MEANING
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FORUM

The editors of M/E/A/N/I/N/G asked a small group of artists and writers for their responses to a series of questions that reflect the focus of the magazine. What follows are the questions and the responses we received.

Do you see your work, or the visual art of those with whom you are most sympathetic, as involved with the visual expression or articulation or reality, meaning, presence, authenticity, originality? To what degree do you see your work, or that of visual artists to whom you are sympathetic, as questioning, undermining, or eroding some or all of these values? Finally do these concerns play a relevant role in the creation of your work or in your response to visual art?

Arakawa & Madeleine Gins

As to what a question of what is going on: Who is forming space and for what? To what extent (O ripe extension!) is blank as original as it would be? Any meaning as a seam of the symbol-making fabric across which daily the fiction of place moves its obstinate, quite-possibly-shining sieve and sieve-making prescience. Oh, not much, if you say so.

Susan Bee

But, yes, I too puzzle over “meanings.” What is the work’s ultimate meaning or sense? Can we crack the code of the painting till it has no more secrets to withhold? Or are paintings to be understood as shifters, empty signs, that are filled with meaning only when physically juxtaposed with an external referent or object? The painting as a whole functions to point to the natural continuum, the way the word “this” accompanied by a pointing gesture isolates a piece of the real world and fills itself with a meaning by becoming, for that moment, the transitory label of an event.

I shifted pictures around for days and nights, reeling from the diverse possible meanings the picture possesses when placed in different image relationships. But that is the potency of image making — it’s as if we are dense —
swamped — image-ridden — we teem with “meanings” constantly.

Everything has a meaning, even what may first seem nonsense. Meaning is so fated for persons that art seems to be used, especially today, not for making sense, but on the contrary for keeping it in suspense; for constructing meanings, but without filling them in exactly. So the “what” is never settled. Of course, it never can be . . . I comfort myself, at times, with the thought that perhaps my whole work is one image anyway. Meaning is never an absolute, but rather a choice of possibilities, with meaning determined by the very terms not chosen. By giving everything a name, it strips each sign of its special modality of representation. The enigma remains a silent spot in the rush of meanings.

One does not put one’s house in order by getting rid of what one does not have, because that only creates a void, and a void is neither order nor purity. To sum up, I do not create a person or a house, I make a picture. Yet, that the world is out-of-joint is shown everywhere in the fact that however a problem is solved, the solution is false.


REALITY, MEANING

During the process of painting meanings come and go. I don’t find them to be definitive. Meanings, that is, more or less coherent thoughts about the significance of things, occur to me, change, stay, or get forgotten. What a painting means to me and how much it means to me will be largely a function of how it intersects with other experiences I’ve had. Others will generate their own meanings, viewing or thinking about the work. All these meanings, however engaging, are certainly not the reason for working nor the point of a painting.

If by “reality” we mean everything that is so, then we must see that it doesn’t mean anything; it just is. Meaning we make, individually and culturally. Art’s function is at least partly to cut through the received codes of meaning that intervene between us and reality.

Art, as opposed to culture, always has one leg in chaos (where, by definition, there is no meaning). Art has to that extent an implicitly critical role, even when not setting out to disrupt our programming.

AUTHENTICITY, PRESENCE, BREATH

Since Warhol ushered in an art that was at once revelatory (through the sudden shock of seeing our death-glitz culture in front of us where we had meant to escape it) and enigmatic (just where was he in all this?) it has been difficult to know when much art was being socially critical and when it was simply symptomatic. Lately much of the fare seems a study in equivocation, and it is not usually clear whether that effect is deliberate: a double equivocation.

A persuasion in current art and art criticism is that the resources of visual language to express lived experience have been used up. The belief in the authenticity of direct, experientially based art has been eroded, one feels, by a surfeit of disappointments, embarrassments, failures to be understood, realizations of having been conned: growing up in America, or perhaps anywhere, late in this century. There is in the work a very thin line between self-protective irony and heartfelt poignancy or, in their updated versions of recent seasons, sarcasm and sentimentality.

A love of art out there seems to be gasping for breath. It’s not so much that art is over-intellectualized as that the mind, disconnected from senses, emotions, and spirit, runs amok. How could it have presence when nobody’s home?

It may be that such art does, in fact, accurately express, as symptom, the condition of society today. Our most alienated and seemingly critical art may in the last analysis be entirely conservative in its essential agreement with the media world of manipulated consciousness.

POLEMICS

I’m not interested in my own work in polemical issues, that is, using my work as a deliberate vehicle of protest or propaganda, although there is such work being done that engages me and even sometimes makes me wish I were such an artist. One wants to be effective and useful in the world, and yet it’s not given to every artist to do it through the art. In any case the political art that is good does much more than express opinions, and its value as art doesn’t altogether coincide with its value as political thought.

NATURE/CULTURE

My painting grows out of other sorts of occasions: moments when glimpses of reality become available, waking dreams where appearances cease to be “mere”. I use the word “grow” deliberately here and am aware that it situates painting within the paradigm of Nature rather than of Culture. I don’t share the prevailing view that we are, in our consciousness necessarily the hostages of Culture, victims limited to the codes it gives us.

Recently I’ve been doing large paintings out of doors, working directly and fluently from the motif, as they used to say, in this case from enormous, ancient trees. As with portraiture the work involves communication between the model and myself and is, finally, a sort of collaboration. My culture-informed sense of painting and my awareness that I am making paintings to be seen elsewhere in an altogether different context are in the service of the project, even as they guide so many choices made along the way.

Robert Berlind
Jake Berthot

"Right now a moment of time is fleeting by! Capture its reality in paint!"
— Paul Cézanne

I await the day when a real smart guy with political and philosophical clarity hangs a stretched chunk of linen or cotton duck (even here a decision must be made) on the wall and proclaims the ultimate reality has been reached. . . . There are two choices. . . . you can make something that floats around the word or you can make something so that the word floats around it. Whatever, what's for sure, is that, the closer you get to the heart of the matter the more it shifts. . . . What's real, what has meaning for me is to dream and be awake at the same time. . . . To be in flux—a constant state of transition—to reach for art's life, not its death.

Power Boothe

Paint is the medium. The actions of hand and brush explore the relationship between differences. I make paintings in order to get something "right." This rightness is in fact a projected sense of how something might "exist." Getting an object to exist with this kind of rightness is directly related to my understanding of how an object might have "meaning." It is an intellectual, emotional, and a physical event.

The process of making and the process of seeing are active. An effort has to be made for the clearest possible coming to terms with the work as unique. Its connectedness to the world takes care of itself. Only then can the painting explode predetermined formulations. Only then can the object be transformed. Only then can something happen.

The mute threshold of the medium must be broken, but explanations of how or why a painting gets made, in concrete or historical terms, have relevance only if used to get closer to the work itself. The mystery is that there is communication at all, for Art abhors interpretation. For example, Giorgione's Tempest, Cézanne's Bather, and Rothko's Four Dark in Red, are each fundamentally unsettling and unsettled: they defy historical movements, critical categories or other attempts at domestication. And consequently they remain charged with meaning.

Art is particular and personal. I find there are colors that sing, and shapes and qualities of space I feel, and visions that haunt. It has to do with being alive. It is also compelling and terrifying that I could find the form for that emotional experience in the working of something so inert—paint.

COUNTRY MEANING

Collins & Milazzo

"Sebastian used to say 'Truth is at the bottom of a bottomless pit.'"
— Elizabeth Taylor
from Tennessee William's Suddenly Last Summer

We do not see our work as involved with the articulation of reality. We are more involved with bracketing systems of institutionalized articulation and reality—not only mainstream but the marginal or (so called) radical systems as well.

We do see our work as quintessentially involved with meaning. In our view of things, we perceive meaning as a construct, and attempt to bracket it as such, but experience it as otherwise. We do not believe in meaning, or in meaninglessness, but we are presently compelled by its liabilities. At a time when issues of structure, language, information, sign and ideology dominate critical discourse, govern the fashion industry of criticality and critical ideas, not only superstructural but subcultural as well, we are instead mesmerized by the weakness of meaning, dazzled by its fall from intellectual and academic grace, convinced by its inability to survive the mechanisms of culture, and intrigued by the ways in which its will is so easily compromised by (so called) 'opportunities' to communicate. In all likelihood, we are predisposed to encourage these corruptions in meaning.

Regarding presence and authenticity, we find at this time that the stages of reification which they have achieved resist consciousness. We experience them as a phantom limb.

