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The following conversations with Carolee Schneemann took place beginning on January 28, 1988. The last discussion was on August 24, 1989, shortly after she had returned from Russia, where her film Fuses was to be shown at the Moscow Film Festival. The program for the American Soviet Joint Venture (ASJ) was organized by the San Francisco International Film Festival. The program included: Philip Kaufman's Unbearable Lightness of Being (as a feature) and a side bar of "Sexuality in American Films" including Trash by Paul Morrisey, Working Girls by Linae Borden, She's Gotta Have It by Spike Lee, Russ Meyers' Beyond the Valley of the Dolls, Desert Hearts by Donna Deitch, Sex, Lies, and Videotape by Soderbergh, Mark Huestis' program on AIDS, Obie Benz's Heavy Petting, and three shorts by James Broughton. Only Fuses, after an opening night unscheduled screening, was canceled from subsequent planned screenings, and was finally screened unannounced after pressure from the USA organizers. Fuses, made from 1965-1967, is the first film shot by a woman in which she's also the participant in her own love-making. There is no third person — on camera. It's painterly, densely collaged, and all the sequences are in complex rhythms which disappoint pornographic expectations. This was not Schneemann's first encounter with censorship, and it was being mirrored in Washington, D.C. with Jesse Helm's crusade against the Mapplethorpe exhibit and the NEA. — Aviva Rahmani

Aviva Rahmani: You've dealt with aggression in your audiences in your career from both men and women. In your recent trip to Moscow you traveled all the way there, they put you up and gave you a translator only to divert your work! That's a tremendous blow to your adrenalin, isn't it?

Carolee Schneemann: How about, tremendous spark? Censorship breaks your integrity, it's sinister because the work is endangered and engaged in a falsification of motive. In Moscow I was struggling against invisible powers and was always saying? "What's she saying?" I asked Vladimir... he paused... "Sexuality in the Soviet Union." She would introduce the interview, then Vladimir, my translator, would translate her questions, he would then translate my response. She was smiling approvingly, looking into my eyes as she spoke into the microphone. “What's she saying?” I asked Vladimir... he paused... “She's saying you are a pornographer and a dangerous woman.”
tend to resist having their traditional convictions threatened by "dangerous people." But sometimes it comes from unexpected sources.

CS: In Cannes, in 1968, Fuses was shown as part of a special jury selection. This sophisticated French audience went berserk. I was standing in the back with Susan Sontag, expecting a pleasurable audience response. Instead, a great commotion erupted in front of the screen. French men were ripping up the seats with razor blades and screaming because it was NOT truly pornographic. It wasn’t satisfying the predictable erotic, phallocentric sequence they wanted. It was a source of frustration and anger.

AR: Carolee, I feel a great deal of rage and bitterness over this censorship issue. I’m furious because this is the art world’s equivalent of the one white male heterosexual who gets AIDS and all of a sudden everyone takes notice. It’s tremendously hypocritical and self-righteous. The fact that Mapplethorpe was gay and Serrano is black is incidental, in the art world, to their fashionable status. The reason I accuse the art world of hypocrisy on this is that no one stood up to defend or protect twenty years of feminist artists and feminist work that got shredded. And anyone who doesn’t think that has economic and self-censoring effects has their head in the sand. In 1968 the backlash against all of us who challenged the established norms of sex and power began. It seems ironic to me that after twenty-five years, America and Russia have reached parity over censoring your work. Glassman and American conservatism equals out. If the art world had cared to acknowledge what was happening all along and resisted years ago, the right wouldn’t have such a podium today. The art world has failed itself by failing those of us who knew all along that we were at war. But at best they were either cowards or indifferent.

CS: So, hey, Judy Chicago puts a sacred vulva — which celebrates an historic woman of unique creative authority — on a dinner plate! And she wants people to sit down, say grace and eat! ... Hey! We’re not going to get approval and funding from the Bridal Registry ... not even Duchamp’s.

