and definition. I saw the problem with the word as a chance to deepen the level of artistic discussion and help language evolve so that we would emerge from the quality debate better able to under­stand and discuss the power of art without recourse to ideological dismissals or easy labels. I had little doubt that notions of quality would be articulated that would accommodate the new, the insulting, the jarring, and the commu­nity-based, as well as the harmonious, the lyrical, and the grand, to the point where the lines between resistance and transcendence would not always be so clear.

What I, and we, have to face is that so far none of this has happened. Critics who used the word still just use it without any attempt to define it. Institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art use it more proudly and defi­antly than ever. Most art from non-European cultures, some of it challenging European perspectives, some of which I feel very close to, has continued to be identified with to be more rigorous and imaginative in defending the art they believed in. I took for granted that it was the job of intellectuals to struggle with difficult issues, and that we, as a group, would never accept, in principle, that any idea is beyond questioning and definition. I saw the problem with the word as a chance to deepen the level of artistic discussion and help language evolve so that we would emerge from the quality debate better able to under­stand and discuss the power of art without recourse to ideological dismissals or easy labels. I had little doubt that notions of quality would be articulated that would accommodate the new, the insulting, the jarring, and the commu­nity-based, as well as the harmonious, the lyrical, and the grand, to the point where the lines between resistance and transcendence would not always be so clear.

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BRAVE NEW ART WORLDS

Consider the juxtaposition of the following two artistic pronouncements:

Death is "tragic" because it closes off possibilities of further meaning; art is similarly tragic because it prefigures as an ended event of meaning. [My] paintings do this by appearing to participate in meaninglessness.
— David Salle, 1979

Artists, as much as galleries, museums, and journalists (not excluding art historians), hesitate to discuss the industrial aspect of their activities. An unequivocal acknowledgement might endanger the cherished romantic idea with which most art world participants enter the field, and which sustain them emotionally today. Supplanting the traditional bohemian image of the art world with that of a business operation could also entirely affect the marketability of its products and interfere with fundraising efforts. Those who in fact plan and execute industrial strategies tend, whether by inclination or need, to mystify art and conceal its industrial aspects and often fall for their propaganda.
— Hans Haacke, 1984

While seemingly at odds and incongruous, both statements neatly encapsulate and frame some of the key ingredients that characterized the polarized aesthetic debate that raged throughout the 1980s. On the one hand, Salle has relied upon his own (considerable) ego as a font of insight, the true or "ur" source to bring to any elaboration on the state of art. Haacke, by contrast, has bypassed this kind of solipsistic mode of address and considered the larger picture: that is, the socio-economic context that determines the production and reception of art. One strategy is wildly narcissistic and adds to an inherited belief that self-expression is the common goal of all artists; the other, impersonal but not quite anonymous, thrives on the presumption that the declaration of subjectivity is a misguided endeavor, a foil that masks the larger and more pernicious agendas of the businesses and governments that assist in the sale and support of art.

Whatever the ideological differences that separate Salle and Haacke, oddly there are certain points of contact in their ruminations that eerily point to the kind of morass and defeatism that surround the current widespread debate on the future of culture in this country, and by implication the National Endowment for the Arts. Salle speaks of a "meaninglessness" that pervades his work; Haacke of the seamless and "dominant authority" of museums and the purveyors of culture (i.e. the curators, critics, galleries, and arts administrators), of their rapid ability to absorb dissent, and re-present change as part of a logical, continuous, and ongoing narrative of the trajectory of art. If anything, a deep-rooted pessimism unifies both Salle's and Haacke's outlooks. While Haacke, and many other artists who have taken their cues from the Frankfurt School, and other endgame-type critical writing, have succeeded in deconstructing the entanglement of art and power structures—a lesson which after all has been well worth learning—his work prefers no solution. What are the alternatives to the hegemonic institutions that control our understanding of art? What are the possibilities for art to occupy a more respected role in society and not be reduced to national mockery by politicians such as Alfonse D'Amato, Jesse Helms, and Newt Gingrich? Certainly, David Salle's private discourse of "meaninglessness" is not an answer. But, then, nor is Hilton Kramer's requirement that art uphold the "institution of tradition," some elusive canon or aesthetic formula that abhors art that smacks of politics or popular culture.

This symposium's panelists have suggested through both their own programming, public actions, and, in some cases, artistic gestures, constructive options for developing wider audiences for art. Interestingly, some of their approaches have been given to work by artists who de-emphasize their own individuality, and place a premium on alternative solutions such as collaboration and community interaction as a means of emphasizing a more social role for art. An active commitment to the voices of others — that is, to women and minority artists — shapes many of their policy decisions, a factor which in itself enlarges the possibilities for change, while decentralizing the marketplace as the only filter for art.

When the NEA was finally chartered in 1965 after more than fifteen years of protracted national discussion and intense lobbying of federal legislators, presidents, and governors by the arts community, Lyndon Johnson declared, "freedom is an essential condition for the artist, and in proportion as freedom is diminished so is the prospect of artistic achievement." While the emphasis on freedom has been decoded by some in the academy as the inherited legacy of cold war rhetoric, of an aspect of America's will to political and cultural supremacy, it also bears mentioning that historically the NEA co-exists alongside of another remarkable piece of legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Surely, something of our desire for government recognition of the arts community is also entwined in this monument. For it seems that the civil rights movement which paved the way for the women's movements and the gay liberation movement after 1969, have now become ritualized as political events partly through artistic expression. Although fragmented and fractionized, at the least, culture and the arts community with its array of voices, are working to keep democracy fluid, mobile, and updated. Therein lies some cause for hope.
Michi Itami

HOW CAN YOUNG ARTISTS ACCESS THE ART WORLD?

The standard advice given to young artists when they have finished their M.F.A. Degrees and/or have arrived in New York is to submit their slides to the standard nonprofit spaces: The Drawing Center on Wooster Street in Soho, Artists’ Space, Organization of Independent Artists, Art in General, Art Initiatives.

Of course, young artists should do that, but is that enough? I recommend that the artists go to each space and check out how they feel about the place and then give time. I am involved with two nonprofit art spaces: Art in General and Art Initiatives. Holly Block, who is director of Art in General located on Walker Street, one block below Canal Street, has various ongoing activities — among them, exhibitions, community-based projects with artists and public school children, video nights, guest lectures, artist in residence programs, studio tours, and panels of artists who jury and organize the exhibitions at the gallery. Art Initiatives on Duane Street in Tribeca is another organization directed by Gail Swithenback; they sponsor art exhibitions by artist members in alternative spaces throughout the city; many shows are chosen by guest curators and gallery owners often serve as guest curators. By working with these organizations, you meet other artists and view each other’s work. Friendships are forged and people associate your work with who you are.

I am also on the steering committee of “Godzilla, Asian American Art Network” which is an organization of artists, writers, and curators of Asian heritage. We meet several times a year and publish a newsletter twice a year on topics that are of interest to members. The current issue which is due soon is about education. We see ourselves as an activist organization; in the past we have met with the Director of the Whitney Museum to protest the lack of Asian representation at the Whitney and we have picketed the Guggenheim at the opening of its Soho branch. Recently, we sent a group of four artists to Reed College in Oregon to install a group of objects made by Godzilla artists — in the form of baseball hats, pennants, and blue books. The title of the mini-exhibit was called “Teen Age Mutant Ninja Turtles — Not!”

Meanwhile, bookstores, video stores, and art supply stores are filled with how-to books and videos providing step-by-step instructions in specific techniques to produce paintings which fit into set genres — landscape, portraiture, still life, in pastels, acrylics, or oils, furthering the status of painting as hobby and entertainment through established and irrelevant-to-avantgarde-thought genres.

So what would constitute useful painting manuals for our time?

Mr. Rogers’ Studio

It is hard to imagine becoming a painter without ever having seen someone actually paint a picture. For many younger artists, the first person they ever saw paint was Bob Ross on his television program Joy of Painting, often aired on public television in the afternoon as a sort of semi-cultural after-school babysitter. In a soft voice, “so soothing that its effect was once compared to Demerol,” Ross encouraged his viewers to “have a good time” as he demonstrated to them how to create simplistically illusionistic landscapes, in formulaic genres already buried under endless stratifications of kitsch, with little or no attempt to call the viewer’s attention to his or her own specific visual surroundings. The effects were doubly magical: a specific (and profitably marketed) brush would always create the illusion of leaves, snow, grass, or clouds — “tiny little circles, tiny little circles... then fluff it” — at its lowest common denominator of...
representation and in each program Mr. Ross would create what looked like the identical painting. There is an undeniable hypnotic fascination in waiting to see which cliché image Ross will put down next. Will there be a waterfall at the bottom of the blue mountains? Yes! "Happy little splashes." Yet it seems obvious, watching closeups of these magically illusionistic effects as they appear, that, if ever seen "in person," the representation would disintegrate back into silly little marks.

The lulling quality and slow pace of Ross's speech was similar to that of PBS's kids show host Mr. Rogers. Its message was: painting is easy, painting is safe. Painting in this neighborhood is the sum of a few tricks and it is meant to be soporific, preventing troubling thoughts from disrupting the surface of the picture plane. Significantly, these paintings were only experienced as video images: the subtitle for Mr. Ross's New York Times obituary was: "Was Painter on TV?"

Trade Secrets
Some artists will always dream of finding magic elixirs for success and today's art students may look to their teachers for a rule book because the proliferation of possibilities offered in the postmodern moment are apparently so dispiriting that rules are craved if only for something to fight against. At the same time the simplest of painting techniques, such as painting wet into wet or glazing, may appear as mysteries because they are not taught. This is because in more traditional schools compositional and spatial concerns overwhelm problems of color, light, atmosphere, painterliness, not to mention subject matter, and in more advanced schools because such techniques reek of dated and dispiriting that rules are craved if only for something to fight against. At the bottom of the blue mountains? Yes! "Happy little splashes." Yet it seems obvious, watching closeups of these magically illusionistic effects as they appear, that, if ever seen "in person," the representation would disintegrate back into silly little marks.

For seekers of secrets and tricks, Salvador Dalí's Dali — 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship offers hysterically detailed advice, as well as straightforward information of a stoutly traditional nature and some numinous descriptions of what painting once was.

...it is a rigorously objective fact: in 1948 a few persons in the world know how to manufacture an atomic bomb, but there does not exist a single person on the globe who knows today what was the composition of the mysterious juice, the "medium" in which the brothers Van Eyck or Vermeer of Delft dipped their brushes to paint. No one knows — not even I! The fact that there exists no precise recipe of that period which might guide us and that no chemical or physical analysis can explain to us today the "majestic imponderables" of the "pictorial matter" of the old masters, has often caused our contemporaries to assume and to believe that the ancients possessed secrets which they jealously and fanatically guarded. I am inclined to believe rather the contrary, namely that such recipes must in their time have been precisely so little secret, so incorporated in the everydayness of the routine life of all painters, so much a part of an uninterrupted tradition of every minute of experience, that such secrets must have been transmitted almost wholly orally, without anyone's even taking the trouble to note them down."

This book, "a kind of culinary initiation to the Eleusinian mysteries of painting — (in order) to make translucid the most obscure technical secrets which would seem to require the art of magic in addition to the practice of painting itself," offers detailed instructions on how to hold a brush, as well as wonderfully poetic surrealist piffle about sea urchin eyes, the need for sleep and olive trees, and the importance of being married to Gala. A combination of absurdity and slightly cracked but serviceable practicality imbues Secrets #17 and 18 which deal with how to keep dust off of the painting surface:

"Also every painter while he's working should wear a necklace of large amber balls which should be rubbed at length before he begins painting, so that it too will attract flying hairs. I have even noticed that long mustaches like those I wear are also useful to the painter to attract small particles, preventing them not only from attracting themselves to the canvas but also from entering your mouth or your nose. Regards this as Secret Number 18."

Dali concludes his book with a sober list of "permanent colors which can be used with confidence" which does not differ much from more recent artist's handbooks such as Ralph Mayer's The Artist's Handbook. However the latter expresses current concerns about toxicity of art materials. A few years ago there was a move in Congress to prevent the production and sale of cadmium-based pigments. Enough protestations from the art community spared art supplies from this act of environmental protection, but ecological (and conservatorial) concerns are now pervasive in the education of artists. This emphasis on the perils of lead and cadmium, the poisonous nature of raw umber as a dry pigment, and myriad other skull and crossbones on traditional art supplies creates an atmosphere of fear. Now painting must be enacted and experienced through rubber gloves and a mask, reflecting the fear of sexually transmitted disease which has, in the 80s and 90s, imposed the use of the condom over the sexual freedom of the 60s and 70s. The fluid master Paint, whose fecal connotations and gossy female nature so appalled many early modernists and later conceptual artists and theorists, has now been scientifically proven to be medically dangerous. An atmosphere of risk permeates the unprotected production of a painting. Perhaps this will attract reckless youth to its cause, although that has not yet happened.