In light of the reifications operative in art right now — reifications of critique and irony, picture theory, appropriation and critical photography, and, more recently, simulation — originality may be able to sustain, like meaning and Nature, new predicates of inquiry. Originality understood as source of originlessness cannot be reduced or confused with the various expressionisms it ventilates. When pushed to extremes, the unquestionability of the model forces us to reassess the static vectors of mortality that assert what may be considered to be now the radical content of Nature, and which may even bear the markings of a critical existence.

Maureen Connor

Art, science, and religion have, through history, generally represented efforts to deal with the unpredictable. Some cultures, particularly tribal cultures, respected the irrational and made it an important part of their traditions, while others, such as the ancient Greeks, at least in part, tried to deny the existence of the irrational or to exert absolute control over its exigencies. The attitude toward the unknown was, in both cases, an important aspect of positive, productive behavior within each respective culture. Finding a way to confront or control this unknown was to improve the world in some way—to make a significant contribution.

Originality has come to be considered the form or quality of character through which an individual with special access to, or understanding of, the unpredictable makes a valuable contribution to the world. This might take the form of a useful discovery in medicine or mechanics or an alternative way of looking at the world through art or philosophy. Often, the original represents true insight into the unknown or the irrational, but sometimes it is merely superstition intended to allay fears or exert power. However, it seems inevitable that when something is acknowledged as an original contribution it is embraced for a time and imitated by others who also want to do something of value but fear the unknown. Thus, culture, in the form of fashion, quickly places limits on the unpredictable and keeps it well under control.

Some of the early modernists used the irrational as a means to question social and aesthetic conventions. Originality became a force with which to continually undermine society’s efforts to control its unpredictable elements. Although, for these artists, artwork did not intervene directly in everyday events, since art was believed to occupy an ideal, pure world that could be separated from the compromises of everyday life, modernism did represent a force for openness, freedom, and discovery. As this art questioned itself on its own terms, with the social challenge embedded in its aesthetic, it had the potential to metaphorically transgress the status quo. While this separation allowed and encouraged much experimentation, it eventually began to create serious problems. In some circumstances, any novelty could take on the status of a challenge to convention and in others the access to the unpredictable became too controlled. Originality, as defined in late modernist terms, began to function in an almost magical way as there came to be a kind of blind belief in its inherent capacity to be subversive.

Currently, artists involved with deconstruction have attempted to undermine these superstitions by asserting that it is more subversive to use appropriated images than invented ones and by trying to “discover” the repressed or denied traditions contained in those works we consider inno-
vative. While this kind of thinking can be productive if it releases us from restrictions and helps point the way toward a new openness and exploration, so far only the opposite has occurred. Although appropriation is valued as a challenge to convention, it actually subverts and further erodes our freedom to explore. Deconstructivist zeal has extended the devaluation of originality far beyond the restricted, late modernist version to the point where it now seems retrograde to actively engage in any open-ended experimentation.

Even if deconstruction, in its present form, is simply another fashion it has insidious implications—that fit well into a world increasingly dominated by statistics and probability and in which the problems of art and philosophy become givens with predictable solutions. Because if deconstruction and appropriation imply that the unpredictable has nothing to offer us, then they help repress rather than explore the unknown and, with their veneer of fashionable subversiveness, help allow an easy, hardly noticeable transition from an age that values freedom to one that values control.

Alan Cote

There is a question I have about the meaning of what is being asked. There is a question I have about the meaning of presence and the presence of meaning in a work of visual art as an original value expressing reality. The quest for originality in the visual arts erodes and undermines authenticity whereas authentic presence allows original meaning to question the established values of visual expression so as not to erode or undermine the presence of questions about values.

If visual artists don’t question the established values of what is meant by presence, authenticity, and originality, reality will be seen as a belief in the acceptance of a system of visual thought habitually acquired through what is known and will not organically evolve from this knowledge.

The artist becomes the first viewer by stopping. The viewer stops but is not necessarily the artist. A visual artist is creative in that in part the artist invents plastically, reacts favorably and unfavorably, makes decisions and mistakes, gets surprised and perhaps doesn’t even like what is finally done and finds, in this process of making, something that seems real (barely tangible) and which appears in the form of an illusion to the viewer, to be experienced as real.

When the white bear rears in front of you in a snowy thicket, you don’t look for the tracks of the black bear in the snow. You tell the white bear that the black bear is behind him.
Rackstraw Downes

'Reality, meaning, presence, authenticity, originality.' These words, all placed side by side in a row, make a weighty list.

1) Reality. My painting process has a lot to do with correcting an assumed reality in my head by continual inspection of what I am depicting. But a depiction can only have the kind of reality proper to itself: its effectiveness consists in how intensely real it is as a depiction.

2) Meaning. An endless number of meanings float through my mind while I work, and some of them will perhaps be present in the finished work, alongside others which I never consciously articulated to myself. I do not manipulate the work to ensure that they get in there, though; that would be editorializing, which I eschew. The actual meaning of a finished work is never definitive — neither with my work nor that of anyone else's: it is a collaboration between the work and the viewer: 'A work of art is completed by its audience.' Paul Valery.

3) Presence. If a work has presence, that means to me that it asserts its own life effectively. I always hope my works will achieve this, and the ones I exhibit are those that I feel do so to a greater or lesser extent.

4) Authenticity. I believe that all works attributed to me are authentic; I am not aware that anyone has forged a 'Rackstraw Downes.' I sincerely hope that I shall never be so devoid of energy — or perhaps income — that I am reduced to forging one myself.

5) Originality. This word is often used with reference to the position of a work in history and, as a quality, was until recently accorded to the kind of work which shouts 'This Has Never Been Done Before.' I'm not at all interested in achieving that kind of originality in my own work nor is it necessarily interesting to me in other people's work. The kind of originality I value is not so self-aware or so intended; it comes in through the pursuit of quite other goals, and because those goals are pursued in an unselfconsciously but intensely individual way. I like to be in a room full of works of different kinds and different periods; history becomes extrinsic, the drone of a docent, and the individual character and relative power of the works come more sharply into focus because of the present tense dialogues that take place among them.

Janet Heit

I don't see how a work of art can not be concerned with the articulation of meaning, or the authenticity of the artist, on some level. Even when the artist is concerned with de-constructing, that is still dealing with the issue of meaning. But I am most interested in work that approaches issues of meaning, authenticity, originality from the standpoint of the artist making a statement (or raising questions) blending personal stimuli with data from the outside world. Whether the work is figurative or abstract is unimportant; what I value is visual art that refers to felt circumstances. Work made to exemplify intellectual theory, stripped of emotional or psychological or socio-political input does nothing for me, except that it tends to look handsome. In 50 or 100 years, what will it mean to have a painting consisting of nothing but machine-like black and white stripes? Compared to the passion informing Leon Golub's Mercenaries, for example, or the playfulness of Mimi Gross' figurative constructions, purely cerebral work is nothing short of boring. Once you've illustrated your theory, that's that. You're making expensive tchatchkes. But art that exists within its own time and simultaneously makes you think about time was and time that is about to come, that art is replete with layers of meaning. That art carries with it tremendous power to inform the individual viewer as well as the culture at large. How fortunate for all of us that despite attempts to strip visual art of the artist's personality, there are many more artists interested in doing just the opposite.

Bob Holman

REALITY is what you see, the art is bringing it back alive.

WHAT I MEAN is important on your answering machine, which is why I called you up. Hello? As to the Poem/Painting, well, it means what it says but who is it speaking to?

DO YOU READ ME? Buy my book.

"PRESENCE." Yes, "to create" is to bring into being that which was not previously there. As a performer or actor, well, turning presence on & off (like a light) is the art there.

AN AUTHENTIC REPRODUCTION! You can own a genuine plastic splinter from the Cross! Chaucer "appropriated" Boccaccio. Art is not science therefore theft is legal. Please steal this song — but don't forget the European markets! Imitation is praise. USA 87 gulping Capitalism eats new ideas overnight for breakfast, recycles eras unceasingly.

Q: ONCE you articulate an Idea, is it original? A: Only if no one hears it.
"VALUES": Above all, if "reality, meaning . . ." are "values" then we'd better get to work naming/inventing alternatives/opposites.

PERSONALLY, they are not "values." Yet they are playful, and I play with them, innocently at first, then serious enough to go steady, get engaged, fulfill the relationship at the marriage of Ear and Eye, celebrated by Mouth, singing:

What's the meaning of Meaning?
What's the purpose of Purpose?
What's the use. Can I use it?
It feels so good to refuse it!

David Humphrey

"Man is soluble in his thought." — Andre Breton

I have found that the consideration of questions of meaning, presence, authenticity, or reality, while often being an invitation to pretentiousness in social life, are generally quite fruitful to the production of art. While providing a kind of thematic skeleton onto which a work can adhere these questions also produce an oxygenated ambivalence that circulates throughout the effort. The very existence of these terms often seems determined by a desire for them to exist while the ability to act with authority would seem to depend on a sense that there is a real and whole author who is a master among real things.