We’re examining deflected censorship and violent censorship (consider abortion rights); individual and communal censorship (consider AIDS research and care). My experiences with censorship cover a wide range: from the man who attempted to strangle me during the Paris performance of “Meat Joy,” (1964); to USA government intervention preventing my anti-Vietnam war performance “Illinois Central,” (Chicago 1968); to the manager of a world famous rock group spiking the sangria which was passed out from the dressing room of the Round House to 2,000 participants in the “Celebration of the Chicago 6,” (London, 1969); to the local police arresting the projectionist and the projector with Fuses still on it (El Paso, Texas, 1985). ... My work within erotic and political taboos has been fueled by the constraints of sexism; but my work has offended both men and women, and been defended by both women and men; my work has offended granting agencies and institutions, and been supported by granting agencies and institutions. I like the margins to slip on ... the uncertainty. From the margins I’ve been free to attack, to sniff out the leaking repressions and denial of subordination. Head-on is too much — it’s macho, you’ll get knocked out of the ring ... your body is chopped up, head cut off, your children disappear. In male power structures you purchase civil rights for their own self-justification ... better to run free out here. It’s a relatively new social process in which the good guys don’t get blown away ... that they can play with the girls and find meaning, value — a complementariness of action, insight, and force; a repositioning of the old heroic mold ... We still build on the underlying pattern that good guys get blown away — that identification with the female, interiority, the unconscious, puts them in jeopardy, ... The male psyche unsurshas lost attributes, missing attributes when the female no longer represents the victim-self. Well really it’s a privilege to produce work that provokes censorship! Although I don’t believe that is my intention, nor that of Judy Chicago, Mapplethorpe, Serrano — even the contentious actions of Karen Finley do not “invite” censorship — rather, controversy, confrontation ... an unraveling of submerged, denied, latent content. Volatile erotic, sexual denial underlies the self-righteousness of our reactionary censors. Each of our transgressive visions rises from a particular brew, a churning of contradictory values and our insistence to cut through cultural delusion and psychosis. Our lived insights merge with our imagining and materials.

So the real dilemma of the censor is to corral the imagination and the passage of visceral insights into aesthetic and political contexts. Denying a few photographs an exhibit, canceling screenings of Fuses only heightens our necessary bite and gnaw — to cut into layers of taboo, denial and projection.

AR: Tell me something about your experience with other artists, writers or journalists in Moscow.

CS: Our conversations were curtailed — not by overt censorship — but by a disparity of analytic precedents. The erotic and political thrust of my work has particular cultural referents which we take for granted: the writings of Artaud, De Beauvoir, Wilhelm Reich were early influences; Freud, Jung, feminist investigations in art history, psychology, linguistics and concepts of the sacred erotic, of an ecological economy; even the gender constructions of Russian Marxism not implicitly in Soviet discussions. Issues of sexuality pivot on authoritarian constructs. Our feminist issues which have assertively dismantled male definitions of female value have not reached into the newly shifting Soviet morality. The intellectual sophistication of my Russian friends — their sharp, ironic perceptions, and the depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative depth of Western influence merges with Russian metaphysical traditions, fueling profound longings — to be released from paranoia, punishing consequences; to express convictions, passions which were punishable by incarceration, exile, repudiation, for the past forty years. It is impossible for us to realize Stalinist terror and suppression left not one person, place, or thing unscathed. How do they now contemplate a life of economic scarcity and hardship with the new creative
It's interesting that this year, twenty-four years after *Fuses* was made it could be both censored and uncensored at the Moscow Film Festival and receive its most intensive structuralist analysis in David James's *Allegories of Cinema* — an analysis in which my deepest motives and methods are clarified.