Virtual Painting
What better place to evade the contingent messiness of paint than in the light of virtual reality? Modernism's preoccupation with pictorial and illusionistic space is collapsed into the immaterial space of the video monitor and is expanded into the equally immaterial but "dimensionally" illusionistic space of virtual reality. On the computer the "painter" can scan, crop, morph, colorize, distort, flip, blur images — everything that could be done, and was done before, by hand, using the imagination, paint, scissors and glue, but now at great speed, in the computer. The invisible scissors of Max Ernst and the melting of solid forms in Salvador Dali are now available to anyone as generic effects at the stroke of a wand, at a mouse click. An image can be collected by
scanner or digital camera, reorganized, restyled, and re-effected. Filters are designed to convert photo images into simulacra of painting surfaces and styles of brushwork: craquelure, mosaic, film grain, "impasto," "distorto," "drip." "Auto Van Gogh." Surrealism's conventions are appropriated by a more hallucinatorily speedy technology of representation. The technology facilitates but also complicates through its capacity for visual tricks, already established conventions of juxtaposition, collage, and alteration of images.

The computer's speed and variety of options may well enthrall the painter. While the painter may consider the computer just a friendly tool for organizing and pre-transforming source images, the result may glow more vividly in the light of the monitor than when returned to the clotted substance of pigment and medium.

David Humphrey is a painter who uses computer manipulation of photographs and other images to develop source imagery for his paintings. He also produces prints created entirely through computer graphics. Distortions as well as evocative juxtapositions of images have always figured notably in his paintings. While his work within the "feedback loop" of painting which imitates the computer's imitations of painting enhances these methods of representation, occasionally he seems to hit a wall created by the difference of speeds and materialities inherent to each medium. In the pig­mentless glow of the monitor, images can be effected quickly and in infinite configurations. When the artist is tempted to retranslate a particular computer image, arrived at through the computer's version of painting effects, into the fixed materiality of physically present oil paint, simulacral effects sometimes congeal into self-conscious sections of types of painting, lacking the flow of Humphrey's computer images or his less computer-dependent paintings.

These momentary glitches may represent only brief moments of transitional awkwardness in one artist's significant advance into a new process of hybridization of technologies and media. Yet they seem symptomatic of the problems inherent to navigating between two methodologies of representa­tion: some of these problems are continuations of the still strained relation­ship between photography and painting. These inter-media problems suggest a cautionary example of modernist precepts about truth to materials. The computer may offer barely developed new possibilities of visual art, but these may best function within its specific space and language boundaries, as painting does within its own.

But what is the best site for computer imaging? At present an image exists the virtual space of the monitor either into the similar space of the television screen, or onto the page, returning to graphics as we already know it. New means, the same old flatness of paper. And if the best, the most literally brilliant space is that of the monitor screen, how will that affect the develop­ment of painters using paint in the future? The August 1995, TV ad cam­paign for Microsoft's Windows 95 ended with a small girl, not more than three and a half, turning to us from her station at a computer: the threat to the consumer is evident — your toddler can and will use this so you'd better get it with. The threat to painting is there as well: what will happen to paint­ing when kids don't finger paint except virtually, when they cathex not to the textures and smells of goopy pigment and stubby markers, but to the clicks and beeps of the computer and mouse? Children are offered software games such as Kid Pix Studio which is, suggested for "kids ages three to 12," (my emphasis) and promises to "make it easy for kids to add movement, video, sound effects and music to any creation." It sounds like a lot of fun. Why draw or paint still images in silence, given options for music and moving pic­tures? Yet early play with paint and colored crayons develops eye-hand coor­dination; presumably children's computer games do so as well, but perception of deep and local shallow space, maybe the senses of smell and touch as artis­tic triggers may go underdeveloped in the future.

While it is likely that even early painting play is influenced by art historical image tropes, the computer increases the input of ideology since it trains the child to answer its commands and allows play only within each program's capacity for interactivity. The sociopolitics of painting software designers, who are more committed to computer technology than to previous media, will defet the concept of art — as well as gender and other social posi­tionalities.

CD-ROMs that make art history accessible to children are equally dubious manuals for painting with paint, since no matter how clear the reso­lution of the detailed reproduction, no matter how fascinating it is as a visual experience, it is a poor substitute for its video image.

Hope for the future viability of painting with paint may rest on the year or so when the child is too young to be trusted with expensive equipment but coordinated and conscious enough to manipulate pencil and paint on paper. Judging from the approximate age of the child in the Windows ad, that window of opportunity is shrinking. However, perhaps a need for what Dierdre Boden calls "copresence" will persist. In "The Compulsion of Proximity," Boden and her co-author Harvey L. Molotch argue that "copres­ence," the actual physical presence of human beings, is necessary to humans and will persist despite the increasing capabilities for rapid, virtual commu­nications. "Copresence is 'thick' with information;" they note the importance of touch in ameliorating even business transactions, and also that in business and political hierarchies, the more important the decision, the greater the necessity for actual physical meeting. The concept of "thick com­munication" from copresent visual cues seems particularly relevant to the question of painting.

The Real as Manual

If virtual space is a future site for the urge to create images for which painting once provided the only field, in today's art world installation art dominates the expressive arena. Recent national and international exhibi­tions which nominally included painting among other media, foregrounded a
variety of installations which employed real objects and spaces along with video and text. In one week in the summer of 1995 two such exhibitions were written up in The New York Times. "Politics, This Is Art, This Is Politics," described the exhibition, "Dialogues of Peace," presented at the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva. Although it was noted that the show "brought together paintings, sculptures, video art and instal­lations by 60 contemporary artists from around the world," with the excep­tion of a series of serigraphs by Robert Rauschenberg and a room-sized sand painting (a painting which is also an object and a performance taking place in the real) by Joe Ben Jr., a Navajo artist, the article focused on sculpture or video installations, even when done by artists primarily identified as painters, such as Pat Steir. The following work sounded prototypical of an international style of installation art:

"...in the gardens, visible from the main building, the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber has placed "Resolutions" — five white refugee tents, each carrying a phrase from some long-forgetten United Nations resolu­tion — "a decision will be taken," "irreceivable attacks," "deeply wor­ried." Or Daniel Buren's "empty roofless room with its outside walls cov­ered with mirrors, as if it were peopled by images of the world.""

"Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject" detailed an exhibition at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia: all of the works described were on-site installations in the cell-blocks of an early-nineteenth century prison. Again, even artists identified as painters were described as doing installation/sculptures, such as "Bruce Pollock, an abstract painter from Philadelphia, [who] uses slabs of fallen plaster from the decaying prison to seal one cell's doorway." A work by Beth B. offered visitors "a choice of being locked briefly in a cell or watching on television the reactions of those who are locked in the cell.

Over the past ten years, installation art's hybrid strategy of representa­tion has become familiar and formulaic enough to have entered into main­stream popular culture. Vividly prefurring Beth B.'s prison cell, a room installation of mirrors and doors in which museum visitors are trapped by a computerized timer while their reactions are viewed on a video monitor fig­ures in a recent murder mystery paperback aptly titled, Death of a PostModernist "Was it art or was it murder?" asks the cover subtitle.

A conceptual mechanism has been set in place, as well as a recipe book of objects, texts, and spaces, which seems, both to the international curatorial class and to young artists, to be the best way for artists to interface with culture, perhaps because the emphasis on the real seems to answer con­cerns of accessibility of art to a broader, less elite audience. For instance, sculptures are less likely to employ handmade "traditional" sculpture tech­niques than to use video monitors, new readymades such as women's cosmet­ics, found objects, and thrift store purchases, placing them in room or land­scape environments, frequently depending on language to provide meaning for the viewer. The metaphorical and illusionistic properties of painting seem to be liabilities and limitations when measured against the seduction of the
tangible readymade and the bright glow of the virtual.

Craft and the Past

Before going any farther, I want to show you in what fashion you should make the coals for drawing. Take a nice, dry, willow stick; and make some little slips of it the length of the palm of your hand, or, say, four fingers. Then divide these pieces like match sticks; and do them up like a bunch of matches. But first smooth them and sharpen them at each end, like spindles. Then tie them up in bunches this way, in three places to the bunch, that is, in the middle and at each end, with a thin copper or iron wire. Then take a brand-new casserole, and put in enough of them to fill up the casserole. then get a lid to cover it, <cutting it> with clay, so that nothing can evaporate from it in any way. Then go to the baker's in the evening, after he has stopped work, and put this casserole into the oven, and let it stay there until morning; and see whether those coals are well roasted, and good and black. If you find that they are not roasted enough, you must put the casserole back into the oven, for them to get roasted. How are you to tell whether they are all right? — Take one of these coals and draw on some plain or tinted paper, or on a passe-partout or anoma. And if you find the charcoal takes, it is all right; and if it is roasted too much, it does not hold together in drawing, but breaks into many pieces."

Equal amounts of careful craftsmanship, strange recipes, and patience were necessary to produce "plain or tinted " papers, panels, gesso, and paints in 15th-century Florence. As Cennino Cennini says, in The Craftsman's Handbook, at the beginning of an account of how to make tracing paper, "if you do not find any ready-made." Today, in addition to the prolif­eration of art supplies of all kinds packaged as "ready-mades," young painters use Elmer's Glue, play-doh, surveyor's tape, and foamy extra-light acrylic paints, all in bright fluorescent colors, many of these materials purchased not in art supply stores but at hardware stores and the children's toy section of Wal*Mart. The idea that effort might be required, therefore motivation test­ed, in order to produce paintings is a lost concept; Cennini's recipes and homi­lies seem merely quaint.

And yet a sense that making art cannot be taken for granted emerges from reading this ancient manual which may have resonance for today's painters, proposing an intervention into the prevailing atmosphere of speed, repetition, apathy, and entropy. It seems poigniant that Cennini's mode of address — the use of "you" and the emphasis on the necessity of seeing, "if you do not see some practice under some master you will never amount to anything," — is so similar to that of TV how-to hosts including Bob Ross, while Cennini's writings call one's attention to the picture plane in ways that are far more vivid and lovingly physical than the prescriptive descriptions of Clement Greenberg. The section on gessoing and what amounts to sanding, although that term is not used because sandpaper did not yet exist, creates in the mind's eye a perfect abstract painting or process painting:

Take a rag and some ground-up charcoal, done up like a little ball, and dust over the gesso of this anoma. Then with a bunch of hen or goose
feathers sweep and spread out this black powder over the gesso. This is because the flat cannot be scraped down too perfectly; and, since the tool with which you scrape the gesso has a straight edge, wherever you take any off it will be as white as milk. Then you will see clearly where it is still necessary to scrape it down."

The tactile seductions of these details of craft are enhanced by precisely what seems the most quaint to the contemporary reader, namely the amount of time it takes to produce each material, surface, and effect.

Now you have to have a gesso which is called gesso sottile; and it is some of this same gesso, but it is purified for a whole month by being soaked in a bucket."

Then take some clear river or fountain well water, and grind this black for the space of half an hour, or an hour, or as long as you like; but know that if you were to work it up for a year it would be so much the blacker and better a color."

This ancient text forces one to consider how the computer places the artist into something of a time warp: operations which would have been inconceivable for Cennini to accomplish in a year, and which might have taken Max Ernst several days, now take a second, yet hours pass as minutes as the artist becomes mesmerized by the possibilities of speed and change or struggles with glitches. At the end of the day, all that has been effected may remain only present in an absent space. But even if the time were only fast, where would that get the artist? The philosopher Teresa Brennan suggests that:

To make a profit, capital has to produce commodities at a faster rate than the time taken by living nature to reproduce itself. As the only substances out of which commodities can be produced are those supplied by living nature, this means that the profit factor tends to exhaust natural resources."

Human thought is in itself a natural resource and the pace imposed by computer technology could well outpace the speed of human creativity's capacity to renew itself. While one cannot seriously recommend going back to scraping sheep gut every time you need a sheet of tracing paper, Cennini's recipes emphasize to the contemporary reader the possibility even now of using different types of time and space in the production of an art work.

Painting as Manual

Painting is still painting. It is a paint thing. The material "paint" is trapped within the word and the discipline "painting." There is no material called "sculpt" that remains at the essence of the discipline called sculpture, which is perhaps why, occupying and developing three-dimensional space, it was able to open its doors at a crucial moment, in the late 60s, when the exclusionary formalism associated with Clement Greenberg succeeded in pushing too much content out of the picture plane of painting. It all rushed into the expanded and welcoming space of sculpture. Suddenly it seemed that anything that existed in space, time, or thought could be called sculpture. The possibilities attracted many artists, including feminist artists committed to integrating previously excluded and undervalued content into art.