I think there is an inspiring incongruity between the apparent unified presence of an artwork and the unruly metastatic swelling of meaning and the unmeant it produces. In a way this dynamic can become a kind of narrative of the body. It often seems that the body (as well as the self) maintains its unity thanks to the internalized constraints of the social in the form of some morality or image, that the body’s tendency is to expand out into the environment and the cosmos in a kind of infantile romantic fashion. Artworks, especially those that seek to resist the constraints of a bound meaning, lubricate, promote, and fuel this process. The indolent perversity of the onieric is a good model.

The liquid or ghostly presence of intention in a work, the ease with which it is quoted, repeated, recontextualized, or misinterpreted, seems to render questions of originality and presence less substantial. Yet because these seem to be an important part of how artists and viewers assess and relate to artworks they remain as part of a metaphysical love act that develops from looking and interpreting.

Some recent theory has attempted to describe the world of things as an effect of language, thereby shifting the emphasis from reality to be known to texts to be interpreted. This perspective can have the effect of placing the artwork and its interpretation on a volatile and fertile bed in which language, sexuality, power, etc. become the animating terms. The membrane separating the work and the world becomes semi-permeable in the exchanging flow of signification. For some this critical self-conscious scrutiny produces an endgame anorexia of the artwork in which its disappearing body satisfies a notion of postmodernity. It is possible, however, for these perspectives to help nourish and liberate the body of meaning (and meaning of the body) from rigid codification and return to the senses access to the mysterious plentitude of experience.

I am interested in the possibility of an art that animates this somewhat ungovernable sexuality of meaning (including its forbidden, unknown, desiring, or embarrassing character) and that promotes the redirection of thought towards the imperatives of the body and an expansion or re-surveying of its boundaries.

Komar & Melamid

All the terms used in your questions are in one way or another relevant to different parts of our work.

But the division of the question into "your work" or that of "artists to whom you are sympathetic" doesn’t apply in our case, since more than twenty years ago we began working together precisely because we considered each other the artist to whom we were most sympathetic. But the main thing that brought us together was the belief that we were beginning a new movement founded on "eclecticism" — after all, isn’t it true that two artists constitute a movement?

Realistically reflecting the eclecticism of our consciousness, combining together supposedly "contradictory" images, historical and emotional styles, we have gradually moved from chaos to harmony.

If we understand the connection between thought and architecture, we can imagine our memory, our consciousness, as a mysterious city-labyrinth, in which the facades of neighboring buildings and the various floors of the Babylonian tower belong to different styles. In this city "visual expression" coexists peacefully with "erosion." All these facades: "articulation of reality," "presence," and "questioning," "meaning," "authenticity," "originality," "creation" and "response," cats and dogs, serious values and bullshit, are forever joined within the framework of our lives by each of our births and deaths.
Medrie MacPhee

I have always believed in the notion of “vision” which is what I think is the embodiment of all the values that are expressed in the first question. For myself and those artists that I consider kin, vision is a kind of touchstone against which everything that is being explored must be measured, tested, authenticated. By its very nature art making is a philosophical and spiritual position. It does not recognize a compartmentalized self. Work literally is life, a way of fully inhabiting both the territory of one’s inner life and outer world. Art making requires a different kind of intelligence from that of a literal, narrative nature. It is kinetic, coming through the body, revealing other dimensions, making imprints of all that is known but difficult to speak of.

Adrienne Rich in one of her poems speaks of the body as being a raft that is continuously in motion between all these abstract worlds. I like to think that that is the state that art making is involved with.

I am not sympathetic to those artists who have elected themselves to destroy and undermine what they consider the myths of art making.

This undermining is accomplished through a celebration of irony, tongue-in-cheek, artist-as-maggie, ambivalence, etc. Many of these artists are career-artists, first and foremost involved in a very narrow debate with the powers-that-be in the artworld. Because I believe that it is intolerable for human beings to exist in a state of disbelief, disconnection, and utter banality, I can’t consider this trend will last.

Throughout human history the art that has lasted, the art that has meant much to me has been always the work that delved deeply, sincerely into the nature of reality, of time and place, of intimacy. It is that tradition that I think of, that I would like to be connected with.

Elizabeth Murray

I think these questions answer themselves, namely:
1) Yes. 2) In some instances to a very high degree. 3) Certainly.

Mark Van Proyen

It seems that your question is rather loaded in the sense that answering it in the negative is tantamount to moralizing on behalf of dog rape. It should be remembered that art is belief made dramatically visible, a manifestation of an individual crystallizing his or her experience and/or understanding of the world into a coherent form. This process requires honest introspection, courage and faith in its own value; when it is completed there remains a record of the author’s consciousness. Of course, if that consciousness is lacking in scope or intensity, all of the honesty and authenticity in the world cannot abate a mediocre conclusion. If one wants his or her record of consciousness to be reflective of a community beyond the isolated self, sensitive insight into the collective fantasy of meaning is also required.

Still, it seems that the unwritten backdrop to your inquiry is the functional sociology of the Artworld, which needs some kind of consensual (e.g. administratable) myth of credibility to fuel the investment dynamic which in turn motivates or informs all institutional decision-making processes. To the degree that these processes form a coherent pattern of patronage they also form a pattern of passive coercions that dangle the distracting carrots of economic support and peer affirmation in front of the creative process. Those whose creative efforts are not internally motivated tend to be manipulated by these carrots, or discouraged by the non-existence of alternatives. In such a situation, dilettantism finds it easy to reinforce its own mythologies, generally to the detriment of the “authenticity” that so much lip service is paid to. An antidote? A more contentious and partisan critical environment is perhaps the only possible remedy to the situation that I have just sketched, and that is where grass-roots publishing efforts such as METHINKING can play a very important role, since the more established venues for critical writing have to cater to advertisers.

Yvonne Rainer

Reality, or the idea of it, is the interplay between private experience and social consensus. Which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist, or is “relative”, but that it must be struggled for, and reassessed, like knowledge.

Authenticity and originality are those dubious cornerstones of western (especially U.S.) individualism. The more unequal the distribution of resources and wealth in the society, the more desperate the search for authenticity and originality in daily life. As a proper “postmodernist” I ceded the latter almost with my first public/presentational gesture. The former, or the illusion of it in representational practice, is useful in establishing credibility and ties to an audience (“real people talking”) and is necessary in progressive propaganda. My own postmodernist schooling makes it difficult to go along with this strategy whole-hog, resulting in a tightrope act in which left political conviction appears side-by-side with various kinds of shifts, rifts, fissures, and seizings-up of “authenticity conventions”, with the attendant danger of putting a given enterprise into credibility jeopardy. But that’s the way I’ve got to do it.
Most of my water installations involve mass, reflections, and movement. They are the result of various levels of fantasy, built on dreams but based on the absurd contradictions that make up reality. Through the use of many materials, I create a new and different work infused with the energy from reality’s contradictions.

I am not nor have I ever been, involved with reality or originality. I am, as Virginia Woolf said, “the loose drifting material of life.” All that I see, all that I hear, all that I ingest — I am. I am involved with presence since I need to have my work visible because it speaks for me. I need to appeal to others so that they will be seduced into reading what I say in my painting.

Yes to meaning. A signification of my personal politics meant to be yielding rather than flat, posteresque.

“Painting” is my reality, therefore authenticity is part of my belief system. I do not simulate anything and the responsibility is enormous, constant, and ordinary. Reality, meaning, presence, authenticity, originality. Does my work “erode” these values? The question doesn’t resonate for me. I want to present my point of view and have parity with those who differ with me.

I read your question. Later I walk in an Adirondack forest, pick up a small branch. I discover reality, meaning, presence, authenticity, originality. Are these values being articulated in my work, or am I seeking to undermine them? Somehow the questions seem beside the point, they evade the doubt and the subjectivity within the work. They taste of paper.

For me the adventure of art comes when man or woman make within themselves new and unnamed discoveries. In painting and sculpture, when these meanings surface, they are understood intuitively and do not easily attach themselves to words.