So, I understand your rage and fury at the dissimilar suppression of works by feminist artists and by Mapplethorpe and Serrano. The only way I ever learn how transgressive my works are — I have this naive, messianic streak and an instinct for the cultural distortions which surround me — the only way I experience the resistance in my culture is by the denigration, denial, and attempt to obliterate or trivialize my work and its direction. But in the Soviet Union there would have been no chance to ever produce such work! I recognize the measure of society's psychosis when I realize there are only two roles offered me to play in a 9 foot by 7 foot arc.

Patriarchal gender constructions systematic transfence and mythification lurking within the idealization of the arts. We are looking at different forms of denial/censorship: one form instigates public outrage, outcry; the other acts as a slow smothering, a constraint. In the former instance you might have to fight for the immediate fate of your work; in the latter you have to wait it out, persist, live in the basement... It became a classic work despite resistance; some people used to think of it as this narcissistic jerk-off. The invisibility of "self" that I experience is that I really don't see myself there. I'm an available conscious form that's permeable, that I'm able to use. The culture obfuscates lived experience, the female erotic and the sacredness of sexuality. There's a similar motive in my performance piece "Interior Scroll." I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but it was because the abstraction of eroticism was pressuring me in a way, that this image occurred, which said, you must demonstrate this actual level...

AR: It sounds like you are saying that sexuality as it presents itself in our culture became a form, a metaphysical structure on which to hang the whole issue of human intimacy and the deeper experience of intimacy itself. It's a double-edged sword, of course, because of the baggage our society brings to sexualities and to multiplicity.

CS: That sounds like it has a painful aspect.

AR: Yes, in a way I protect myself from thinking this is backwards. But there's a way I protect myself from thinking this is a 'non-pornographic' or an emissary of Aphrodite!

AR: Is there a sensory and conceptual correspondence between what I live and what can be viewed and seen? It's not normal to be phallicized or de-phallicized!

The world is a great vulva that mirrors and imprints the phallic shape, not the reverse! So you see, for me to get clear, I have to make it all inside out and backwards. But there's a way I protect myself from thinking this is "myself."

AR: That sounds like it has a painful aspect.

CS: This is the work and I'm an element in it, the best available material for investigative work. With the cat imagery, I have that same surprise and bewilderment in a consciousness of male erotic fantasy and its concomitant castration fears. Conservatively straight men hate to face the paradoxical magnification of their own suppressions, grandiosity of male erotic fantasy and its concomitant castration fears. Conserveratives hate to face the paradoxical magnification of their own suppressed desires. Female sexuality incites another sort of prescriptive idealization to wander, delusional, ecstasy, and fear.

AR: In the process of working with sexuality can you describe an evolution in the material?

CS: My exhibit in March 1989 at Emily Harvey Gallery, NYC raised all the same difficult issues about the perception of the body and the body as a source of structure, and one of the components of the work was a composition of over 160 color photographs displayed in a 9 foot by 7 foot arc. Over a six year period I shot in available light close-up of my cat Cluny's morning ritual mouth to mouth kisses. Because in many of the photographs you can see tongues touching, many people found the sequence obscene.

AR: But by using a cat, you're going even further and making it "non-pornographic," taking the erotic issue out of the context of heterosexual mating into eroticism for its own sake. Eroticism becomes a language of communication not necessarily attached to specific organs, actions, people, but simply part of being alive.

CS: I feel I've worked into a big blind spot in the art world. I've been enraged by the sexually negative reactions to so much of my work. I always felt I was doing the obvious next step. In *Fuses,* the necessity was to investigate the absence in my culture of a visual heterosexual intimacy that corresponded to my own experience. If there was no example, could I possibly produce evidence? *Fuses* does. It became a classic work despite resistance; some people used to think of it as this narcissistic jerk-off. The invisibility of "self" that I experience is that I really don't see myself there. I'm an available conscious form that's permeable, that I'm able to use. The culture obfuscates lived experience, the female erotic and the sacredness of sexuality. There's a similar motive in my performance piece "Interior Scroll." I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but it was because the abstraction of eroticism was pressuring me in a way, that this image occurred, which said, you must demonstrate this actual level...
A CHINAMAN’S CHANCE