The spatial cleansing of painting emerged from Greenberg's preoccupation with flatness as "more fundamental than anything else to the process by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art." Although current Greenberg scholars take pains to stress the "catholicity" of his tastes, his principal writings codified and further set into motion modernism's clearing out from painting sculptural, but also "representational or literary" elements which would "[dissemble] the medium." The results were ultimately unfortunate for painting, though felicitous for sculpture. Yet it seems crucial now to effect a compromise between the rigorous self-critique of painting associated with an acute awareness of its elemental flatness, as propounded by Greenberg, and the content which pertains to our time: text, information, politics, gender, sexuality.

If no one painting style or painting contains a totality or a synthesis of cultural information, neither does any other medium available. Such a totality is effectively interdicted by current philosophy and by the proliferation of information and media. All media, including current sculpture and photo/computer imaging, are infected by a network of predictable mechanisms and recipes for representation. It may seem that the readymade and the virtual are the most relevant arenas for investigating the questions of the moment, and yet they carry with them limitations and burdens of history that are rapidly becoming equal to those of painting. Yet if painters chose to continue to make paintings using paint, then they have to take into consideration that they are making a painting that must be as much about some awareness of it being a painting as it is about anything else. This is particularly important for those who are working representationally and who may be using painting as a site for identity politics. If, as they struggle to refine and express their specific "story" content, they fail to think of the basic elements of painting — including, crucially, the relationship of illusionistic space to the real flatness of the surface — as also the content of any painting, they forgo the very qualities of metaphor inherent in these elemental aspects of painting that made them chose painting over other media in the first place. As a result, their work risks lapsing into a new cliché, kitach genre of personal identity painting as pernicious as the ones codified in mass-market how-to manuals and TV shows.

The generation of painters about to enter the art world exercises many possibilities for new painting. Some use neon colored "toy" materials to refresh modernist formats by expressing computer-enhanced, MTV color/motion sensibilities within the traditional structure and surface of painting. Their aesthetic is influenced by popular culture but embraces the art-as-art of pure abstraction. Others, whose explorations of identity imbed canny pastiches of media which influence or perpetuate these identities with cleverly corresponding painting techniques, carry on the self-reflexive

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process inherent in the modernist project. Looking back to 60s and 70s process and conceptual art, they often rely on conceptual systems in order to bypass sentimentality, but many seem to have put aside the ironic disbelief in painting which poisoned so much of the painting that took place during the 1980s.

Ultimately, the best painting manuals are paintings themselves seen in the "thickness" of "copresence," where the richness of visual information facilitates painting's conversation with painting as medium, space, substance, and history.

NOTES

I am grateful to David Humphrey for his articulate comments about the relationship between painting and computer graphic technologies, for demonstrating what seemed like magic tricks to me on his computer, and for generously letting me see some of his computer-related paintings in progress. I would like to thank ten-year-old Emma Bernstein for showing me how she uses a computer painting program. And, finally, I'd like to thank the young artists at The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the summer of 1995 for providing me with a living laboratory in which to test some of the ideas expressed in this essay.

1. Maria-Elena Sanchez, summer 1995.
7. That gendered biases are built into the corporate structure of software design and the personal subculture of computer programmers is one of the premises of Allucquere Rosanne Stone's The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age (Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press, 1995), for example, pp. 158-162.
8. "Teaching Young Eyes to See," Newsweek, June 26, 1995, p. 8. This is a review of Voyager's "With Open Eyes" CD-ROM which "presents 212 objects from the Art Institute of Chicago's collection in a clever frameline graphical interface, and lets children examine and have fun with art through various activities."
9. This hope was suggested to me during a telephone conversation about this question with Susan Bee: she interrupted herself to admonish her three-year-old son, Felix: "Don't do that!" What was he doing? Sticking a magic marker in his nose. Why? "Because I want to smell it." A few months later, he is already making a bee-line for her computer, but at least some tropism for manipulating old-fashioned drawing tools has been established.
THE STRANGER

PAM LONGOBARDI

Straniero, stranger: the foreigner, also, the stranger. In ways, students are both: initially a stranger to the teacher, and perhaps a foreigner to ART, but also a stranger to their own content, traveling as a foreigner in this strange land. A metaphor I have found very useful in charting the course of my own content, which I also try to pass on to my students is that of "the foreigner from within" (Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves,1) or even more appealingly, the stranger from within. Being both simultaneously the self and the stranger gives one the opportunity to gaze at one's work from two perspectives. Being inside of the work during the process of making ensures that the art comes from an emotionally powerful place. Taking on the role of the stranger, however, allows one to step outside of the self into the gaze of a viewer. A dialogue can develop when one "greets the stranger" and moves from emotional attachment to the world of language. As a teacher, I often try to act as the mirror, a way of modeling this process of looking at work from the stranger's perspective. Other students in the group provide additional mirrors. By internalizing this process, one is able to create "the externalizing eye," an internal mirror for examining the dialogue created within a work of art.

Kristeva writes: Living with the other, the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other... Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking: the impetus of my culture.2

This activity of identifying the stranger within, of being both self and other, me and not me, suggests a doubling of the ego, a splitting of the personality. Humans first become aware that they can have a "double" when they first recognize their image in a mirror: it is a projection or reflection of the self. This awareness Lacan describes as the "mirror-phase." Like Alice's trip through the looking glass, "the mirror-phase" is a passageway between Lacan's two main stages in the development of consciousness: the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary involves a pre-linguistic stage of consciousness focused around the visual recognition of images (and here I would posit... and the emotional associations they carry). The Symbolic concerns the subject's entry into, and formation by, the world of language.3 The creation, and subsequent viewing, of artwork involves a similar two-part development: access through emotion (the pre-verbal) and access through language.

The two routes of entry into content in the input and output phase simply underlines my belief that the primary motivation behind artmaking is the desire to communicate. Whether it is desire to communicate one-on-one, desire to identify with a community, or libidinous desire, desire drives artmaking.

Desire can also signal a splitting of the self, love representing a total identification with the other, to the point that during sexual interactions it is possible to realize such a loss of ego boundaries that two identities merge and you can experience being inside of another person's body. This doubling mechanism of projection and mirroring can not only be the drive behind the creation of content, it can serve in the analysis of it. By identifying with the role of the viewer, one can envision possible interpretations from a third point perspective. There is no prescriptive sensibility here, as it would never be possible or even desirable to predict a viewer's interaction with your work. That is the wonderful wild card in all of this. However, simply by presenting an external perspective and acting as the "mirror" for the work, I can, as a teacher, model the internal process that an artist can undertake in order to examine their own work from a point of view a bit outside of their own subjectivity. It can be extremely humanizing to try and imagine how another might interpret a scenario, an event, or a work of art. It can really pay to "walk a mile in my shoes."4

What you make as an artist is inseparable from what you feel, what you think, and what has happened to you. By privileging a student's personal history, I can champion that stance that the better they know themselves the better art they can make. It takes a certain force of will to believe in what you are doing enough to pursue that relentlessly, especially in the studio. I, first of all, believe in them. Soon, they believe in themselves. In one student's case, the growth of content in his work spawned a simultaneous construction of identity. This construction of identity involved the need to create a private and complete cosmology, a world of gender transference, where men could strap on a "mother-maker" to experience the exclusive pleasure of nursing an infant.

An interesting shift in the perception of one's identity has occurred between the generation of artists that were my teachers and the generation of artists that are now my students. When there was a smoother homogeneity to the visible population of artists (I am thinking of course of the recent decades of American art history that were most exclusively composed of white male artists: Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and later, early Neo-Expressionism) identity was a given, something you were born with. Even a second-generation immigrant, whose family's cultural affiliations were perhaps different from their grandparents, still had a built-in set of associations of a cultural identity of origin.

Most young artists that are students now are far enough removed from the traditions of and identification with a culture of origin that, in some respects, there is more of a sense of a blank screen, of a personal history waiting to be written. As one student recently remarked to me that her guiding force of identification, and therefore worldview, ultimately manifested in the
content of her work, is MTV. This is clearly a chosen identity, manufactured to an extent by pop media, which is rapidly becoming a global community of identification. David Robbins writes, "Pop culture and info dreck convey the kernel of an idea of community based upon concept and taste — a chosen community as opposed to the old world's idea of a tribal community based on blood and heritage."

My championing of identity in art making is most likely a reaction to the invisibility of the maker — particularly the female maker — in my early training. In attempting to help students explore and embrace their identity, I began to re-evaluate my own personal history. What I arrived at was that, different from the inherited identity of an earlier generation, my personal circumstances were such that I was left to construct my identity.

How does one meet the stranger within? In the absence of known truths, one can construct fictions which stand as real — as plausible as family history which is handed down. Why not? If you don't know the answer, you can make something up.

There are scant known facts about my mother's secret adoption at birth. The irretrievable invisibility of my matriarchal ancestry had a simple framework: 12 children, born in an unidentified European country, Catholic, the mother was an opera singer, three of the sisters adopted as infants into the United States. Within that open frame, one could become anything — it was as yet an unwritten page.

The pages began to be written for me at age 20 when I married an Italian cowboy and changed my name. I chose to be Italian, and upon changing my name, have embraced the possibility as fervently as one does religious conversion. It's as good a guess as any, and the simpatico was there, lending credence to the intuition.

It's taken me years to get over the secret panic that would set in when someone would ask me about my family background, my ancestry. There was always a sense of embarrassment or shame, of something hidden for a good reason, in the stiff New England family my mother was adopted into. It was not to be talked about. What I did not realize until later was the incredible liberation their silence gave me — I could be anything I wanted to.

The missing elements of my own personal history has made itself manifest in my work in the large areas of void punctuated by specific historical references. These references are ellisions from Italian paintings, suggesting an awareness of self to actualizing self-identity. At this point, the personal can expand to include the social, the connection of the self to an outer cultural, political or ideological framework.

As a teacher, I avoid any reference to myself as "mentor," with its load of academic baggage, implied hierarchical relationship, and suggestion of the closed-society passing of a garlanded baton. I prefer to think of myself instead as an "un-mentor," an accomplice. For amusement, I like to think of the students as Houdinis in a cabinet, with shackles which may have been placed by the self or the society. Bess was Houdini's accomplice, secretly passing him the key. I prefer to act as Bess, a willing accomplice participating in the creation of the illusion. This behind-the-scenes activity is more collusive and collaborative than the traditional teacher-student model. The success of the "escape," the illusion, is fully dependent on this collusion with Bess. Of course, Houdini always first had to give Bess the key.

Originally presented on a panel entitled "Unlocking the Cabinet: Personal Contents and Passing the Key," 23rd SGC Conference, Knoxville Tennessee, March 1995.

NOTES
2. Ibid., p. 13.
PAINTING AFTER PAINTING: The Paintings of Susan Bee

MISKO SUVKOVIC

Susan Bee's painting (like her collages and her color xerox and photographic books) is generated out of "the end" of painting. In the place (edge, puncture) where the history of modern painting ends, her painterly interventions begin.

I. BORDERS, EDGES, PUNCTURES AND THE END OF HISTORY

Bee's altered photo books from the 1970s (Photogram, 1978) and early 1980s (The Occurrence of Tune, 1981) close down and deconstruct the power of representation that photography took over from painting. Photograms take away the power of representation from photographs, returning to the concreteness of the surface (relations of black and white, plane and form on the surface). Photograms take away the power of producing the meaning by means of representation, leaving to the gaze the realized surface of possible associations. Possible associations are not symbolic but are based on the signifier's ability to anticipate potential meanings.

There is a photo in The Occurrence of Tune that shows the artist with camera. Her face is framed by a square, drawn with photo-chemicals. The painterly motif of the artist's self-portrait becomes the photo-document (iconic sign) that is, by means of the painterly intervention upon the surface of the photo, brought to the edge of gestural painting. This edge tells about the end of painting, signifying borders of face, figure, and form on the plane.

The end of painting, which in different ways happened in photography, film, video, performance and conceptual art, had the nature of a performative act. That is to say, the end of painting gained its meaning and sense by abandoning painting, and not by creating representation or by producing artifacts. The act of ending painting obtained its sense and its meaning by its own realization. The material power of representation in painting transformed itself into the concept of representation and into the logic of representation. Deconstruction of representation is based upon the transformation of the sign of painting (that which it shows: picture, text, scene) into the signifier (that which precedes representation). The signifier was the ideal zero degree of painting. Bee's photograms tended towards the zero degree of photographic surface as the zero place of painting.

II. AFTER THE END OF PAINTING

Bee's paintings, beginning in the 1980s and the early 90s, raise questions about the nature of painting by transforming modernist and high modernist signifiers and signs of painting, as well as the visual codes of mass culture, into new signs and texts for painting after the end of painting. She shows how one signifier from the history of painting or from advertising designs of the fifties becomes the new sign or structure of sign (text of painting). Her paintings are the other in relation to the history of modernism, although they are made out of signifiers of modernistic representations. Her paintings posit for us the exact material scene for the representation of the signifier's transformation into sign and sign's transformation into the text of painting.