“originality, authenticity, presence, meaning, the visual expression or articulation of reality…”

but

my voice has become strangely silent, tensing in my throat when I want to speak, as if some driving impediment’s down there maneuvering a stiff steel lining outward against its walls flattening my voice, making it disperse then disappear is this true?

no

but

my voice has become strangely silent, whenever I try to speak — loudly or not as if something’s wringing it and narrowing its range this tyrannical constraint is the stranglehold of Theory squeezing my voice into the axis of Its Authority “… representation, signification, reification, the simulacrum, the breakdown of unity and the Other” but so much else comes into my head

A true story: A few years ago in Livorno, Italy, a Japanese TV station sponsored a hunt for some long-lost Modigliani sculptures fabled to have been thrown into the canal by the distraught artist. After some much-publicized diving, three busts were recovered from the murky waters. Amid a frenzy of media activity, the busts were authenticated by museum directors and prominent art historians and a public showing was hastily organized, complete with catalogue. A few days later some local art students came forward claiming to have made the sculptures and to have tossed them into the canal to be found. To prove their allegation, they agreed to go on TV and make another bust (promising it would take no more than 5 minutes). Armed with a Black and Decker electric drill, they ground out a pretty good Modigliani — coming in comfortably under the deadline — as a stunned Italy (including some very unhappy museum officials) looked on. Subsequent tests, of course, revealed that the three found busts were indeed fakes. A few days later, Black and Decker took out a full-page ad in Italian newspapers: A large drawing of a Modigliani
head looming over a small photograph of a B&D drill, accompanied by the copy line, "È facile essere bravu con Black & Decker." (It's easy to be great, with Black & Decker.)

What interests me here is the way meanings (and values) shift — for instance, the way something authentic subsequently proven inauthentic can become automatically something else. That is to say artworks don't have specific meanings, but contexts in which works and meanings slip about one another like colored blobs in a lava lamp. All we do as artists is turn on the light (content) and hope it works. The Modigliani forgeries started out as one kind of artwork (part of an art/political action), became, for a short time, a different kind of artwork (an authenticated Modigliani), then, acquired value as a cultural artifact (a famous forgery). The art-student/forgers may have been gratified at their apparent success in making fools of the art establishment, yet may (or may not) have subsequently been distressed at how B&D appropriated their appropriation.

But we lose control of junior once we put him out into the world. All I want is artwork positioned for the spirit rather than the market. A stance that allows the work to continue accumulating meanings long after the intended ones are forgotten (if ever known). (This is not to say that an artist doesn't have the right to a career plan, like everybody else.) I think that the current debate over the possibility of originality is like the old debate about abstraction versus representation. These controversies are absolutely inevitable — proof that the patient hasn't yet died. But people stubbornly continued to make representational art long after everyone knew it was impossible to make representational art, they continued to make abstract paintings long after painting died, and now people are continuing to make original paintings, blithely ignoring the fact that the avant-garde failed years ago. Maybe the answer lies in something as silly as "quality." (Even Baudrillard said "...there's good simulation and bad simulation.") But this really begs the question because who would dare say what makes something good? It just rings true, it's convincing, it makes us believe —

Ultimately, what I look for is work that flows from a search, not for meaning, but for a meaningful life.

Pat Steir

I find this question impossible to answer because the question is an answer in itself.

For me, a work of art must show a way of seeing that has not been seen before.

Or show a way of seeing that has always been, but not consciously seen.

Robert Storr

Deconstructing the myths of absolute originality and authenticity has been the common purpose of some of the best and most provocative art of the 1980s. Insofar as inherited notions of "genius" and "aura" have been the refuge of art-scoundrels of all stripes and splashes this effort has been tonic — and sometimes genuinely radical. However uncomfortable this critique may make one, simple rejection is at best short-sighted — at worst reactionary.

Over the past several years, however, the efficacy of deconstruction not to mention the coherence of its motives have been undermined by its very success. Wide dissemination has led to the near complete vulgarization of its basic concepts — and a corresponding opportunism on the part of many of its supposed practitioners. It is now a cliche producing cliched art.

It has also become an alibi for the fatalistic acquiescence to or eager courtship of power. "Gee whiz!" nihilism has picked up where the idea of resistance to cultural determinism once flourished. "No exit" has become "Let's settle in for the duration — who's your dealer?" And, fascination with the "Hyper-real" has devolved into a convenient excuse for ignoring or second-guessing the experience of others — that mundane and highly inopportunistic turns of the "Other" — and a means of avoiding the most disturbing implications of one's own.

In this regard, two incidents of the past year stick in mind.

On a recent panel a colleague, who has written frequently on the theme of the media and the arts, explained that for a while she had lived in walking distance of the Louvre and had regularly gone to see the Mona Lisa but decided in the end that there was little advantage to be gained from this exercise since studying the reproduction gave her information she needed. This is a startling conclusion. Granted the painting vastly overrated and superficially overfamiliar. And granted there lies over it a patina of irony and in front of it a literal shield of guards and glass that obscure our vision. Nonetheless, like all "originals," even those imprisoned by curators and enshrined by custom, Da Vinci's painting remains unique by virtue of the complexity of the relations it synthesizes. Despite everything, it survives in this state because of the density of nuance it contains. No surrogate can match this complexity; likewise no second-hand knowledge can suggest new interpretations as readily as the idiosyncratic engagement of direct and sustained observation. And, one might add, full appreciation of the degree to which a painting has been compromised cannot be deduced from general principles, it too must be witnessed first.
hand. The question then becomes not whether the original has ceased to exist (it hasn’t) but the nature of one’s interests relative to its existence — and the measure of one’s curiosity and the subtlety and extent of one’s appetites.

Next, from art to life — or rather its negation. Some months ago a painter musing on the ideological context of contemporary abstraction put forward this proposition. “Likewise, the poles of life and death collapse into a state of non-life and non-death. No one either lives or dies. The possibility of life is negated by the imposition of mechanical time and by regimentation. ... Meanwhile, death is replaced by disappearance and is negated by manipulation of time within the recording media.” Cribbed from Baudrillard’s reflections on Walt Disney, the wizard of the “simulacrum” who lies eternally suspended between life and death in a cryogenic tank, this was once a clever conceit. Lately it sounds astonishingly callow. Death in New York and elsewhere in the art world is too present and too obscene to make anything but nonsense of such sophistry.

AIDS is not “disappearance” followed by electronic after-life, it is misery and definitive loss. Meanwhile, outside that world — among drug-users on the Lower East Side and infected members of their families, in the dirt wars of Central America and the Persian Gulf — death is likewise miserable, individual, and final. In this context the discourse of infinite regression into the “Hyper-real” is the intellectual equivalent of speculation on the “Star Wars” defense. An intricate futuristic toy, it is the ultimate distraction for insular minds.

In the end, whatever the impediments and distortions created by the general, the social, the “reified,” everyone is responsible for and to the authenticity and immediacy of their own experience. Usually what rings true is embarrassing because it must necessarily admit to the tenuousness of its claim to truth. The real test is that of one’s tolerance for embarrassment, inconclusiveness, depression, and wonderment.


Laurence Weiner

ART IS NOT A METAPHOR UPON THE RELATIONSHIPS OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS & OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS BUT A REPRESENTATION OF AN EMPIRICAL EXISTING FACT
IT DOES NOT TELL THE POTENTIAL & CAPABILITIES OF AN OBJECT (MATERIAL) BUT PRESENTS A REALITY CONCERNING THAT RELATIONSHIP

IF AND WHEN A PRESENTATIONAL SITUATION CANNOT ACCOMMODATE BY VIRTUE OF SELF — PROTECTION (CONFLICT OF BASIC IDEOLOGIES) A WORK OF ART
IT (THE WORK OF ART) THEN MUST ERECT A STRUCTURE CAPABLE OF SUPPORTING ITSELF
BUT WHATSOEVER SUPPORT IS FOUND CAPABLE BECOMES IN EFFECT LEGITIMIZED
PERHAPS THE DIALECTIC CONCLUDES AS THE SYSTEM OF SUPPORT CHANGES

A REASONABLE ASSUMPTION SEEMS TO BE THAT PROLONDED NEGOTIATIONS WITH A NON-ACCOMMODATING STRUCTURE IS NOT THE ROLE AND OR USE OF EITHER THE ART OR THE ARTIST

THE OBVIOUS CHANGE IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF ART TO A CULTURE IS PERHAPS THAT THE EXPLANATION (NOT NEEDED JUSTIFICATION) OF THE EXISTENCE OF ART HAS BEEN ALLED TO THE CONCEPT OF PRODUCTION
THIS READING WHILE OBFUATING SOME FORM OF SOCIAL UNEASE IS NOT IN FACT THE CASE
ART IS IN RELATION TO ITS SOCIETY A SERVICE INDUSTRY

THE ARTIST'S REALITY IS NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER REALITY
IT IS THE CONTENT THAT GIVES THE PERCEPTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS OF AN ARTIST (WITHIN THE PRESENTATION ART) A USE FACTOR WITHIN THE SOCIETY

A CONCEPT (IDEA) OF ENDEAVOR (WORK) WITHOUT A COMMITMENT IS NOT A REASONABLE ASSUMPTION

CONSTANT PLACATION OF PREVIOUS AESTHETICS CONSUMES PRESENT RESOURCES TO THE EXTENT THAT AS THE NEEDS & DESIRES OF A PRESENT AESTHETIC MAKE THEMSELVES FELT (EVEN WHEN THE BASIS IS IN A PREVIOUS AESTHETIC) THE RESOURCES HAVE BEEN EXHAUSTED
BONNARD’S ANTS

MIRA SCHOR

A family of words lace artspeak and arthink — simulation, simulacrum, "simulacral discourse," irony, equivalence, distance, mediation, code, sign, signage, tactic, strategy, "commodity signification," exchange value/use value, art practice, reification, cultural production, hyperreal, "hyperreal simulation," appropriation, and the prefixes "de-" and "re-". These words and the art works they are used to buttress offer much of interest in their critique of contemporary culture. Those artists who chose to remain ignorant of these words, ideas, and works do so at peril to the validity of their own work. Yet the overuse of these systemizations of aesthetic thinking have become such that the favorite derogatory terms of this language begin to turn against it: narcissistic, fetishistic, masturbatory.