DARYL CHIN

Over the past few years, I have been called by different foundations and arts organizations to advise on specific programs. In almost all cases, the reason I am called (and I know this is that I am a “minority.” Within the span of a few weeks this summer, a number of events conspired to provoke in me what might euphemistically be called “an identity crisis.” Although I do have some acknowledged expertise in certain areas (for example: independent and avant-garde film), I know that I am expected to represent the interests of a specific constituency. In the case of Distant Lives, a new series of independent film and video to be presented by the Learning Channel and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, I received a letter stating that the series “will showcase films and videotapes by independent American producers who are stepping outside their own borders and making works about other peoples, other cultures, travel and metaphoric journeys.” Clearly I was expected to know about works by Asian-Americans which would deal with “other cultures.” The most obvious example: Trinh T. Minh-ha’s Reassemblage (1984), an “anti-ethnographic” study of women in Senegal. Nevertheless, though I did recommend works by Asian-Americans, I also recommended works by African-Americans and by whites. In the case of Distant Lives, there were certain guidelines in terms of what the series was supposed to be about, and the recommendations were supposed to be works which fit into those guidelines. (Guidelines in terms of subject matter, themes, content of work.)

When I was asked recently to speak on a panel of the Association of Asian Performance (a branch of the Association of Theater in Higher Education), I was told that the panel was to be on “Asian-American playwriting.” Now I am a playwright, and I am an Asian-American, but I am not an “Asian-American playwright” as that is now being defined. I do not write plays which deal with “the Asian-American experience” as that experience is now being institutionally defined. When I suggested that my topic would have to do with formalism and experimental theater, and about my attempt to work in this way, I was told that I could not speak about this. Since I was not an “Asian-American playwright,” I was not to speak about my work in any way. Why then was I asked to be on the panel? Certainly as an “arts activist” (curator, organizer, critic) I have done a lot to promote Asian-American work, especially in film and video. It was as a propagandist for Asian-American arts that I was asked to speak, not as an Asian-American playwright, because I was not an “Asian-American playwright” as the Association of Asian Performance defines that term.

This summer I also participated in the Fourth International Festival of Dance Academies in Hong Kong which brought together a large number of dance teachers and choreographers, mostly of Asian descent. The question of “national culture” became particularly perplexing because a lot of the work which was presented turned out to be “modern dance” done by Asians. Most of the training derived from American sources, Graham or Limon or Cunningham. And most of the dancers and choreographers and teachers doing “modern dance” had studied in the United States. Was this, as was claimed, a new synthesis, a form of “inter-culturalism,” or was this simply “modern dance”?

The discussions during the conference in Hong Kong finally centered on two companies: the Cultural Center of the Philippines Dance School, and the Gumarang Sakiti Dance Center of Sumatra. In both cases, the schools represented government funded, officially sanctioned “national academies.” Therefore, the assumption was that the dance being presented was representative of what was being regarded as “national culture.” At the Gumarang Sakiti Dance Center, the style of dance being taught was based on traditional movement, centered on martial arts and ritual dances. The style of dance being taught at the Philippines Dance School was based on Western modern dance, specifically derived from Graham.

The most complex instance of “national culture” occurred in relation to China. A number of delegates from the People’s Republic of China finally arrived, to participate in the conference. The political ramifications were difficult to determine; obviously, since these people had been allowed to leave China to participate in this conference, they were official government issue. The lectures and the master classes which they gave must be taken to represent a national governmental agenda. Taking dance as a test case for national culture, here are some of the conclusions I was able to reach.

During the 1960s, the “official dance” in China was the ballet. The Central Ballet School in Beijing was the center of dance education; during the most extreme period of the Cultural Revolution, the ballet was used as a major propaganda form, as in the case of such ballets as The White Haired Girl and The Red Detachment of Women. The reason for the ascendancy of the ballet, aside from the personal interest of political leaders, was to represent the ideology of “modernity.” It was a proof that Chinese culture was on par with the high culture of the West.