Bee's paintings are the other in relation to the history and scene of modernistic painting. Where can we find the nature of this otherness of her paintings? This otherness is to be found in the asymmetry that is established at the visual and semantic planes: (1) between the sign structures of modernism that her painting takes over as signifiers and (2) their transformation into new painterly signs and structures. This asymmetry is analogous to the asymmetry that exists between language and the subject. The asymmetry between language and the subject who speaks or writes creates the relation of otherness. Language is always unfamiliar to the subject and language always drops out the subject. Asymmetry creates a discrepancy between the subject of language and the existential (biological) being. Similarly, Bee's paintings, by fragmenting the modernist visual structures of painting's and advertising's signs, build an asymmetry between: (1) herself as the subject of the act of painting, (2) painting as the ordering of signifiers that transforms itself into the new painting, and (3) the Other that could also be the strong subject of modernism as well as the weak subject of postmodernism (which could be painting's laws, political dogma, models of sexual intercourse, styles of social consumption, the gaze that interprets the painting, feminist critical discourse, fatal strategies of seduction). Her paintings are about the asymmetry of the subjectivity of representation and about the relation among signifier—> subject—> sign—> Other. Equally by her figures and by her caracteristic signs of painterly procedures (her use of Jackson Pollock dripping or advertising and cartoon iconographies of fifties), Bee introduces sexual and political connotations into the play of painting. She shows that the function of the painting: (1) is not anymore the ritual transcendence of the plane of the canvas into the sacred (European tradition), (2) is not the aesthetic transformation of this plane into immanent subjective experience (European figurative expressionism, American abstract expressionism, modernist autonomy of the aesthetic into which the artistic work is transformed), (3) is not the destructive, analytical, and deconstructive act of performative transformation of this plane into the existence (performance) or into the cognition of art (conceptual art). She shows that the function of painting is based upon the other practice: it has its foundation in the sexual-political net of production of
asymmetry between painting and the Other as the theme of painting. The Other of her painting is not the transcendental Other, but the Other of the sexual-political net of pictorial images. How can this sexual-political net of production of asymmetry between painting and the Other be recognized? Let us look at the painting Ortranto (1984). At the plane’s surface there is the ‘floating’ or ‘lying’ statue of a man’s head as if gazing at the nude female figure below. The painterly procedure and compositional solution are close to the Italian transavantgardia: (1) classicist compositional relation between figure’s head and figure of the body (pseudoclassical pose), (2) the modernist relation of the head and the figure on the plane, (3) the postfuturist and postcubist modernist solution of a reduced figure of the body and head (the body and head are transformed into iconic signs). The way the scene is represented by the painting produces a range of narrative relations that could be recognized as a ‘sexual-political net’: 

(a) She, as he would wish her. 
(b) He, as she should wish him. 
(c) She, as he would like her to be seen. 
(d) He, as he would like her to see him. 
(e) She, as he would like her to see herself. 
(f) He, as he for her would like to be seen by her. 

This chain between Her and Him is a chain of failure in the sense of sexual relation and brings asymmetry to the representation of gender-political relations. In the painting, he looks at her, and she doesn’t look at him. He sees her, and she imagines him (or she doesn’t see him). The difference between perception as an act of fulfilment of (man’s) wish and imagination as the producing of (woman’s) wish is a political-sexual difference that the painting produces for us by representing it. The represented failure and the asymmetry of her and his gazes (it is possible for him to see her and by seeing her to dominate over her and her ability to imagine being looked at) could be determined as what is sexual and political in every human act. Every failing act—here we think of gazes that don’t meet one another—has some connection with sexual motivation and with political consequences. The sexual motivation is represented by the relation of the two figures and their objectification. This objectification of the gaze (the relation between subject and object) is universal in Western tradition of representation. The political consequences are inscribed in the relationship between subject and Other—a relationship that is represented in this painting as the relationship between outer and inner. Outer is represented by the male as symbol of transcendence (there is no body, just the master’s gaze), of law (he floats above her), and of ethos (he is the one that looks at and who gives criteria for the gaze). Inner is represented by the naked female figure (which is the object of wish, fetish, the place of wish, the invitation to be looked at, the invitation for the imagining Other who looks at her). His transcendence is universal and grasps the power of symbolic law (in Levinas’s words, transcendence is not negative). Her transcendence is only personal and grasps the power of imaginative experience (it is always negative because it does not grasp the universal symbolic order). 

The sexual-political net of the represented figures’ relations is always the expression of Non-Wholeness. Theoretical psychoanalysis shows that the constitution of subject, culture and society is non-whole and that the system of human relations always shows some lack (defect, failure, asymmetry of gaze and wish out of which power comes into existence). The idea of Non-Wholeness arises out of the “fact” that nature (woman) and culture (man) are not two circles that could in any way come together in one circle (“There is no intercourse!”). Bee’s painting shows that there is no intercourse, that there are only differences in desire and the ability to wish with open eyes (symbolic order) or with closed eyes (imaginary order). Teaching about Non-Wholeness subverts the last two hundred years of the Western ideology of complementarity (of male and female, of wish, gaze, political power, sexual division of values, of matter and spirit) of wholeness and consistency. The idea of Non-Wholeness shows that speaking (writing, painting, looking, thinking) is gender determined. The representation of Non-Wholeness through the asymmetry of the figures reveals what is important: the knowledge about taking over of one’s own gender in speaking (looking, writing, painting, living).

III. WISH, PAINTING, FIGURE, DEVICE AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Bee’s painting—made out of diverse, appropriated signifiers—produces an asymmetric pictorial order of signs and shows that it possesses neither itself nor the neutral meta-language by which its meaning and pictorial relations could be codified. It immediately invites analysis. But where should the analysis start, where are the points of support, when in front of us there is the order of: (1) asymmetric figures, (2) open noncoherent compositional solutions, and (3) fragmented narrative mechanisms?

Asymmetry of figures

A figure is always a trace, and a trace is always a trace of absence, a trace of Other. A figure (of a woman, a child, a doll) is not a sign of the presence of a woman’s, child’s or doll’s being on the painting but rather is a trace that points out that there is no being. A figure speaks (shows, represents) what is not on the painting and what could not be in the painting. An image in the mirror is always symmetric to the body in front of it. A figure in painting is always asymmetric to all persons and bodies of the world revealing itself as being the trace of representation of what is already represented. Bee works with the clichés of figure; for example, some figures from her paintings are paper dolls cut out from girls’ magazines from the fifties or decals. Her figures seem to want to tell us: “Yes, we are imaginary asymmetric figures: we are not figures of the persons made of flesh and blood!” Her paintings always point to a context of appropriating out of “one possible world” and removing into “the other possible world.”
How to become the figure of the painting? A figure becomes the figure of the painting when the already existing figure is removed and becomes the element (trace) for a new context of transformation of signifier into the sign and of sign into the visual pictorial text. The figure removed from one possible world (of advertisement, of toys) into the pictorial world of painting, is inscribed in literal, material manner. Inscribing the figure in painting is both material and bodily. Figures from advertisements or from girls' magazines are impersonal representations (metaphors) of possible persons; that is, they are actually metaphors for a girl or a woman. When that figure is inscribed in the painting, it becomes a material body in a material pictorial painting's world.

Open noncoherent compositional solutions

When a figure is inscribed into the painting, it is brought into it: it is inserted into a new material relationship with the painting elements that determine, or at least make possible, the potential meaning of the figure. In these paintings, a figure is never given in a simple way, for instance: (1) a figure is inserted in an artificial collage-montage manner, so that it is noncoherent with its plane and all other solutions (Gray Matter, 1993); (2) the figure floats, in other words, it is not determined by conventions of spatial representations of the body in the picture plane (Swiss Miss, 1993); (3) the figure is covered by layers of color, lines, stains (Little Girl Lost, 1993 or Greetings, 1993); (4) several figures are mutually connected by organic shapes (The Gaze). The fact that the figure is not given in a simplistic "natural / conventional way" emphasizes the act of pictorial inscription through acts of taking-over, insertion, and classification. The figure is always brought into the broader pictorial product. It is possible to differentiate three levels in the painting Little Girl Lost: (1) the accidental plane, (2) the figure on the plane, and (3) the Pollock-like dripping grid that covers the figure. The situation of the painting Greetings is more complex: two figures (which represent two girls in a hug) are situated in pictorial scene that is covered by a grid of Pollock-like dripping and little vignettes with texts. In relation to other compositional elements, the figures do not appear as the human center (the represented human being around which the composition is built and which gives sense to the composition). The figure is a signifier for the painting, but a signifier that is in relation with other signifiers (the picture plane, the dripping grid, the other figures, the vignettes with texts, or with three-dimensional objects that are introduced into the painting). The figure also presents the painting's subject. This figure will be the figure that causes all other figures to represent the subject. But the subject that is built into the painting at the same time is the figure that is in relation to the figures (signifiers) of painting as art. This chain-like branching out of the relation of figure and representations of subject is potentially endless — it is never finished or stable.

Bee's painting surfaces are material scenes that subvert the idea of a transcendental signifier. Every single painting's signifier is changed in relation to the other pictorial signifiers without establishing a coherent meaning order. Her paintings subvert the idea of transcendental signifier because they prevent finding the first signifier (first signifier = transcendental signifier) with which painting is started and that builds a continuum between the painting and the world or between painting and spirit. The serial character of these paintings is a consequence of this subversion of the "first" or transcendental signifier.

Many of Bee's paintings are made in series; for instance, several paintings point to different moments of one narrative (semantic level) or procedural (formal painterly level) flow. Some of Bee's paintings are made in layers so that over time the layers are changed, covering precursory traces or representations into planes. Let us consider, for example, a series of paintings and collages that represent two women fighting with one another while floating on the painting's surface. The same figurative relation of two women (taken from a 19th-century wood engraving) is given three treatments: (1) with stains around the figures, (2) with stains around the figures out of which a square spiral that frames the figures is drawn, and (3) with dripping lines that cover the figures. In the first case, figures and stains have the same pictorial signifier's function of floating in pictorial space (creating a floating illusion on the surface). There is no defined space. In the second case, the square spiral establishes spatial relations between figures, with the stains and surface building a defined pictorial spatial world. In the third case, the figures are situated in a dripping whirlpool that covers them by suggesting the depth in which they are situated. In all three cases, empty signifiers introduced into the painting's space (on the painting's surface) anticipate different meanings that may not necessarily be clarified and clearly defined. This series, just through the anticipations of different meanings it creates, points to the inseparable relation of the figurative and linguistic, because language not only establishes codes, but also opens endless potentials of meaning.

These works, as well as most of Bee's paintings, contain an atmosphere of humor (of possible laughter), although we never exactly know what it is that produces humor. Maybe it is the multitude of asymmetries that show that among the painter's different viewpoints and different stylistic solutions (iconographies, compositional possibilities of one and the same painting and of narrative fragmented citations) there is no correspondence in meaning, but a multitude of often opposite indexes that point to fear, pleasure, or unsafe-ness, i.e., to the forms of visualisation of skillfulness, spontaneity, chance, ironization, self-reflectiveness, transfer, countertransfer, tenderness, craftiness, seduction, innocence, language games, and children's games. The hidden laughter that hums behind the paintings is the laughter of a puzzle.

Fragmented narrative mechanisms

All of Bee's paintings made between 1991 and 1994 contain narrative fragments. Fragments of narration are connected with the relations of the
figures. They are elements of a story that is out of the picture. By introducing the figure into the painting, narration is announced, promised, or quoted. Nevertheless, fragments of narration never start or finish the story. The story as a continuity of pictorial narration and representation is unapproachable. The narration is always out of the painting. It is the object of the wish that represents the Other. But the story of the Other cannot be told or represented by the painting. The story remains an announcement and pictorial promise. The Other is, for painting as well as for language, always that which cannot be described by metaphor, allegory, or by speculative transcendences.

Let us consider the painting Swiss Miss (1991). The gesturally painted, richly-colored surface is in the tradition of abstract expressionism. Two female figures (paper dolls) are introduced into the painting by collage. Their floating relation on the plane is arbitrary in the spatial sense. In the stylistic sense it corresponds, for example, to the use of "floating figures" in the work of Marc Chagall. The banner (the cloud in which the text is placed, for example in a cartoon) is the hole that yawns in the plane making the illusion of the space behind the plane. In the banner there is a horse's head. The banner with its peak, which is usually put near the figure's mouth that speaks in a cartoon, is placed towards the female figure's genitals. None of the described figurational relations has a specific meaning, or a fixed narrative motive.