This web of words forces a recognition of all that it has excluded, in this case — ambivalence, despair, anger, outrage, passion (love), remorse (tenderness), humility, transformation, transcendence, search, mutability, failure, inconclusiveness, loss, struggle — words that hover around an intangible element that one might call the Other of "simulation."

And this "Other" takes its toll in a sort of psychical debt incurred by those who wish its repression. For example the paintings of Peter Halley and the rapprochement to "individualistic" painting in Sherrie Levine’s recent work are oft-cited instances of an infertile preoccupation with the non-integrity of representation and image in painting — that is, with a sort of "death-wish" for painting. One wonders why, if painting is wished dead, must its most enthusiastic mourners do it the questionable favor of reenacting its death over and over again as if in a perpetual embalming.

Halley has succeeded in securing for his work the immediate obsolescence he blandly advocates in the realm of thought:

The time has come to stop making sense — to replace History with myriad exaggerated theories of post, para, quasi- and super-History has been defeated by the determinisms of market and numbers, by the processes of reification and abstraction. These form the great juggernaut of modernity that has destroyed History by absorbing it, by turning each of History’s independent concepts to serve its own purpose. Another kind of response is then called for: ideas that themselves change or dissipate as they are absorbed, that are formed with the presupposition that they will be subject to reification . . . doubtful ideas that are not invested in their own truth and are thus not damaged when they are manipulated, or nihilistic ideas that are dismissed for being too depressing.  

It is bad enough that our refrigerators are made to obsolete! To momentarily transpose Halley’s argument to another arena, if one applies Baudrillard’s elaborations of the simulacrum, then Ronald Reagan might be described as a simulacrum — that is to say an image which “bears no relation to any reality whatever” — of Presidentalit. But must one then freely campaign for the computer generated “Max Headroom” next? Halley’s paintings are themselves empty, etiolated by their dependency on obsoleting ideas. One is left before a blank page (or a page that does not even have the virtue of being blank), its rote-text already forgotten. Sherrie Levine has proceeded from photographs of photographs, to photographs of reproductions of "high art" to little water-color reproductions of reproductions of "high art" to golden knot holes on plywood and decorator neo-geo stripes. At her first exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery, the re-presentations "After Alexander Rodchenko," shrunk, identically and ostentatiously matted and framed, are relegated to the back room. Whatever "intellectual" honesty and avant-garde abrasiveness Levine’s earlier work might lay claim to is lost to the corporate elegance and acceptability of the more recent work. The main rooms of the gallery contain Levine’s new paintings, pretty, tame, and lame, while Rodchenko’s work is no longer re-presented, it has been recuperated. Further, the dourness of her early work hints at the puritanical restrictions pertaining to the experience of “pleasure” in art, thus one is led to speculate on the degree to which the materiality of paint and the artisanal activity of painting in her newer work might be affording her just another "incorrect" experience, without, apparently, leading her to an awareness of the interiority of painting.

These works’ main source and reference is the art market (notwithstanding their claim as mediators of cultural representations): art flogged like a dead horse. There is nonapprehension of the non-commodity elements of the art that they negate, appropriate, or bracket, which pushes mediation towards autism. Instead of hanging their heads against the wall, they hang art against the wall, past the point where that action might effectively energetically release art, to the point of destitution.

The difficulty of summoning images, or realities — or irrealties for that matter — should not deny the power of these things, nor the power of the search for them and of its inevitable irresolution or failure. Despair about painting, art, or culture is not the unique province of the critical theorists of “simulation.” Indeed such despair is sometimes more deeply felt by those who chose to continue painting in the face of its alleged impossibi-
Two drawings have recently compelled my attention. They are unpretentious, modest, relatively unimportant early steps in the development by each artist of more major works, and these qualities are precisely what strikes one at this art moment.

The first drawing, by Giacometti, is one of a chair in his studio. The humble nature of the familiar subject clarifies that the drawing is a non-art effort, an un-special daily activity, and an embrace of failure. What gradually emerges from the marks that build, frame, lose, and refine the chair is that the artist does not feel he is superior to the chair, nor is he superior to the act and art of drawing. The chair is approached with humility, indeed with terror; as doubtable as a man, as is the space it inhabits. Giacometti wrote:

When I woke up this morning, I saw my towel for the very first time: a weightless cloth in a stillness which has never been perceived before, suspended, as it were, in a terrible silence. There was no longer any connection between it and the chair or the table, whose legs, barely touching the floor, were no longer supported by anything; there was nothing linking these objects, separated from each other by immeasurable voids. I looked around my room in terror, and a cold sweat ran up and down my spine."

Drawing the chair is a battle ever to be joined, never to be won, because it cannot be — for it is given that there is always a gap between what the artist wants the work to be and what it is, between the first goal and the weird paths taken — and because it should not be won. Winning would only make it look like art and would signal the end of the blind chase down the path, the atrophy of the organism artist.

One of the misapprehensions, or arrogances, of “post-modernism” is the assumption by its practitioners that certain battles within the field of painting and image were definitively fought and “won” between 1850 and 1970, and that an artist’s reconsidering of certain basic problems within painting is a historicist and reactionary action. In other words the assumption is that there was one problem, and one solution — modernism — and, now, post-modernism’s response is the only legitimate reading of “linear” art history.

The second drawing is by Pierre Bonnard. Its analysis necessitates a preliminary digression to a series of serigraphs by Edward Ruscha of "INSECTS." An ad appeared in Art in America in May 1972 announcing this work. The ad copy assured the prospective buyer of the durability of the product:

A portfolio of six original silk-screened prints, signed and numbered: three on 140 pound Classic laid finish watercolor by Fabriano, and three on paperbacked wood veneer. The edition is limited to one hundred portfolios...
Also announced was the marketing of the portfolio by its "simultaneous exhibition" in twelve galleries across the country (like the release of Rambo). The ad did not describe the witziest element of this product: the actual portfolio containing the prints. Its cover is dirt (home of the insect), dwiected between an inner layer of linen (material of old "high art") and an outer one of plastic (material of new "high art").

In one of the prints, photographically realistic ants congregate on a reddish background. They group in the center of the page (formalist concern for composition). On another, green-beige background, the ants cover the page to its corners (all-over composition, thereby art historical reference). There are also smaller, black ants on pale wood bark (synthetic cubist material). These INSECTS look like art.

Bonnard's drawing is an unlikely candidate for marketing, even by today's standards. It is a little ink drawing, on paper without pedigree, of some ants. It is a drawing of not especially transcendent quality, clearly one among many drawings, as are the ants among ants. Fifty-four ants to be exact, and thirteen blades of grass; the ants are loosely organized but clearly engaged in specific activities. These ants are doing something, the drawing is quite convincingly particular about that, and because of that the drawing makes clear that Bonnard does not consider himself or the act of drawing superior to the ants. It is a modest drawing of a humble detail of a planet inhabited by species of ants.

The activity of the formicarium may be a pitiful illusion, a historicist phantasm, a reactionary romanticism, it may be repetitive, anonymous, unoriginal, and futile, but it is always formidable.

Notes
4. Tworkov, ibid., p. 145.

BATS

TOM KNECHTEL

for Bernard Cooper

A group of people come to my studio, and, while looking at drawings of bats, express bemusement at my choice of models. I explain my fondness for the outlandish by comparing my reaction to bats to the feelings I have while admiring the antlers growing out of a moose's head or a bird-of-paradise flower or a platypus: amazement that anything so eccentric could have found its way past the relentless red pencil of evolution.