Within the last decade, certainly since the death of Mao Tse-Tung, the political agenda of China has changed. During the past decade, the dance establishment in China has been involved in the process of preservation of “traditional” culture (culture which was either ignored or actively suppressed during the previous decades). Going to remote provinces, to villages and hamlets isolated because of geography, to the farthest reaches of China, cultural historians have come to these places to study the rituals, the dance and music, the art of these areas. Through videotape, film, audiotape, there has been an intensive project of recording village festivals, tribal customs, folk dances, and music.

Ironically, this preservation project had been occurring at the same time that the modernization project of the Chinese government had been going on, bringing with it such technological wonders as electricity, irrigation, and mass media. Television had reached the remotest regions of China. When asked about
the continuation of traditional culture, one of the speakers from China admitted that most young people in the villages were more interested in rock-and-roll, music videos, and movies than in sustaining the traditional culture. The modernization project brought with it political ramifications, which resulted in the democratization movement. The extent to which the remote regions in China are still removed from central policies of the urban centers can be gauged by the events in early June of 1989: the troops that moved in to crush the demonstrations had to be imported to Beijing from the remote areas, where the only news they received was from the mass media, which is government controlled.

One of the most surprising performances given during the festival was by the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, a part of the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association. This is a school that has been set up in the past fourteen years in Australia. Aboriginal culture is not unilateral: there are many different groups, in many different areas of Australia. Every year, the students of the school spend a month in the respective traditional area, then study with tutors who teach them the specifics of traditional dances and music. The students are themselves aboriginal, and they have set about learning the dance and the music of the many different tribes. The agenda is very specific: the students go to the traditional areas so that they understand the conditions (the terrain, the weather, the agriculture) under which the rituals are performed. The students are very careful about the presentation of the rituals: if a dance is a funeral dance, they will not perform it unless there is a funeral. If a dance is a harvest dance, they will only perform that dance during the harvest season. This maintains some of the integrity of the rituals, even though the rituals are removed from the original context by being presented theatrically.

In addition, the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre allows many of the members the opportunity to present their own choreography. In Hong Kong, they presented contemporary works as well as traditional works. But these were kept distinct: as Paul Saliba, one of the master teachers from the school, said, “The traditional is the traditional, and the contemporary is the contemporary.” The teachers are mostly ballet or modern dance professionals, most of whom have studied in New York or England. The contemporary dance presented is, therefore, in the tradition of “modern dance” as developed in the United States, and it is presented in that way, without trying to create a hybrid or an erset form.

The idea of modernization is irksome, even murky in terms of “the Third World.” Once television has changed the conditions of a culture, the conditions for the oral traditions of storytelling and epic poetry, as an example, are no longer present. Why should people sit around telling stories or recounting legends, when they can just gather in the town square and watch television? In many villages, there are few television sets, and one is usually placed on a platform in the town square, so that the townspeople can watch communally. This is a phenomenon that occurred in the remote provinces of China, in aboriginal communities in Australia, in the remote regions of the Philippines. After these changes have occurred, the introduction of new ideas, ideas which change not just the arts but the social structure, the ideology, the politics, seems inevitable.

The example of China is important here: although there is a tension be-

 tween the amount and speed of new information and the capabilities of government control of media, once these new ideas, such as “democracy,” have entered the society, the only way to stop the changes in society is to kill the people.

While I was in Hong Kong, the impression of the modernization of Asia was inescapable. Though there remain enclaves of stubborn traditionalism, the rest of the society seems desperate to prove that they can be as up-to-date as “the West.” But modernization and the attempt to be up-to-date are accompanied by a defensiveness. It’s viewed not as modernization, but as transformation; there is supposed to be some innate Asian quality to the modern touches. This was apparent in the debates on “national culture” which occurred during the festival.