What are the narrative promises of Bee's paintings, what are the figural relations based on? First, there is the absence of one fixed narrator; for example, the author-painter who by the use of pictorial tools speaks and shows a possible event. As a painter, Bee doesn't have defined stylistic, iconographic, gender, and metalinguistic position in relation to the figures, composition, and narrative promises. She changes her moods in the frame of one and the same painting by changing the stylistic, iconographic, gender, and metalinguistic positions of her gestures, colors, and forms. She promises, but doesn't declare, pictorial truth.

Second, there is the absence of imaginary and symbolic identification with a coherent narrative flow and with the subject that is identified with a narrative structure and that builds a pictorial voice of narration. Imaginary identification, for example the Lacanian stadium of the mirror, is subverted. There is no identification with represented characters. Represented characters are figures that are in fact traces of the figures of mass media production. Bee does not identify her painfulness with the painfulness of the painted scene. That is why her expressionism is para-expressionism (she represents the expressionist atmosphere of painting but she doesn't represent inner soul moods by expressionist modes). Neither at the iconic level (of the identification of her character with the figure) nor at the symbolic level (of the identification of her gesture with inner moods) does she define the subject. Her identifications lead towards a representation of the represented, and her emotions are in relation to the emotions of perception and to the usage of the already represented. They are not stable, but are changeable to the extent permitted by every shift from the original context of the figure (advertisements, magazines, paper dolls) to the new context of placing figures in the painting's plane.

Third, Bee's recent paintings work by shifting the viewpoint at the level of narrative promises as well as at the level of formal pictorial solutions. With her pictorial iconic signs, the painter tells neither a fairytale, nor a folklore anecdote, maiden's dream, woman's wish, nor obscene game. All these she promises, pointing to the fact that the drama of the painting is not be found in the obscenity of a psychoanalytical myth about the relation of the body to the language, but in the drama of the gestural figure who opposes figure to language. Yet it is as if Bee evades language also: (1) by gestures that take away the sense from the figure (gestures that refute established, recognizable, and valid "grammatical" figures) and (2) by inserting the figure into a field of gestures, an insertion that takes away from the gesture the pure senselessness of painting, promising a language that is not there in the picture.

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE VISUAL-VERBAL WORLD OF JOHANNA DRUCKER: Five New Books

THE VISIBLE WORD: EXPERIMENTAL TYPOGRAPHY AND MODERN ART, 1909-1923
by Johanna Drucker,

THEORIZING MODERNISM: VISUAL ART AND THE CRITICAL TRADITION
by Johanna Drucker,
Columbia University Press, NY, 1994, 201 pp., $29.50 (cloth), $19.95 (paper).

THE ALPHABETIC LABYRINTH: THE LETTERS IN HISTORY AND IMAGINATION
by Johanna Drucker,

DARK DECADE
by Johanna Drucker,
Detour Press, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1995, 122 pp., $10.95 (paper).

THE CENTURY OF ARTISTS' BOOKS
by Johanna Drucker,

1. The present time has so completely devastated the resources and communal efforts that formerly were made available to the artist that a new type of artist is emerging, one that more completely corresponds to the complexities of a new century, and perhaps a new millennium. New demands continually reshape what we can do, growing inevitably out of what we must do. This emerging conception of the artist includes the cultivation and invention of her or his own resources. Among this narrow but growing field of exemplary artists who have confronted this necessity to the very limit of what is imaginable is the book artist, poet, painter, publisher, editor, critic, historian, and teacher Johanna Drucker. That many of these resourceful artists have sought refuge in academia is ironic to some extent, in that their forbears (like Kafka, Stein, Benjamin, and Baudelaire) were ignored or damaged by the academic institutions which now have permanently canonized their contributions. Like other workers and professionals, artists do learn from history and adapt to it. Not long ago, particularly among innovative writers, working in an academic institution would have been considered heresy, and fellow experimentalists could have easily predicted doom, or worse, sterility for such writers. Drucker has indeed experienced such critiques, as well as being attacked by her fellow poets for her use of visual techniques as part of her writing. For example, she was recently critiqued in the pages of JAB, the journal of artists' books that she edits with Brad Freeman, by a fellow artist and curator who wrote that he finds it "somewhat ironic that Johanna Drucker, a tenured professor at Yale, believes she can set the standards for democratizing the medium of the artists' book while ignoring the privileged status of her own position..." Drucker happens to be an untenured Associate Professor, and in fact, in order to survive has studied and taught in many institutions. But this antiquated prejudice against artists who work in institutions continues.

It's true, however, that when we examine the works of innovative artists and writers who have a lasting impression and influence on us we frequently become curious about their lives and, more specifically, how their way of working is intertwined with their overall careers. In other words, how they survived and how they shaped their public careers in relation to their own conceptions of their artistic intentions and their personal values. Although the so-called "New Critics" attempted to focus attention away from this issue it tends to creep back in, not only because we need to interpret works more concretely, and historically, but also because we are constantly absorbed in thinking about such things in life due to sensitive issues like the authenticity of works and objects and their actual (as opposed to advertised) social value. It is an area where the practical aspects of life converge with exponential hatchings of speculations and theories, where the most erudite subjects can provoke an endless curiosity for more details, as though one were solving a mystery. There is something about this process that must be exemplary for our desire to understand what it is that generates such a boundless appetite for life. In fact, the artist changes and challenges our conception of what a career is and what it can be. The artist is the cultural magician who restores our belief that work and passion, imagination and reality can actually cohere. Our official social reality demands that such desires must be conditioned by conflicting social expectations, social obligations, and realities.

I count at least ten different areas of knowledge which are exhaustively displayed, discussed, analyzed, evoked, and examined in great historical detail in the works of Johanna Drucker: the history and development of print and typesetting and allied arts like collage, the history of painting and critical theories of painting, the development and history of language and specifically the primary symbols of language, the alphabet, the history and development of artists' books, feminist theory, as well as lettristic, poetic prose writing, conventional narrative prose writing, journalistic writing, and painting. I'll probably soon be discovering more. It is as if, through the evolution of her own career as a writer-artist Drucker is creating a conceptual framework for the relationship between the visual arts and the written arts, the life and work of the writer as an artist or the artist as an artist. As a book artist and historian of book art she has done this via the unusual feat of qualifying herself to create books of scholarly value for each separate area or discipline of her central artistic interests and concerns, alongside of her own book art produced by her own press. Indeed, Drucker is one of the most imaginative, prolific, and well-recognized book artists of the past two decades. Her intricate typographic works include Narratology, Simulant...
months later a chance phone call brought me the knowledge that Drucker's *The Alphabetical Labyrinth: The Letters In History and Imagination* (1995) had come out from Thames and Hudson, a 300-page book, a beautifully illustrated, scholarly history of the alphabet (which I've since seen in the bookstores of both the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Louvre in Paris). And hadn't I received notice of a new novel by Drucker called *Dark Decade* (1995) from Detour Press and hadn't I also noticed in the Columbia University CLIO listings another new book of critical theory by Drucker called *Theorizing Modernism* (Columbia University Press, 1994)? Since I had gone as far as obtaining and reading all these books with a quizzical eye to discussing all of them for an article for *M/BA/N/J/N* I decided to also have a quick look at the manuscript of *The Century of Artists' Books* (Granary Press, 1995).

3. The Visible Word

The formal research that Drucker drew on for writing this book goes back to the 1980s. In her introduction she writes: "The research for this book was begun in an era in which semiotics was considered a useful interpretive tool, but the writing is concluded at a moment when semiotics itself has become the object of historical and historiographic inquiry." In *The Visible Word*, as in many of her other books, Drucker makes a powerful case for continued study of an important 20th-century problematic: the insistent historical tendency to partition the visual and verbal arts into separate, unalld, domains. She writes, "In its critical re-investigation of the terms of modern art practice, modernism invested seriously and intractably in the distinction between literary and visual arts practices. By inscribing each realm in the specificity of its own medium as the basis of its essential identity, the visual and the verbal necessarily excluded each other..." (p. 228) The implications of this statement are all the more disturbing following upon the previous chapter, "Experimental Typography as a Disturbing Following Upon the Previous Chapter," in which the powerful typographical art works of such inventive poets as Marinetti, Apollinaire, and Zdanevich are discussed with relation to their poetic and graphic practices as well as their reasons for evolving their typographic art. Eighteen illustrations of their work are included with this discussion. Drucker credits Mallarmé's "A Throw of the Dice" as "the single most striking precedent for avant-garde experiment with the visual form of poetic language." (p. 50) Drucker then grounds her later discussions of Apollinaire, Marinetti, and Zdanovich in a discussion of the early evolution of advertising typography. A journal for the advertising trade called "La Publicité" in 1913 noted that "Most advertisements would be improved by a better knowledge of typography, and by a sense of the appropriateness of a particular typeface to a particular kind of message. This would communicate the ideas, features and marks of individuality..." (p. 99) Drucker states: "The idea that the Dada and Futurist artists were the inventors of a particular typographic vocabulary faltered in the face of such graphic evidence." She goes on to explain that "the appropriation of these publicity techniques to literary works [was] an activity which was subversive to the images.

Given my interest in Drucker's book art and writing I was excited when I heard that the University of Chicago Press had published *The Visible Word, Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1933* (1994). Some
...character of the words on the page..." (p. 103) These poets were concerned with subverting and positing the authoritative, cut-and-dry aspects of literary texts by employing many then new typographic techniques usually reserved for advertising and other "less serious" visual purposes. As Drucker makes clear in this book, many of the issues the Dada and Futurist poet experimenters were facing continue through the present time.

In Drucker's critique of the New Critics of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt, and I. A. Richards, we come to understand that in their desire to categorize the activities of writers they cut away the heart and soul of the kind of political subversions the typographical experimenters of the early period were trying to evoke. There were professional, careerist motivations behind some of this: "In critical writing the stress on investigation of the medium as the major site of activity within art practice became more and more dependent on that medium's distinction from any other media..." (p. 228)

In her analysis of the underlying intentions of the New Formalists and the work of Clement Greenberg and his followers (a theme she also discusses extensively in Theorizing Modernism) Drucker ably supports her idea that "The political implications of a position in which the means of production are effaced, attempt to be eradicated, are obvious — and the conservatism of American Formalism is hardly incidental..." suffice it to say that formalist literary criticism had no use for a typographic practice whose material properties, if acknowledged and accounted for, would have prevented any possibility of linguistic closure on the work. (p. 233)

Drucker's many examples and thorough exposition convincingly demonstrate the accuracy of her assertion that "Modern art practice and its critical definition with in high modernism were substantively different. Modern art was concerned with an attentive investigation of the effect of materiality on the practice of signification. Modernist practices generated an exclusive and oppositional definition of the literary and visual arts. The terms of the modernist critic had at stake defining the bases of their own existence and practice while the activities of modern art allowed for much greater ambiguity, complexity, and heterogeneity, plus recognition of the potential for materiality to play a part in politicizing the activity of signification... Obviously, typography, as the image of language, the messy, boundary-blurring practice which included both formality and reference, image and language, present signifier and absent signified... was therefore excluded from their consideration, historical or critical." (pp. 237-238)

Drucker makes us see that those who wish to exploit artistic workers and control them frequently do so by attempting to take away, or minimize, their idiosyncratic, creative means of producing real meanings, that is, complete meanings, by redefining how meaning is drawn from artistic work. The New Critics asserted that the meanings of texts could not be fruitfully interpreted by referring to the lives of their creators; similarly, Greenberg said there could only be flatness and no reference to figuration. Drucker exposes these moves for what they are: depleting, diverting, divisive, and ultimately destructive to the freedom and autonomy of writers and artists to represent their discoveries in their native languages and mediums. She writes: "It is in material that the activity of signification is produced, and the works here investigated simply make the extreme case for what is the norm: 'Lettre-Ocean' [Apollinaire] would cease to exist as such were it rendered in a different form... The generalization that the focus of art in the twentieth century has been to free the trace from referential value... can be readily criticized by a realization that it was instead a self-conscious concern with the manipulation of various elements of signification in both art and literary discourses which was central to modern art practice." (p. 246)