I've never seen a bat—not close-up, at least. But it's not really germane to my interest in the animal as to whether I've seen it in the tiny dark flesh. Our appetite for monsters thrives more successfully when fed with our imagination; the Loch Ness Monster will probably appear one day as a large clay-colored blob of a creature, rather than the iridescent sentient being we've fantasized is moving beneath the loch's surface. And the bat is a monster: like the result of a joint experiment between a botanist and a toymaker, it takes the form of a malevolent orchid with balsa wood and tissue paper wings.

I picture entering a cave and seeing the ceiling covered with the lumpy insulation of bat bodies, the air thick with the humid breath of ten thousand breasts. Lungs no bigger than the pink rubber tip of my pencil expand and deflate—or perhaps I've got it wrong; maybe they need immense lungs to sustain their flights, and so their bodies are nothing more than balloons made of fur and bone. If they fall to the floor of the cave, they pivot and hop until they reach an overhang and can drop into the air, blossoming into flight. The minute brain is firing indescribably small synapses, none of which register on an unresponsive face with glittering pinpoints for eyes and a mouth in a perpetual sneer.

That something so simultaneously ugly and exotic could be among the most numerous species (as someone recently told me) is inspiring. Such self-confidence to push oneself forward, regardless of one's serrated leaf-shaped nose! I'm reminded of a pair of recent conversations. A friend called to say that he had received criticism on a piece he'd written and that he felt a complete collapse of confidence in the piece and in his work. We talked about how he felt isolated, buffeted about by opinions, wandering without an inner compass. Later, describing this to another friend, he said: "I talked about how we're used to locating ourselves and our work by watching our contemporaries, finding our bearings in the world by boun-
ing our opinions off our peers, like bats bouncing shrieks off walls to find out where they are. We force ourselves, foist ourselves off on an indifferent environment.

In addition to being an artist, I teach art history. My mind has become so accustomed to plugging everything in western civilization into a timeline comprehensible to the student mind that I now find myself trying to fit the bat into art history. The bat does bear a resemblance to another of my enthusiasms — the rococo, a movement itself not so far from the monstrous, with its mad proliferation of explosive form. In the French salons and Bavarian pilgrimage churches of the 18th century, in the paintings of Tiepolo, organic form takes ornate flight, rising weightless under its load of draperies and gilt surfaces, spiralling effortlessly away while regarding us with an aristocratic smile. If the bat makes an appearance in these paintings, it does so as a note, a shy gray-blue silhouette fluttering behind Calumny as she's cast down from the skies by a haughty Truth. The actual animal, though, keeps stubbornly forcing itself into my thinking about the rococo, since its anatomy is so delicate, intricate, and artificial, like a decoration out of a perverse version of the Amalienberg. Perhaps it's rococo's dark cousin or even the opposite pole, with Tiepolo, light and reason at the beginning of the century, and Goya, darkness, the irrational and bats at the end. By Goya's time, the bat has inflated into a giant shape, faceless, but unnerving, who dominates the artist as he falls asleep at his desk. But as I write that, I realize that Goya's bat is as anonymous as Tiepolo's, that the bat is too exquisite to have been captured by Goya, that it is too exquisite even to seal up into an airless dichotomy.

A story I love: A scientist who studied bats had to travel frequently on the plane with one of his pet subjects. The bat was too fragile to put into the hold with the other animals; so the scientist arrived at the solution of carrying the bat in an empty cigarette carton, where it slept hanging from the inside of the lid, while the carton sat in the scientist's shirt pocket. The image captivates me: a man travelling through the air with a miniature monster sleeping over his heart.

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**DEAR ELLSWORTH KELLY**

**BARBARA FLUG COLIN**

Dear Ellsworth Kelly,

It interests me that since your 1973 return to your original town, to a house and studio before a manmade pond, field, hill and woods whose “deer come down like crazy”, your sculptural objects to be executed by someone else manifest the greatest degree of feeling.

You said your painting, though a sum of all ideas you want to present, is still a painted image between a real thing and a metaphor that sculpture makes come to life again, stand again on its own. Is sculpture the furthest extension of the painting?

Is relief the in between stage, your canvas emptied to be shape itself with its own sculptural weight emerging from the wall. Are these boundaries between mediums, styles, art forms or any means of self recreation, human constructs. Is it all a unity we interrupt.

Like what Monet said about his “Nymphéas”, different phases of the same state. Truth to the self discovers equivalent forms. Why did you abstract from phallic shapes like Motherwell’s and related to Bourgeois’ that emerged in studies for “Reflection in the Seine.”

Is light the essential subject. Is feeling, Is light feeling, Why did blind old Monet lose sight of color and form to create the solution of light in his “Nymphéas”, his work which interests you the most. Is feeling light an inception of consciousness before words.

Is that the luminous glow in your canvas. Is the beginning feeling of inside a feeling of something outside, above and below, sky and earth breeding the first sense of dark and light on our way toward a fall into consciousness. Why do we try to retrieve this state.

Is meaning between real thing and metaphor. Is it the odd shape of reality your simple forms altered from convention. Is it to be found in juxtaposition of differences on the real, of life on origin. Of home and sculpture on forest with animals coming down.

Is meaning set in between so we can see the nature we interrupt to remind us of ourselves. Is meaning set to see relationship is a key. To have an in between. To know the separate hidden elements, to separate a house into rooms to know what Lives Within Us means.

To separate you to provide me with an outside means to inside elements.
in relationship in myself. Does relative mean degree. Does subtly create greater degree of depth in to see out to being manifest in object of being in a field independent, incarnate.

Are all the arts a unity. Do we share experience of light and shape before words named it, forgotten memory before it had to be possessed by Of or relativized by Like what is. Is memory the key to Being itself that links humanity before labels or easels.

You said your 1952 "Seven Panels; Kite 1" felt good because it was empty, without composition. Did panels let labels and easels go. You said you put things on a track to let the forms speak. If things are pregnant with being do they speak their own meaning.

Do they tell us of the room that surrounds them. Is that why you don't want your work to be self-contained but to be interesting because it makes you aware of all the rest, the lines on the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the museum we are in that is within us.

In London, for your exhibition they cleared out furniture and walls and the emptiness was your canvas. You wanted each piece to be anonymous, empty. But the show was labelled and your work is your signature. Is to be empty in the room, not to be the room empty.

As foreground and background become one, as you reject illusionism, is there no illusion. Is a canvas as fictional as a real field diluted by sculpture. Fictional as reality deluded by experience patterning digestion, stamping signature on its recreation.

Are color and form real values for the self. Is money. Are they relatives removed by degrees of subtlety. Is the real world just the object of our subjectivity. Bridged by meaning. Why do we need your sculpture's physicality to return us to our body.

Why do we need their light to return us to seeing effects of seeing objects seen. When your curve angles or your angles dissolve to curves, I feel it. Your light is shadow under a bridge, on steps, in a tent, my background suffused by my foreground to be luminous.

Monet's late water lilies you love knew the nature of painting. Recreation had become being, a pond to live in without horizon or bank, an efflorescent center to solution. Crossing the solid mean between, the railed footbridge, he dove into the frameless mirror.

He was in back country of self-reflecting sea and sky. No boat. The white bird dissolved in unresolved sky of shifting clouds reflecting in, giving light to, and distorting planes of water. No mangroves. No time to press through to return to safe ground.

He was dying. Dissolution was solution. Creation. A scape with no kilometer marker. A painting unafraid to turn upside down, enlarge shapes he kept smaller earlier. An ongoing flux of a mirror whose appearance alters at every moment because of sky.

Because of feeling. A cloud passes. A refreshing breeze. Light grows dim then bright again transforming the coloring, distorting the planes. How many planes are juxtaposed. How many canvases to work on at one time to return to the original, interrupted effect.

Barbara Flug Colin
THE DISCOVERED UNCOVERED

NANCY SPERO

Putz, an extremely young, beautiful California artist — whose recent exhibition of his work and navel
d) is the most significant of these last few years. Along with Creeps, he is in the vanguard of these exciting 60s
(yawn).
I mean Putz' plasticized condoms are extraordinary — the illusion is rendered somehow literal — while at the same time the literalness is
dissolved. It is because they are what they are — in spite of their being coated in plastic — a most attractive illusion — (yawn) — that has comp
pelled this young artist.
In this very manner, this viewer gets a feeling of utter amazement — one is compelled to realize that Putz' very rigorous transcendent realiza
tions of a most challenging aesthetic, an extreme non-art, in-ert object — could be most possibly — and literally realized. The illusion is most didac
tically limited in these shapes (of course, one has to see what one has, of course).
Now, the question arises as to whether or not these literal shapes ac
tually do erect. This is a profound question. Perhaps in essence of "Male Ode" I have not been able to completely follow the projected trajectory to its
fullest intimacy — which I feel in this piece the literalness was somewhat contrived, forced by its ambiguity and physicality at the same
time.
Moreover, as I mentioned this artist most intentionally has (as C. so cleverly and prophetically said "they must halt their phoning") had his
assistant making transparencies because their surfaces (and thrust) have become important for the first time.
Finally, and most didactically, Putz has produced — for this viewer a
projection of a vision — suspended and virile — angled in complete objec
tivity — yet unmistakably his very own.