The question of what is national culture might be extended to include issues of ethnic identity. For the past three years, the Asian-American Film Festival in New York has been involved in an expansion, trying to showcase new filmmakers of Asian-American descent. This isn’t as simple as it sounds. Two years ago, during the Tenth Anniversary Festival, there were so few new Asian-American films that it was difficult to get one full program, let alone a whole festival. (The solution was to use the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary as an excuse to do retrospective programming.) This year, there were nineteen programs, with no repetitions. The issue of what an Asian-American film is has been resolved in this way: it’s a film made by an Asian-American. Again, this isn’t as simple as it sounds.

Nevertheless, the idea of Asian-Americans doing experimental work, or anything that does not have to do with “the Asian-American experience,” is not widely accepted. Every year, whenever such work is shown, someone always asks, “Why is this Asian-American?” The fact that this question has come up every year for twelve years means that the rigidity of categorization remains. Yet every year, there are more and more filmmakers doing “nontraditional” work (that is, work without “Asian-American” content). This year, the work of Tom Yasumi was paradigmatic of stereotypical ideas about ethnic identity.

Yasumi’s film, Dog and Eye (1988), is one minute long. It’s a single-shot, “static” film, in which a young man seems to be looking at a screen on the right side, so that his eye is a major part of the image. To the left of the screen, in the background, is a black dog. Conceptually, the film is very complex. It’s tied into recent theoretical writings (predominantly feminist) about “the gaze” as a source of cinematic discourse, and of the “object of desire” being the female body. Here, the gaze itself becomes the “object of desire.” I.e., the fetishized object to be stared at, and instead of the female body, it’s the male gaze which turns in on itself. (To heighten the ambiguity, the “action” of the film is the falling of a tear-drop.) In addition, it’s a tribute to Warhol, just as Warhol’s Sleep (1963) was a tribute to earlier experimental films. The “true film,” of which Maya Deren’s Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) is a paradigm, was a genre which concerned the surreal imaginings of a sleeping protagonist. Sleep reversed the trajectory, by simply showing the sleeping protagonist. The early Warhol single-shot films minimized action, in order to change the focus of attention from a look to a stare. Here, the stare is the action.

“What’s so Asian-American about that film?” is the stupidest question im-


aginable, because everything is Asian about that film, if one is aware of the recent history of the avant-garde film in Japan. As an example: Sakumi Hagiwara's *Kiri (The Fog)* (1972) is a single-shot film (in black-and-white) of the silhouette of a tree as fog gradually covers the image. Filmmakers such as Hagiwara, Toshio Matsumoto, and Nobuhiro Kawanaka were tremendously influenced by Warhol and Michael Snow. In the case of Hagiwara, his films are single-shot images which often have the appearance (especially in black-and-white) of calligraphy or Japanese brush paintings. There was a feeling in Japan that Warhol's early films, with their minimal imagery, represented a Zen philosophy in films. Yasumi is simply following in an established Japanese tradition.

Why should it be assumed that Yasumi should make films about the immigrant experience, Angel Island, or the internment camps? Those things have no relation to Yasumi's experiences: his family was in Japan until eleven years ago (when he was 12), when his father decided to move the family from Japan to California. And his was not a poor family, but a professional family. Yet it is assumed that there only one type of experience that is "the Asian-American experience," and that this should be the province of Asian-American art, even though most of the Asian-American artists I know have had little or no experience with "the Asian-American experience" — as that experience is being institutionally defined.

At the panel of the Association of Asian Performance, a white woman who teaches at UCLA was explaining how she tried to get her ethnic students to get in touch with their roots. From what she was saying about "roots," you knew she had definite ideas about what ethnic roots were. This, even after Eric Hayashi, the artistic director of the Asian-American Theatre in San Francisco, had made a telling point about the work of playwright David Henry Hwang.