4. Theorizing Modernism

The power of critical practices to rearticulate, refine, and control the direction of artistic practices so tellingly discussed in The Visible Word is taken up rigorously in Theorizing Modernism. Drucker's ability to look at critical theory in such an analytic and deeply insightful manner grows out of her multiple and yet overlapping practices as a poet, an essayist, a short story writer and novelist, a book artist, a printer, publisher, and editor, a visual artist, an historian, a theorist and a teacher. Although her rigorous professionalism forbids her from discussing her own work in her theoretical writing, I noticed an allusion to her own typographic work in Visible Word where she tells us that "As a printer and artist I had become actively involved in making use of page format, type style, and graphic design considerations in the structure of experimental prose works. These works incurred a highly negative attack on the part of the circle of poets with whom I was involved in the late 70s and early 1980s in California, though they found positive reception elsewhere and later. The need both to validate my own work and to inquire into the strong prejudice against acknowledgment of the visual component in literary work put an emotional spin on the intellectual project." (p. 2) One can imagine her encountering innumerable such biases as she carries out her many chosen roles and such experiences must certainly assist her, albeit painfully, in developing her convictions about the importance of revealing the many manipulations underlying the "received tradition": "While it can be demonstrated that the phantoms of received tradition against which this text is composed have largely been eclipsed at the cutting edge of thinking about modernity, concepts of form, formalism, subjectivity, and history remain insistently tenacious as assumptions about modern visual art." (p. 4)

In her introduction to Theorizing Modernism, Drucker states that she has organized this project according to three themes, "the representation of space, or space as representation, the ontology of the object, and the production of subject positions." (p. 6) She then describes "a series of models developed for both the ontological status of the art object and subjectivity." (p. 6)

For the non-specialist in art history and art criticism (like myself) this is a challenging though highly readable and informative work, not overly dependent on art critical jargon. Nevertheless, it is a scholarly work which
sets out to convincingly and clearly demonstrate the historical accuracy of its assertions. I had to read several sections more than once in order to understand the thrust of her arguments more fully, an effort that was very much worth the trouble, as the book gains in interest and persuasiveness as you get to know it better. As a non-specialist I was unaware or not very knowledgeable about many stances taken by important figures in art critical history who were well worth learning about such as Timothy Clark, Griselda Pollock, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, Guy Debord, Peter Halley, Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried, as well as Baudelaire and Benjamin; and while I have read more writing by and about those two key figures, I still gained much from Drucker’s presentation of where their work fits in with more recent art critical theories. Although Drucker does not exhaustively discuss each of those critics and critical theorists she does present a pointed and fascinating overall historical discussion and analysis of them alongside a detailed discussion of the theme of representational strategies and theories of ontology or "presence" in the work of canonical modern artists such as Guys, Manet, Cassatt, Degas, Seurat, Cezanne, Picasso, Kandinsky, Duchamp, Warhol, and others.

Drucker’s painstaking, historical approach allows her to identify the overall critical momentum and to assert convincingly that: "the notion of purity as non-verbal, antilinguistic, became a keystone of the high modernist position. The relation to Fry’s aesthetics is clear, and the notion of the threat posed to the image by the power of logos which might appropriate and displace its value, is another theme or subtext at work." (p. 84)

With inexorable precision, Drucker demonstrates how the guiding critical assessments and categorizations of modernistic practices are frequently self-serving and narrowing of the fields their lenses are directed on. In a discussion about Picasso’s Still Life With Chair Caning, she theorizes that the power of the invention of collage has less to do with Greenberg’s central concern than with the fact that the first collage:..."delimits its new space as literally as if it were an invention of real estate. This new space is both physical and conceptual, the space of an image existing without referent and in-itself and thus being simultaneously the thing and its representation." (p. 51)

Drucker’s discussion of the evolution and eventual collapse of the powerful and officially sanctioned critical arguments of Clement Greenberg reveals how a strategy of representing modernistic practices along the lines of some preconceived, or unconsciously held, set of orthodox aesthetic or political beliefs can distort not only a clear-sighted perception of what is actually going on in the work but can also make it easier to insidiously ignore whole frameworks and aspects of the work. She writes: ‘The loge of figuration took on grotesque proportions for Greenberg, and the necessity to repress it, and with it, the referential function of a signifying practice in which the materially present image might refer to an absent signified, was so forceful that his reading of modern art history was derived to naturalize its elimination.’ (p. 88) She goes on to show how later critics like Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss take this position further “with the conviction that visual modernity comes into being through distinction from and separation from the literary and linguistic. Both critics predicate their writing in the 1960s on the claim that modernity is about the refusal of language and the fulfilled realization of presence as inherent to the visual mode.” (p. 93)

The concluding chapter of Theorizing Modernism moves away from a discussion of canonical critical texts. In her discussion of "Subjectivity and Modernity" Drucker further explicates the relationship between the visual and verbal modes in understanding identity: "While language is the primary means of representing the fictions of subject identity, visual images also function to produce a specularly pleasurable fiction of self-identity... However, theories of enunciation which derive from concepts of linguistic form are only somewhat adaptable to the articulation of a theory of enunciation in visual terms." (p. 111)

Drucker’s vivid discussion of the role of subjectivity in more recent art practice includes Picasso and Meyer Schapiro, Duchamp and Benjamin, Barthes and Modern art critics such as Guys, Manet, Cassatt, Seurat, Cezanne, Picasso, Kandinsky, Duchamp, Warhol, and others. Complex, detailed and demanding, Theorizing Modernism is not only a contribution to the field of art history, but it is also an important text in understanding the way Drucker has evolved her unique understanding of the complex relationships between critical and creative artistic practices, visual art practices, and their related critical-literary contexts.

5. The Alphabetic Labyrinth

This book is encyclopedic in scope, taking in as it does 5000 years of history, beginning with Egyptian hieroglyphics which appear as early as 3000 B.C. and continuing up to the present with a discussion of the alphabet and electronic media, computers, and the insights of Marshall McCuhan. As a source of information, this book offers countless uses and will likely be the one to introduce Drucker’s work to the widest audience of readers.

The Alphabetic Labyrinth provides the most indisputable evidence of the importance and omnipresence of the physical and visual aspects of language. Due to its scale, countless facts, and historical accounts, this book cannot easily be summarized. But what is immediately evident is that it is immensely detailed, visually attractive, and is replete with many fascinating and beautiful illustrations drawn from all of history. Among the many topics covered in great historical and documentary detail are the alphabet in classical history, gnosticism, hermeticism, neo-Platonism, calligraphy, alchemy and Ars Combinatoria in the Medieval period, the Kabbalah, the renaissance, the social contract in the 18th century, advertising and visible speech in the 19th century and technology, eclecticism and idiosyncratic imagination in the 20th century. I learned a great deal I did not realize I was learning while reading and later noticed, when I was examining a clay, Neo-Assyrian tablet...
from the 7th Century B.C. at the Metropolitan Museum that I now had a way of picturing where this bit of writing fits in to the evolution of the early development of written languages. I recognized it as cuneiform script, which competes with Egyptian hieroglyphs for the claim to be the first form of writing...invented sometime between 3500 and 3100 B.C. in Sumer." (p.17)

This book offers an opportunity to travel back in time and understand why the alphabet was utilized physically for religious, communal, legal, medical, and many other purposes that continue to have an impact on the imagination, even when they are no longer in literal use today; like the tiny tanmel- las which Gnostics wore as amulets containing incantations in the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. (p. 80), or the magic alphabet of the 18th-century magician Cagliostro, who used it for a series of divinations "in which he foretold the death of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte, giving dates, names, and details of the manner and place of their triumphs and defeats." (p. 238)

Here again, I had the sense of Drucker laying the groundwork for a new understanding of whole areas of human experience which frequently have been profoundly neglected for reasons which she discusses or depics in carefully documented and historically precise terms. At times I had the experience reading this work of the situation of a contemporary writer who finds herself (by dint of the areas she has forged her way into) socially and intellectually in the position of the pre-Socratic philosophers who had to provide readers not only their innovative insights into new areas of knowledge but also with a corresponding poetic "container" or context for these revolutionary philosophical ideas, one that might lend an aesthetic rationale and inspired account for them as well. Like these philosophers, Drucker tracks her insight in her art, and her art develops further through her critical understanding. The facts, the chronological record of this crucial visual-verbal area of human experience have been there for anyone to see. It's Drucker's perspective that is new. Gradually it changes how we look at this entire visual-verbal field. My attention was particularly drawn to the extensive, detailed discussions of the uses of the letters in the early mystical sects like the Kaballah. An elaborate discussion is offered for every letter used in this ancient practice with many stunning, unusually hypnagogic and compelling accompanying illustrations of Kaballlistic diagrams which have fascinated mystics and scholars since their emergence in closed mystical Jewish societies as far back as 70 A.D. The chapters on calligraphy, alchemy, and the Ars Combinatoria in the Medieval period also interested me greatly. Drucker tells us how until a certain Cistercian named St. Bernard in the 12th century mounted strong criticism against the practice, scribes in earlier periods created beautifully illustrated manuscripts into which they inserted ever more complex drawings between, and sometimes within, letters. These pictures were microscopic, but frequently of enormously complex pictorial organization. On one illustration, drawn beside a few words in Latin I counted almost 14 human figures in a space the size of 10 words on the manuscript. On another, the letter M is decorated with 3 beautiful drawings of people engaged in various contemporary occupations. Regarding the Cistercian St. Bernard who attacked and helped justify putting an end to such practices, Drucker notes: "The theological and moral implications of St. Bernard's criticism thus far exceed a mere scolding of monks for indulging in frivolous labor and reveal a depreciation of the function of visual elements in the production of verbal meanings which is a recurring theme in Western thought." (p. 113)

Drucker's ability to evoke broad changes and movements throughout history through the lens of her fascination with the letters of the alphabet provides further grounding for my sense of her process of establishing a combined verbal and visual approach to culture which until now has been prevented from being widely acknowledged as central to our overall artistic and intellectual development.

6. Dark Decade

Dark Decade is a novel written in poetic prose constructed within a combined narrative and anti-narrative perspective. Events occur on a dream level, on an analytic, poetic, and chronological level simultaneously by the use of a great many very sophisticated poetic techniques. Having explored what we have so far about Drucker's recent work, we would expect and are not surprised at the visual and visceral level of the action. Drucker's vision, like Walter Benjamin's, factors in the concrete level of visual and sensual experience in all of its combined historical, political, philosophical, and theological, poetic, and linguistic meanings.

We come to know the action by means of a series of poetic asides about the characters, descriptions which reflect their moods, attitudes, and values rather than simply their rote behaviors, for example, in their ritualistic cult practices, or political and artistic ambitions. The atmosphere of the "story" is apocalyptic but the writing is intensely poetic and psychological. The first sentence of the book announces all these themes, as well as the genesis of biblical history in one poetic condensation: "The garden jumped up and gave them a theater for their actions."

The cast of characters includes Work, a poet (who I would not be surprised is a composite of some of the early so-called "Language" poets, a group with whom Drucker is sometimes associated), Dyna, his girlfriend, Sterling Paxton (called father F. on his day off) a politician, his girlfriend, the screenstar Silva Sloane, the narrator, his sister Oolga (who lives in Calyspo) who is a missionary, Dr. Pop, the head of the provisional government, Big Glen, a mercenary leader, Damage, a kind of philosopher friend of Paxton, Pidgin and Squeak, leaders of the children's army, Palmer Reed, a computer operator obsessed with his saintly sister, Palmer's friend Aldo, a painter, and a few others. The action of the "story" (which is experienced more like the negative of a photo, rather than the print) is mostly seen through descriptions of the characters, which are always rendered using poetic techniques which combine their ideas, beliefs, appearances, thoughts, and values into juxtaposed
images: "Her body had a tendency to enter the foetal position, like a brand new fern frond whose tissue structure would be damaged by too rapid an unfolding. There she was, Silva Sloane, beloved by millions, darling of the current circuit, adored by all the probing cameras of the press, lying for all the world like an aborted embryo, unable to motivate herself to movement." (p. 83)

In some ways I am reminded of the novels and stories of Flannery O'Connor and Nathanael West. There is a quality of gothic horror and the glamour of the cinema in a visionary fiction manner akin to Phillip K. Dick. The poetic quality of the sentences is impeccable, definitively putting it in the "minor classic" vein of the above authors, unfortunately perhaps not scheduled anytime soon for mainstream statistics in the New York Times Book Review. Nevertheless this is definitely a novel, with all the pleasures and obligations of that tricky form, and like these kind of books had better be, a good read. What we have here is a kind of contemporary Brave New World which always stays on the best side of the poetry/mainstream boundary line: "Red tile threw itself across the floor under her step, and the aching flesh of the room all made an effort to collapse itself against her." (p. 30)

But this is also hard-hitting political satire, which also includes unflinching and unflattering descriptions of certain literary types: "Nothing had been particularly denied him in his race from kindergarten tyrant to the top of the mudpile of poetics....Born angry he had mutated from the form of child into the brutalized inner workings of his own machinery in order to survive the torments of emotional laundry shoved into a deep bottom drawer somewhere that still stank, but the flat expression on his face refused to admit to the source of pungent odor. He carried his baggage with him all the time but never opened it." (p. 107) In an earlier chapter titled "The Poet's Condition" she writes of Work: "His aesthetics were fed by linguistics, not ecstasy and he banked on the gestures of a middle class life....The poet's time but never opened it." (p. 107) In another chapter titled "The Poet's Condition" she writes of Work: "His aesthetics were fed by linguistics, not ecstasy and he banked on the gestures of a middle class life....The poet's time but never opened it." (p. 107)