This was written in 1967 and sent to Phil Leider, Editor of Artforum, with no response.

Notes

1. He is very ambitious.
2. At first attached to a dishwasher — now a computer.
3. Of course, the critic’s tasks have come to the forefront — and their refusal for the most part to make formalist distinctions has only added the deepest confusion to the entire scene of aesthetic position. So much for the moment for these radical questions critics must provide.
4. I shall write of this plastic problem subsequently.
5. Putz doesn’t have one wrinkle — not one.
6. I was the most unisex student in my art history class.
7. (See footnote 6.)
8. This is much too complicated a question to go into now, in another essay I shall delve into the problem.
9. They phone for their work, as they are excessively tired and debilitated.
10. We were intimate for the first time this morning.
PEACE/NUN/PIECE: April 17-24, 1987
PAMELA SHOEMAKER

The one-year performance project Windopeace, organized by filmmaker Susan Kleckner, began on December 12, 1986 at Sohozat, a newstand and variety store on West Broadway near Canal Street in New York City. Each Friday a woman artist moved in to live and perform for a week in the tiny (5 x 7') shop window, which is equipped only with a built-in sleeping loft, a portable toilet, a box refrigerator, two basins, and a few shelves. Each artist provided all else required and depended on others for food and water. Although each artist created her own statement, the overall inspiration came from the women's peace camps outside the US missile bases at Greenham Common, England, and Seneca, New York. Windopeace is a performance in protest of nuclear proliferation.

On April 17, 1987 — Good Friday — I moved into the window, following such artists as Diane Moonmade, whose transcendental approach as "peace proselytizer" kept her in constant contact with all viewers at all times; Linda Montano, who remained blindfolded the entire week; and Tequila Minsky, who staged the "Political Peep Show/Through-the-Window Film Festival", with films on peace and war. Assuming the symbolic identity of a "Peace Nun", I wore a monk's habit; but this "asetic" monk-ess still brought along bedding and books (a Bible, a Torah, the Oxford Dictionary of Saints, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Cennini's Craftsman's Handbook, and Panofsky's Early Netherlandish Painting), a brown velvet cushion, a kilim prayer rug, a large brass rubbing of St. Margaret and the Dragon I had made at Westminster Abbey, and some eggs and pigments with which I planned to paint a panel in egg tempera. I also brought some plastic wastebaskets for the rather elaborate water system I had devised which allowed me to bathe and wash my hair every day — one of the "necessities" (along with bottles of wine and the delicious dinners my husband Andy Solloway brought me every night) I felt I could not do without. So much for the rigors of monastic life!

But that same Good Friday, at three o'clock (the time at which Christ is believed to have died), I ceased to speak — for me, the ultimate in self-control. My intention was to create, in the light of the common occurrences of Easter and Passover, a meditative atmosphere in the window: a crossroad of inward reflection and outward harmony. While I did not speak for the week of the performance, I did keep a journal of impressions and my writen ten responses to questions and comments from viewers and friends. Following are excerpts from that journal interspersed with relevant quotations.

April 17
Does everything look ok? Are the lights in the window too low? Can it be seen well enough from the street? (to A.S.)

I see that having you in the window makes men make aggressive remarks. Two guys have done it now. (to A.S.)

Seeing, as Sigmund Freud tells us, is the second most primitive sexual activity. It is "an activity that is ultimately derived from touching. Visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitement is aroused."

I'm really enjoying myself. There is a wonderful concert of the Yorkminster choir on the radio, and I'm drinking wine. The store cat visits. The store phone rings. It has stopped raining. Though the curtain is still open, it seems that when the gate goes down, people stop looking.

April 18
In the night I had a dream that I was in the window, which was on a sort of porch. My family came and cajoled me into leaving the window and going out to lunch with them, but when lunch was over I was afraid it would be found out that I had left the window.

When I saw this window (a couple of my friends have done it), it reminded me of my fantasy of a monk's cell so I decided to make it a reality. (to J.P.)

This is my interpretation of how I'd like to be a nun. An ecumenical nun, or generic — but sort of Jewish too as my husband is! Too dull to be so technical. (to S. of Sohozat)

In order to be free with the freedom of the children of God, the monk gives up his own will, his power to own property, his love of ease and comfort, his pride, his right to raise a family, his freedom to dispose of his time as he pleases, to go where he likes and to live according to his own judgment. Why? Because of what he believes.

Once they know I'm silent they're a little shy. I'm going to be doing egg tempera painting, a medieval technique. If you're silent, you have to have something to do. (to S.R., a reporter)

About 4:45 I close the curtains so I can use the john — when I open them again a virtual mob is there with children who run up to the window. The number of people is freaking me out a little.
You have no idea the number of people who have been by here today and I can’t imagine what it will be like tomorrow. There were people pressed against the pane. (to A.S.)

It is 11:30 and I am totally exhausted. In many ways this situation seems to get better and better in terms of feedback, but any hopes I had of getting any real artwork done are fading. We will see. Perhaps I can prepare myself better tomorrow. It would be nice to finish a painting here, but I don’t know. Only a superwoman could do her best work while crowds were pressed against the windowpane and a video camera was four inches from her face. But — what did I expect? It’s naive to think it would be otherwise.

April 19
I’m hiding today. I’m exhausted already. I need milk and herb tea — mint and camomile (& maybe a couple of placidl or valium — yeah, maybe heroin or some nice seconals). (to A.S.)

It’s a political statement against nuclear arms. (to a man with a dog)

Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.

I’m really learning something from this about the nature of looking as an act of aggression. But I think it’s connected to my not talking. (to T.M.)

April 20
I have set up a fairly elaborate water system for myself. The red can has clean water, the blue can (covered) has waste water, and the canteen with the red cap has drinking water. I’ve managed to keep clean this way. Even wash my hair. (to J.T.)

Thanks. The press release on the front of the window tells what we’re doing. It’s an art performance. Easter and Passover are now. It is a religious and political performance which I’m doing in the manner of a cloistered monk or nun. But it’s not meant to be specifically Christian. (to two young girls and an Israeli man)

You are from Montreal? Welcome. I’m doing a religious/political piece, so I’ve decided to not speak all week. It’s like giving up smoking, or anything else like that — you find something out about yourself and other people too. (to two sweet young drunk French-Canadians)

... the refusal to speak is apparently the form ... given to the wish for ethical purity; but it is also, as behavior, a means of power, a species of sadism, a virtually inviolable position of strength ...
ART WITHOUT RHETORIC
JOHANNA DRUCKER

Viewed from Dallas, the Texas art scene has about as much consistency as a crazy quilt, and the fragmentary elements are about as disparate conceptually as they are materially. So, this will be very piecemeal and based on the scraps of observed phenomena which have provided me with a general sense of what is "going on." It is deliberately not comprehensive, partly because that approach would seem to be counter to the very sense I have of the scene itself — and a presentation which tried for a global, homogeneous synthesis, that is, for a unified, representative report, would be a misconception from the outset.

No, the scene isn't unified, and the very way that art presents itself and is presented here seems characteristic of something which I have seen hints of other places, but without the same indolent self-satisfaction which one feels here. The presentation of artwork is blunt and blank, that is, flat and nearly mute. There is an absence of context on all kinds of levels: cultural, social, commercial, and, maybe most significantly for the way it seems to tie in with these others, critical. "No context" means that the work is presented, as such, with the simplest kind of gesture of "Here it is."

The flip side of this presentation (as one encounters it, coming at art as objects of an external order is the all-pervasive artist's disclaimer line, "This is what I do.") I propose that all of the art experiences I have had since arriving in Texas belong to a domain somehow related to these two statements, not as poles marking extreme boundaries in any kind of discourse as site type metaphor (haven't we had enough of that by now...), but as continually present subliminal captions.

I'm not going to try and explain why this is going on here, since that would just lead into a few huge and possibly on the right track and possibly way off comments about demographics, baby boomer production cycles, glut of commodities, the distance from the coasts, the placidity of prairie life, stability of the center and so on, but instead I just want to sketch out for you the few experiences which let me to these phrase-conclusions. These consist of the kind of random miscellany available to any casual but interested participant in the art scene: occasional openings, shows, museum visits, panel discussion events, the usual smattering.