When Hwang wrote *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1982), his adaptation of a short novel by Yasunari Kawabata, he was attempting to develop a style influenced by the Noh. Hwang is Chinese-American, and there is a big difference between being Chinese and being Japanese. Of course, in the U.S., all Asians are viewed as "the yellow peril," so maybe it doesn't matter, but to Chinese, or Japanese, or Koreans, or Vietnamese, or Filipinos, it certainly does matter. For Hwang to do a play in an attempted "Japanese" style based on the writing of a Japanese author, is as foreign as Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince trying to do a musical comedy Kabuki in Pacific Overtures (1976). Yet *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* opened at The Public Theater, all the critics talked indiscriminately about Hwang's faithfulness to his "Asian" heritage.

There are no obvious conclusions that I can draw from all of this right now. But the problems that are being raised are crucial, I think, to the way art is looked at and discussed, because the issue of "quality" is determined by an establishment which seeks to determine ethnicity in terms of stereotypes, without even knowing enough to determine fair stereotypes.

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**BLOOD AND MILK: MUSINGS ON THE WOUND AND THE BREAST**

**FAITH WILDING**

In the light of recent discussions of feminist art discourse and psychoanalysis, certain late medieval and early Renaissance paintings which I have been looking at for years have flashed new meanings. In the following musings, I view some traditional Christian iconology from a new perspective, and speculate on its relationship to contemporary art issues. Consider this picture, for example:

*A spectacular panel painting by the Cologne master of the holy family. Christ and Mary, surrounded by tier upon cloudy tier of saints and martyrs, flank each other as mirror images. Each reveals a talismatic sign of their humanity: Mary offers her motherly breast whose merciful drops of milk nourish afflicted humanity; Christ bares the wound in his side, by whose never-coagulating blood all mankind is redeemed. (Furbittebild — Intercession picture, Meister der Heiligen Sippe, 1480-1520.)*

The theology of this picture is complex but the meaning had to be clear to the unlettered, unlearned faithful. This is a picture about intercession, about mediation between humans and God. In order to be healed and whole, the human realm of the pain-filled and needy body had to be linked symbolically — through signs — with the spiritual realm of the soul.

Mary's milking breast is a "natural" sign of the maternal, of linking and bonding. As divine mother who sits enthroned at the left hand of God, her white secund breast is an immediate and powerful body-to-body link between her and needily humankind. The maternal breast had to be accepted into the male canon of religious symbols. "Mother Church" was ill-served by her "Fathers" however, when they amputated sexual pleasure [Eve] from maternity [Mary]; elevated the male-controlled function of reproduction [motherhood] and suppressed female-centered pleasure. In other words: Mary has a celebrated breast and womb, but an unmentioned vagina.

*Christ's wound is a more painful link between the bodies of Christ and of his congregation, but its pictorial equation with Mary again flank each in mirror image. Mary's body rises naked (except for a blue-white mantle. She squeezes her small breast which peeps out chastely from the cloud of cloth. Christ's body rises naked (except for his loincloth from a swath of blood-red cloak. His fleshy white stomach is soft, slack, fat. He cups his silt-like, thick-tipped wound with a tender long-fingered hand. (Anonymous master.)*
In this picture, the showing of the wound signifies Christ as martyred body. The male wound reminds us of a brutal act of violence and domination. Christian iconology had to attempt to transform and transmute this association. Thus Christ is feminized, made limp, naked, vulnerable. The wound is one he takes upon himself as part of his office, so to speak — it was not gained in glorious male combat. The wound is a kind of fetish which stands for a repressed memory; it is a secret, sacred wound which bleeds perpetually and cannot be healed. (The fetishizing of a leader's wounds is standard political practice today: thus President Lyndon Johnson once showed the assembled press corps his appendix scar; thus we were shown detailed diagrams of Ronald Reagan's prostate operation. The leader's wounds humanize him, make him real, link him to us.)