Reading this I think of Drucker's descriptions of Clement Greenberg, the New Critics, the ascetic Cistercian mysticism: his name might still turn up spades and perform accordingly on the small supply of capital obsessed him. Always his ecstasy and he banked on the gestures of a middle class life .... The poet's time but never opened it." (p. 107)

Drucker's understanding of effective art and critical investigation is that they resist easy closure and call upon as many resources of the writer and reader as possible, unmasking hidden hypocrisies and discovering areas of access to the prophetic vein in poetry, whether visual or verbal, expectable or not, conventionally acceptable or not. But this does not imply a trash of conventions for the sheer joy of breaking things, although this impulse too is acknowledged: "No one knew where the boundaries were. No one know where the limits were fixed, and transgression was therefore the essential rule of the day." (p. 67)

7. Drucker's newest book is The Century of Artists' Books (Granary Press). This book is a complete history of this form including hundreds of descriptions of specific books and artists along with numerous illustrations. Drucker writes in the preface: "My interest in books is as old as my consciousness of them — I cannot remember a time in my life when I wasn't interested in writing and in turning writing into book form....It was not until later that I started to think about books which were not concerned exclusively with language...." (p. vii)

Since I had time only to briefly examine this yet unprinted book (although a careful look assured me that here again was the thorough work that I recognized in her other critical/historical books which employ a careful, unrushed view of every facet of the field under consideration) I'll quote just one passage which I feel captures Drucker's by now more than evident passion for the book in every one of its manifestations, a passion close to evangellitic zeal but tempered by scholarly knowledge, professional skills, and a ready skepticism towards anything suggestive of shallowness or commercialism: "Every book is a metaphor, an object of associations and history, cultural meanings and production values, spiritual possibilities and poetic space, and all of these are a part of the field from which the artists' book derives its identity." (p. 41)

I've come to believe that one of the most intriguing aspects of great writers and artists is their ability to creatively challenge earlier stereotypes of what a career must be. In this regard I think of Leonardo Da Vinci, William Blake, Luibov Popova, Walter Benjamin, Gertrude Stein, John Cage, and Jackson Mac Low. We think of artists and writers like this when we try to understand that one of the primary challenges of being a creator of something authentically original is to find ways of surviving that somehow feed back into the creative energy needed for the artistic practice, which informs it, expands it, and relentlessly tests it and refines it. Life itself for this type of artist must somehow be transformed into part of the material and energy-making process and must contribute to it. Such artists not only draw us to their work, but to how they make their work, and why, and for what purpose. In this area, it appears that Johanna Drucker is exemplary. Her efforts challenge the categories and ways of thinking which have, until now, held us back, particularly those ideas which separate the verbal from the visual, the creative from the critical, the historical from the contemporary, the artistic and literary from the investigative. In Riddle Moon #13, Drucker wrote: "It is
unfortunate that so little dialogue takes place between the academy and the fully developed alternative writing scene. But nonetheless I find the resistance of many writers to theoretical writing equally dismaying, anti-intellectual, and unreasonable. After all, academia, like the art world is a real place, a real arena in which some things are done which are not able to be done elsewhere.... The work has got to be an instrument of investigation and understanding. The sense that 'career and power' are somehow assured within academic life is just as false as the assertion that 'free expression' is possible and recognized in the realm of writing. The struggle takes place everywhere. I really believe that....”

— Nick Piombino

THE SEXUAL PERSPECTIVE: HOMOSEXUALITY AND ART IN THE LAST 100 YEARS IN THE WEST
by Emmanuel Cooper,

Recently I went to see a play which recreates Maria Callas giving a master class to three aspiring singers. In discussing it with friends afterwards, I talked about how uncomfortable I feel seeing representations of artists in which their work is seen simply as the outgrowth of their pathology. The artist who is mocked when she's young is inspired to create a masterpiece, the blocked genius sees God creating Adam in the clouds, the diva rises to greater heights because her Greek tycoon lover with the uncut dick abuses her. Phoebe.

I find myself up to my armpits in this question with these two books, Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and the First American Avant-Garde, by Jonathan Weinberg, and The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West, by Emmanuel Cooper. Both examine the question of the interlocking of the private and public personas of gay artists. Marcel Duchamp once described Charles Demuth's homosexuality as "that little perverse tendency" and said it had nothing to do with the quality of his art. As Jonathan Weinberg points out in Speaking for Vice, his carefully-written book on Demuth and Marsden Hartley, Pier Paolo Pasolini explained that tolerance is simply "a more refined form of condemnation." Weinberg goes on to say that "claiming to tolerate difference is not the same as welcoming difference." This is one axis of the crux of our dilemma. We, who are gay don't get a choice: the feminist adage of "the personal is the political" describes our situation in this country whether we want it to or not, as long as our sexuality is a bugbear used by the right wing to raise funds. We may think it's our business whom we sleep with, but in fact our orientation is not simply our own private business. And the pressure that builds when a person feels there is a greater price to be paid for candor than what they can afford is a real pressure that changes what forms they allow their art to take or how they allow art history to be written. At the same time, for most artists who come out it's not unusual for that experience to find some form in their work — although that's not a given. Hence we arrive at the other axis of our dilemma: does all art created by gay artists reflect their sexuality? Does it have to reflect their sexuality in order for us to examine it as the work of a gay artist? And are literal representations the only forms which sexuality takes in art of the act or the persona?

This is the Procrustean bed upon which Emmanuel Cooper stretches all the artists in The Sexual Perspective, his survey of gay artists of the last one hundred years. Before the 1950s, it appears that Cooper's criteria for inclusion is often either gossip or the creation of a multitude of nudes of one's own sex. At times an artist's work is discussed without any attempt to relate it to gay identity — thus, for example, I was left scratching my head after reading about Canova or Marie Laurencin, where no clear connection is drawn between their work and their sexual orientation. After the 1950s, it's the opposite problem: everyone who's gay is included, so long as their work illustrates their sexuality. Cooper's own prejudices at this point begin to interfere: he announces that "no abstract art has so far successfully addressed the issue of lesbian and gay sensibility without overwhelming ambiguity." Indeed, he dismisses Abstract Expressionism as "inner explorations...presented in an almost meaningless form." He finds Rauschenberg "impenetrable"; this, while Robert Hughes, Straight Male Art Critic Extraordinaire, seems to have no trouble understanding Rauschenberg's Monogram as "one of the few great icons of male homosexual love in modern culture." (Cooper misquotes Hughes, leaving out the key word "male", but grudgingly admits that Monogram is a "obscure but fascinating assembly.")

Given this attitude, there's certainly no room for someone like Louise Nevelson to edge her way in. And given this need to have everything spelled out, Cooper is utterly flummoxed by Andy Warhol, missing the connection between Warhol's "If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it," and Oscar Wilde's The Truth of Masks. Now, there's a central gay belief!

The Sexual Perspective is the meeting place for the most philistine attitudes towards art with what passes in the art world for the rigors of deconstruction, ending up with a selection of art that is, for the most part, utterly flat psychologically, a monotone repetition of the obvious and of preaching to the converted. This book also begs the question of quality. In any preliminary survey such as this, there will be the wonderful surprise of artists you don't yet know; for me, artists such as Alvaro Guevara, Jean Mannen, and Joan Eardley. But given Cooper's parameters, the latter half of the book is largely made up of photographers and illustrators, and one ends up with clunky work like Della Grace's photo of three pierced bald lesbians posing as the three Graces (where is Catherine Opie when you need her?) or the rubbery, badly drawn nude by Matthew Straddling on the cover of
68 isn't a question of simply complaining that the artists one prefers aren't included in Cooper's book as opposed to what is ignored, of the simplistic straw man argument in the art world. It is a case, all too often, of what is more interesting gay art of the last ten years, a particularly fertile time for the book. (Cooper describes it as "idealized and perfect" — sure, if you like inflatable dolls.) By the lights of this volume, you'd think that contemporary gay and lesbian artists' work began and ended with the issues of self-expression, never touching issues such as economics, family, or the environment. We also appear to have little sense of humor. We are told that if someone has not enjoyed success, it's because of the villainy of a critical establishment which ignores figurative art. This is a difficult theory to swallow while looking at the silly Monica Sjöö painting that is supposed to be the object of such calumny: clumsily interlaced outlines of two female nudes — who bear a startling resemblance to the Goops as drawn by Gelett Burgess — with "LOVERS, chunkily written in the upper left, the "O" done as two interlocked female signs. It looks like something made by an earnest freshman student after her first consciousness-raising session. There's some really awful work at the end of this book, buttressed by deadly group-show-review prose where each artist is introduced, given a few adjectives and a kindly pat on the back, and sent off to do The Good Work. ("The presence of white socks, shorts, vest and so on is introduced, given a few adjectives and a kindly pat on the back, and sent off to do The Good Work. ("The presence of white socks, shorts, vest and so on suggests the fitness and health of ideal specimens enjoying the physical awareness of their own bodies. Sensitive, lovingly observed and meticulous­ly drawn, the men are both objects of desire yet beyond reach, available only to be admired." Oh, please.) It all begins to remind one of Gore Vidal's comment that the love that dare not speak its name has become the love that won't shut up.

Apart from this, there are two problems with the reissue of this book. One is simply a question of editing; if a book is interesting enough to justify a new edition, then it should be interesting enough to warrant rereading and rewriting where necessary. It looks like no one, Cooper included, bothered to rewrite this book before they reprinted it, as it's riddled with typos and errors (Dioscgerus giving birth to Zwift! John Reichy! And who uses the word sculp­tress?). There's a lot of just plain sloppiness in the writing: at times the para­graphs are like a wild mouse ride, abruptly zigzagging this way and that, with no warning. Sometimes we are told who owns paintings referred to in the text, sometimes not. (An intriguing possibility for a future survey would be to trace who sold and bought the work of gay artists.) The text has been only partially updated, so one ends up with macabre situations, such as the one in which Derek Jarman's date of death is included in parentheses after his name in one sentence, and in the next we're told he "continues to paint." Two drawings by Moreau and Degas are compared, without ever identifying which drawings they are, what collections they are in, and without reproducing them so that we can't make the comparison for ourselves.

The other problem is more serious. Any survey of recent gay art which contains the sentence "The male nude continues to be the stock in trade of the artist who is gay" is going to run into problems with the current art scene, and Cooper does not seem to understand any art which does not function like a diagram or a pin-up leads him to ignore, by and large, the more interesting gay art of the last ten years, a particularly fertile time for gay artists. It is not a case of figurative versus abstract art, the most useless straw man argument in the art world. It is a case, all too often, of what is included in Cooper's book as opposed to what is ignored, of the simplistic ver­sus the sophisticated, the self-congratulatory versus the self-questioning. It isn't a question of simply complaining that the artists one prefers aren't included. I think the messages, strategies and pleasures of the art being pro­duced by openly gay artists now, as embodied say in Lari Pittman and Ross Bleckner, exile sex and gender. Cooper. Here are two artists with international reputations built on complex bodies of work dealing with gay issues in adventurous, unex­pected ways — and where is their work in this survey? Their exclusion is emblematic of the failure of this book's claim to adequately represent the his­tory of recent gay art. Given the laziness evident in the rewriting of the book, I suspect it might be simply that Cooper hasn't bothered to go out and look at any artists, other than the ones he either already knows or who stray across his path. He might find it instructive to glance at the catalog Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder did for In A Different Light, their 1994 show at the University Art Museum at Berkeley. He might even find out about a few figu­rative painters, such as Monica Mapiñ and Judie Bamber, who have more to offer than just a tight pair of jeans. In the meantime, this book is so flawed as to be only peripherally of use; we shall have to wait for James Saslow's forth­coming history of gay art and hope for better.

Admittedly, it is easier to tackle two artists in a specific time frame than to attempt a survey of the last hundred years. But the success of Speaking for Vice, Jonathan Weinberg's study of the interplay in Hartley and Demuth between their art, their sexuality, and the society they lived in, lies not in a reduced scope but in his willingness to always put their art first as his guide in writing the text.