Maybe this is occasionally the case in New York too, but in Dallas the galleries typically show everything imaginable. A stable of artists will produce work which all over the map, from hot surreal real landscapes ("regional") to pseudo-primitive assemblages to hard-edge abstractions. And a favorite format in the local scene, which allows a wide range of such work to be exposed simultaneously, is the 'group show.' A group show will have a 'unifying theme.' But this can be so general as to allow rather monstrous combinations of work to be assembled in a single space, even on a single wall. Try, for instance, "Works on Paper," one of the decade's favorites. . . . The 'curatorial' permission granted by such general guidelines reflects immediately in the presentation. Work is assembled not only with no regard for what it is, what it might be about in aesthetic terms should such be available, but with an almost violently aggressive desire to shatter the very grounds on which such aesthetic terms might be established. Which is to say, that if one can put a hand-painted photograph of an interior with all its self-reflexive features about identity, subjectivity, space, framing, and tech almost po-mo formalization of these issues next to a Wiley-esque phantasmagoric landscape drawing next to one of those artschool cliche detailed into nausica bark-text-trees on a wall with a kind of Jim Dine commodity-dissection-messy drawing assemblage then the impossibility of making any kind of coherent assessment of what it might be for works to be on paper to be about anything beyond that simple ruse for their collection into a single space is asserted rather starkly.

This impossibility, of there being any motivating relation among these works to provoke their collection into a show, has the curiously perverse effect of making it also impossible to review such a show as a whole or to discuss any of the individual works in particular. Why? There is no whole, obviously, no single point of thematic or aesthetic or conceptual reference with which to situate the works individually or in relation to each other. What can criticism do in such a situation? The commentary is reduced to a kind of institutionalized version of the old individual preference equals validation for art "I know what I like." But not why. Of course. The idea of mechanisms, of strategies, of discourses founded in any kind of logic at all, breaks down confronted with such a wild miscellany on display.

If "Works on Paper" turned out to be a ruse, then so do "Landscape Paintings" and "Texas Women Artists' Works" turn out to be totally inadequate titles if they are to supply any insight into the curatorial logic of the shows made in their name. Part of what seems to be going on here is a marketing strategy, the something for everybody attitude of a vendor intent on selling rather than the old (outmoded?) dealer giving a form and shape to a scene through selective display. Since we don't have, haven't had for a zillion years, any kind of academy, any kind of canon, any kind of institutionalized generational revolt of styles, the necessity for institu-
tionalizing the 'new' as valid seems to have disappeared as an art dealer's issue. Maybe. However, it seems specious to ascribe a kind of general liberal populism to the dealer's point of view here. The public art sponsored women's show, for instance, might more accurately reflect the let's show what's being done rather than try to make a statement which pretends by exclusivity to representative-ness attitude. Whatever the motives (I haven't actually asked any dealers why they assemble this stuff altogether) the result implies an assessment based on the notion that if it's good it should be shown. Here comes the paradox: good implies a judgment, judgment implies critical values, critical values imply context, relative choice and decisions, and these masses of miscellany under mine the existence of any of these factors, relativizing the individual works out of realms of comparison, contrast, or evaluation.

Group shows are always tricky — what constitutes a group, anyway, unless they self-select? And if the miscellany mode is baffling, the manifesto-inspired group would be a ridiculous anachronism exerting any imperialistic claims on the territory of art. Seeing through the group to any of the individuals is also pretty hard. I talked to a few Dallas artists, and a few Texas art students, and tried to get them to articulate their own aesthetic positions. Maybe I got spoiled by having so much contact with a conscientious group of poets for so long, but I find it quite remarkable when someone can't speak a few situating lines about their practice to contextualize it beyond immediate thematic or formal concerns. For example, "I came to Dallas because my work is involved with the way people live in the Southwest." What is that supposed to mean? The artist reduced to a point? A single speck of reference existing as a view out onto an ontologically self-sufficient world? What? At another extreme, equally reduced, but in an imploled, self-involved direction, the artist (male, rather than typically) as hero of the quest, speaks about his "Self" as the central theme. Here is me about to battle with, survive the, encounter an, make love to. Aside from the tiresomeness of this solipsistic mythology and its unquestioning lack of self-consciousness about the heroic as cliche for artist what strikes me as horrifying in such a formulation is its lack of self-consciousness about art as such, art as culturally, ideologically situated phenomenon. One last example is an artist whose work is "about the movement of forms". Oh. But what does about mean?

The limits of these concerns, curatorially and productively, have to be perceived as two aspects of the same situation. The artist here appears as an innocent, as one mesmerized into production through a tiny point of focus, an insular self-absorption into activity cut off from, out of, any informing context. A transparent myth, a lazy mode, an unthinking participation. So what? These are my judgmental statements. Obviously I think there is something wrong with the situation. Not fair. The artist isn't playing innocent, but actually is innocent. That is, in a kind of biblical sense, in which innocence exists before there is knowledge, without knowledge, and specifically, without that kind of knowledge which is linked specifically to language. And the dealer/curator selects work on the assumption of autonomy of objects from any kind of messy contingencies of content, critical or historical. This kind of naive positivism is equally innocent, believing in the essential value of objects as determined by the mere fact of their existence. There is a peculiarly wanton liberation in this release from the kind of relations between artists, art history, criticism, and systematic canonization which I'm used to taking for granted. After all, isn't that what we learned our way into? This relation among art production and critical machinery and marketing? And now, here's a whole scene characterized by its disregard for the one feature of the system which so conspicuously inserted itself as a feature of modern art: criticism.

Who bemoans this loss? Art reps who have to sell their clients on local art without critical guarantees, artists who yearn to see themselves objectified in third-person reviews, and probably developers who want Dallas's Deep Ellum, the small Soho-type warehouse area turned arts district, to take off on the wings of commercial success and rains down great returns into their coffers. Okay. Profit and nostalgia are hardly unfamiliar features of the art landscape, but criticism generated as high quality ad copy would be the inevitable outcome of promptings from this quarter. Besides, my interest isn't really in prescribing any solution, as if the situation were a problem, but to assess its implications a bit. My response to the absence of rhetoric is hardly isomorphic with the art community's recognition of a need for regular critical reflection on its production. It is possible, after all, that regular commentary might 'normalize' the production into more recognizable genres, or make some attempt to link the production back into historical developments or lineages. But part of me is thrilled by the discontinuity, the 'anything goes' disregard for all that I consider to be linked to the antiquated and inevitably patriarchal structures of schools, traditions, or even influence. Sometimes it seems like the beginnings of some euphoric utopian scene full of possibilities for expression as limitless and specific as individuals, that dream of world proposed in some revolutionary tract where everyone is an artist and everyday life is infused with aesthetic vibranse. But since the forms of the art production remain so linked to the old commodity structures, to markets, to the privileging of objects, through value accrued through mythologizing of the artist as individual, this looks unlikely to be the case.

So where does that leave the art, this art that I claim is without rhetoric, at least, the traditional context of a critical discourse in which to situate itself and with which to declare its own value? Does this situation render
the art less meaningful, that is, less capable of offering possibilities for response, interpretive, immediate, significant? In my subjective reaction there is a horror of this realm, this mute and unarticulated realm, in which every artifact simply exists and is therefore accorded, almost automatically, a validity and value just by that fact. Objects, artworks or other, threaten to lose all the distinctive features of their identity in this realm, to be relativized into relations of absolute equality with each other. This does indeed terrify me, since it renders useless the assumption of a social realm, a cultural realm, outside the individual of which such a work, any work, might be a part. If there is no 'system', oppressive and exclusive in its power-brokering and mongering as that system might be, then where is there any significance for objects, artifacts, or expression? Is this just my naivete, my horror? On the one hand, all critical discourse seems linked to the commodity value of art, on the other, all production seems to require frames of reference to render it significant. Someplace else, expression intersects with a context in which is resonates. Ultimately the rule of 'idiosyncratic' seems as relentless as the rule of the doctrinaire and orthodox, and a lawless artworld can't be slipped by in the ready guise of an anarchistic promised land.

So is what is happening here a trend? Is this scene manifesting an actual 'rupture' with the mainstream's self-replicating system? Or is it simply a marginal phenomenon, symptomatic of a scene in an embryonic state of development? Linked to Texas as a site, outside, superfluous to any mainstream? Too soon to tell, maybe, but it is happening, that much is evident.

Contributors


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Arakawa & Gins
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Tom Knechtel
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