Weinberg does not give signs of having used a specific agenda to mold his approach to his subject, other than his decision to examine the work in the light of their creators being gay. And one is grateful to him for this deci­sion, as it undoes some of the crippling effects of recent art scholarship. He talks at length about the catalog for Marsden Hartley and Nova Scotia, a 1987 show which examined the important last works of Hartley, arguably the works which are most idiosyncratic and powerful, a fusion of his abstracted language of forms, his sexuality, and his spirituality. The writers of the cata­log minimize Hartley's attraction for the men he memorialized and manage to see a body of work which is notable for its reliance on the male form only as a manifestation of religious impulses. It's the kind of "good manners" that feels that it's indecent to discuss an artist's "perverse little tendencies" and in the process ends up ignoring a major factor in what creates a body of work. This is the opposite problem to what I was complaining about with Cooper's sur­vey: there, artists are only allowed to talk about sex; in the problem Weinberg identifies, nobody is allowed to mention sex, certainly not homosexuality (sort of "the funny uncle" syndrome). And thus the Nova Scotia catalog, in address­ing Hartley's search for a family in his last years, never discusses the possi­bility of that search being for another man with whom to make a family. It is this kind of benign neglect which Weinberg wishes to undo with his work, exactly the kind of "tolerance" which Pasolini identified as so destructive a syndrome. Never, ever underestimate the ability of well-meaning straight writers to firmly push us back into the closet, even when they smile gently at us as they do it. In Peter Levi's new biography of Edward Lear, he authoritatively announces that Lear was not gay, as if he were protecting him from some ter­rible charge. And in Pure Beauty, a show of young Los Angeles artists curated for The American Center in Paris last year, Ann Goldstein composed the show of three straight couples and one single gay man, as if no gay person
would form a family. Gay artists are not viewed as forming families; we're still seen as bachelors and spinsters, which leads to some serious misunderstanding. The Nova Scotia catalog promotes the reading of Hartley's late work in terms of its religious drive at the expense of its sexual drive, and thus misses the hungrier for family bonds inherent in these late paintings. Weinberg does wonderful work when he pursues this longing and makes an intriguing connection with Hartley's use of Christian imagery to the idea of Christ and his twelve apostles representing "a kind of family that did not follow the heterosexual model." Hartley fell in love with the sons of the family he roomed with in Nova Scotia. He produced a portrait of the family's drowned son, Alty - his shirt open to show his hairy chest, a flower behind his ear - a portrait imbued with the most gorgeous yearning.

I have to admit that at moments Weinberg's close reading of Hartley's stylistic shifts as indicative of shifts in his attitude towards his sexuality made me uncomfortable, in the way I referred to at the beginning of this review. But I think the results are that he gets at something which Cooper can not comprehend: yes, abstract art can successfully embody one's feelings about one's sexuality (or indeed, one's feelings about anything). Feelings occluded from Hartley's public life end as sublimations, representations in abstract paintings such as Painting Number 47, Berlin. As Weinberg points out, the forms at the top of the painting are based on the tassels on a military helmet. Hartley had been in love with a German officer who had been killed, and the tassels, in their position and with a halo behind them, seem to imply they're hiding a face. In the world of the paintings, Hartley can speak freely of his desires, albeit in a language of pattern, emblems, and signs. These paintings have a density and throb to their surfaces that seem the very stuff of private fantasy. For better or worse, one of the dynamics in work by many gay artists is how they manifest what they feel can not be pictured openly. We may despise the closet, it may do unimaginable harm to people; but it becomes a factor in the imaginative life of an artist who resides there and determines the code he uses to speak to the world. And when the artist has a complex and sophisticated mind, the code becomes fascinating. There's an enormous amount of research waiting to be done in this area, the interfacing of private fantasy and language with our predecessors' need to conceal. Predecessors, nuts. There are still artists reluctant to deal openly with how their closest relationships have affected their artwork. Jonathan Katz has done great work reading Johns' and Rauschenberg's relationship and paint­ings from this point of view, and one anticipates reading his forthcoming book, Opposition Inc.: The Homosexualization of Postwar American Art.

One of the great delights of Weinberg's book is the selection of reproductions of Demuth's watercolors - in particular, the erotic watercolors. These wonderful, funny, beautifully constructed paintings of urinating sailors and bathhouse patrons have been virtually impossible to see. (Meanwhile, you can walk into any Barnes & Noble's art section and purchase an inexpen­sive Dover paperback of Picasso drawings, featuring women getting fucked by bulls.) Once again, Weinberg does valuable work correcting the genteel homophobia that runs through much art historical writing. He addresses Pamela Edwards Allara's statement, in her "The Watercolor Illustrations of Charles Demuth," that Demuth's use of the image of the femme fatale in paintings made as illustrations for Henry James' The Turn of the Screw "confirmed
About the look of her double, Antinova, performance artist Eleanor Antin explains, "I had these marvelous stilts of myself taken in a long Les Sylphides costume and in a short tutu looking very glamorous. Then I made a videotape that shows how the photographic session was done...where I have to hold onto a broomstick in order to get into the proper position and things like that." And then she adds, almost, as an aside, she found the process, the actual ballet training, the grueling life of a ballet dancer "tedious beyond belief." It is the glamour of the dress, of the image, that Antin says she's about. As if to underline this observation, in "Recollections with my Life with Diaghilev," Eleonora Antinova demands "Who ever heard of a ballerina without calluses?"

Antin's plays purport to be memoirs of the time "Before the Revolution," of the mythical era of Diaghilev at the beginning of the twentieth century, of the dreams of modernism, of when ballet was a white machine — the romance and excitement of the far away mixing with the mundane under the influence of Antinova sipping sherry, talking of schemes created by international gutter snipes, stories of sweater manufacturers and of the greedy, unglamorous ballet girls, all of it adding up to plays that are not plays but a postmodern meditation on art in the guise of literature. Antin's plays have the unreal topicality of Guillaume Apollinaire's "Breasts of Tiresias." Except that "Breasts of Tiresias" is a formal play. The Antinova plays are written in a less classical spirit and her plays are also fictional memoirs about the reality of making art, about living for the moment of performance, for glamour, for role playing.

Like every good art star, Antin assigns herself the best parts. She begins her "Recollections" with musc sentences that become even shorter and punchier even as she arrives ("Help I'm in hell!"). "I am raining now. It always rains in Seattle. The people are big and wet Germans. They smell of wet socks and underwear. Little puffs of steam rise from their heads. 'We are in hell,' I tell Orlando."

Antin's Antinova's "plays" were mostly performed as monologues (with Antin acting all the parts) in galleries in 1978, 1979, 1980 with the exception of the last piece "Who Cares About A Ballerina?" that was produced in 1987 at the Bowery Theater in San Diego with Antin playing Antinova and Robin Hunt enacting the roles of her three successive typists, each of whom has a distinct character. "Who Cares About A Ballerina?" is a meditation on myth and reality — and what more beautiful myth is there (for Antin and for us) than the magical grace of the dance? But Antin also reminds us (not a little in the manner of Gertrude Stein), "Art is what you do every day. You do it once. You do it again. It is the same 365 days of the year. Art is what you do over and over. . . every day is the same. That's what makes it art." And by way of a contrast, Antin offers Felix (who) was not art: "He was fire. He was bad moods and good moods and bad brandy and rotten food and dark cafes." For Antinova, art is discipline; Felix (who was magnificent) is life. The byplay between the two makes up the content of Antin's work. Her Antinova Plays are full-fledged fantasy decked out in the clothes of real-life absurdity. There is the relish with which she describes and with which Diaghilev exhibits the holes in his shoes. And the ballerina's moroseness is more than balanced by her antic ballet plots, all delivered straight-faced, as part of Antin's wit and charm. For a moment we breathe in the naivete of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, and then the next we mourn with Antinova all her ghosts, which are the ghosts of our own cultural past as well.

Eleanora Antinova Plays includes photographs and drawings by Antin which act as historical footnotes to the text. Also, there is an introduction by Henry Sayre that claims the book only include "traces" of Antin, and further asserts that as a book Antinova Plays have only a "documentary function," which is the opposite of my own experience. Eleanora Antinova Plays stand very well by themselves. In fact, although I enjoyed the photographs of Antin as a nervous ballerina on point on the cover, it seems totally irrelevant whether Antin's performances actually took place. However, because they did, Frantisek Deak's essay "Acting as an Art Paradigm," also included in the book is interesting. As an after note, it provides historical context for an anti-theoretically historical work. For me, the important thing is the text in Eleanora Antinova Plays. The words are funny and acute, they come alive on the page, and they read brilliantly.

— Corinne Robins

Note

MONDRIAN FEVER

PIET MONDRIAN (1872-1944)


NATURAL REALITY AND ABSTRACT REALITY: AN ESSAY IN TRIALOGUE FROM 1919-1920

by Piet Mondrian, translated and with an introduction by Martin S. James, George Braziller, NY, 1995, 143 pp., $14.95 (paper).

THE HUMANITY OF ABSTRACT PAINTING

by Meyer Schapiro, George Braziller, NY, 1995, 80 pp., $12.50 (paper).

Mondrian fever seems in the air this year — perhaps, less in terms of art than in terms of art history and theory. The organization of a comprehensive exhibition with concomitant publishing activities centering on the work of this venerated twentieth century Dutch master may have less influence on the current direction in art, whatever that is, and more on the revival, clarifi
philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who spent his later years attempting to refute what he had established in his earlier *Tractatus* (published in 1921). The comparison, which might have been further developed, is provocative and illuminating for a variety of reasons and might have been elucidated by the author in greater depth.

In both cases, after a hiatus between their early and later careers, the artist and the philosopher began moving away from "facts" toward a more complicated and transitory notion of grammar and syntax. While Mondrian departed from the early influence of the symbolic linear "repouse," attributed to the mathematician/theosophist Schoenmaekers, toward a "dynamic equilibrium" under the influence of Hegel, one may observe a comparative linguistic strategy deployed by Wittgenstein.

In his later career, Wittgenstein invoked the situation of language — the transitory and shifting external frame, as it were — as complicating the pursuit of meaning. In other words, meaning is not only signified within the internal structure of language, but is given to certain external conditions as well. At the conclusion of his essay, Bois demonstrates how the final "unfinished" work of Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1943-44), achieves what the artist was on the brink of doing in 1920 after two Checkerboards; that is, "to abolish the pictorial surface." Instead of going in that direction, the artist opted for Neo-Plasticism — the self-contained unity of the picture plane. In the last New York painting, it is just the opposite. The complexity of components represent neither "repouse" nor "dynamic equilibrium," but rather they exist "in a shallow cut of actual (not illusionary) space...a perpetual state of shift."

Again, the affinity to Wittgenstein's posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* is significant. This "perpetual state of shift" is precisely the problematic that the philosopher understood in relation to how language determined meaning. Whereas in the earlier *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein states: "Form is the possibility of structure" (Prop. 2.033), the latter work emphasizes "language-games" in which the concept of form has been deleted. Thus, it would seem that if Mondrian's last work is the "victorious" rebuttal of all that he had been seeking to destroy since 1932, the structure usurps the possibility of form, that is, "to exist "in a shallow cut of actual (not illusionary) space...a perpetual state of shift."

Earlier in relation to Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, Bois argues that the concept of "unity" in Mondrian's surfaces is not merely a "fragment" of another abstract reality but is "in itself" the abstract-real. This offers a rebutt to the popularly held notion that the early Neo-Plastic paintings were like frames or windows offering a small glimpse of some larger visibility. He argues against "the fragment" especially in relation to the series of diamond-shaped lozenge series, begun in 1919, and then picked up again after his non-painting hiatus in Paris in 1924.

Bois' discourse is impressive in terms of its dialectical consistency and restrained assiduity — a Cartesian habit, perhaps. It is interesting, for example, to compare the Schapiro text with that of Bois. Whereas Schapiro elucidates on Mondrian from the point of view of pictorial order as a humanistic representation — indeed, as a nearly redemptive exorcism, a subtle, yet direct manifestation of the artist's projected inner reality — Bois refrains from making any such connections. One does not find metaphorical indul-
ences in Bois’ text. Yet the pursuit of the dialectic can also be tedious at times, especially when content is introduced that calls for a certain, shall we say, non-dialectical flexibility.

One example would be the issue of Mondrian’s hiatus from painting — or serious painting, his corpus — in order to support himself by painting watercolors of flowers. Apparently the conditions of life had intervened on his career in the mid-twenties. I would submit that the economic stigma of the times became as much a reality for Mondrian as his more focussed and cerebral pursuits before 1920, when he was coming to terms with the “module,” or in his mid-to-late career as an advocate of pure plastic painting. To ignore the impact of such “real life” circumstances in an artist’s career — even one as rigorously consistent and paradigmatically-driven as that of Mondrian’s — is to mythologize the artist in such a way as to remove the achievement from the diurnal habits and affairs that provide the necessary tension — “the disequilibrium” — that the abstract painter simply had to confront. It is this kind of personal interlude within the course of the dialectic that brings a greater focus to the issue and locates the achievement of great art within the context of everyday flesh and blood. Schapiro understood this interlude not as a breach within the discourse but as a challenge, a human signifier that ultimately gave content to Mondrian’s formal struggle — content beyond the form itself.

— Robert C. Morgan

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