In many representations Christ's wound in fact resembles a vagina. In illuminated manuscripts the wound often appears in a separate little compartment or as a free-floating oval mandorla (the sacred oval space in which God usually floats about in heaven). Blood from the wound-vagina is a fresh link of life-giving, communion fluid between humanity and God. The mysterious properties of blood, while not completely understood by the ancients, were worshiped; and great care was taken not to contaminate or to be contaminated by this sacred fluid. Menstruating females were thus virtually taboo, and their touch was considered dangerous. Thus Christ's wound can also be equated to the bleeding, birth-giving vagina, as a two-fold symbol of death and rebirth. The male violence of ritual sacrifice has been transformed. The male god becomes maternal, we suckle at his breast.

In a painting in the Louvre, an ecstatic female saint (Theresa?) hangs at Christ's breast with her lips to the pale, gaping wound at which she seems to suckle like a nursing baby.

Milk is blood transformed. It too has been a sacred fluid since time immemorial. The Virgin's milk redeems the sinner, heals the sick, and nourishes the poor. Mary's milking breast was fetishized just like Christ's wound. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (the chief founder of the cult of Mary in the Middle Ages) after petitioning the Virgin to "show yourself a mother" had a vision of her in which she squeezed milk directly from her breast into his mouth — thus he came to worship her. This chaste, lucubrious vision has been a favorite subject with artists. Perhaps it permitted even the very religious to participate in the obsession with breasts.

"The Bra is 100 Years Old" toots the June 1989 issue of Life magazine. Indeed, bras are back after a brief deflation in the '70s when some women were rejecting all the so-called "natural" signs of femininity. A thousand variants of the lacy/bony contraptions in bon-bon and boudoir colors are available at "better stores" everywhere. The breast is back with a vengeance, and so is breastfeeding among the educated professionals but not the poor and the working class. As the Playboy and Penthouse empires (built on foundations of 36D cups) have demonstrated, the sight of large female breasts is exciting and unnerving, but ultimately reassuring, for men. (It is recorded that a famous female Greek philosopher once had to bare her breasts to calm a mob of rioting men.) They are a powerful sexual sign (not as threatening as the vaginal) evoking mixed images of comfort, food, maternal omnipotence, and female sexual potency. The bra hides, contains, restrains, and emphasizes all of these aspects, all at the same time.

Mary didn't wear a bra [Lycra and nylon had not been invented] and her breasts could not be overtly worshiped as signs of her femaleness. You only get to see one of Mary's breasts at a time in most depictions, and then only as a demonstration of their milk-giving capacity, which signifies Mary's MOTHERHOOD. The Virgin could not be endowed with large breasts for obvious reasons. But she could have copiously productive ones. Early artists gave her little pointy, highest, pink-nippled breasts which when squeezed would emit a respectable stream of milk. Mary's milk production is legendary — think of the many medieval statues of her which are said to lactate at given times during the year. Just as Mary was the Church's symbol of motherhood, so our First Ladies are a national symbol of motherhood. And just as the scars and wounds of Presidents have been important to the nation, so have the breast cancers and breast removals of First Ladies. A whole nation of women was alerted to the importance of breast examination for early cancer detection when Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan had their breasts removed.

It seems evident then that Christ's wound and Mary's breast became crucial signs in Christian iconology, and that they have entered the semiotic system of western imagery in complex and as yet largely unraveled ways.

In the age of technology, simulation, and the death of nature, we again need the constant affirmation that we have bodies, and that their needs and desires are fundamental to a satisfying life. We too search for signs of the body in the representations of language, the media, and art. Kristeva speaks of avantgarde art as being that which reinserts the semiotic (female, primal) back into the symbolic (male, rational) discourse.

It is often women artists now who are dealing most interestingly with these issues. Just as many medieval artists inserted a subtext of instruction about the omnipotent power of the male god, and of the needs of the human body into their religious pictures, so some contemporary feminists are grappling with the imagery of omnipotence and need, of desire and fulfillment. One such image, breastfeeding, is a potent expression of bodily communion — of the mutuality of desire and fulfillment. In breastfeeding the usual male/female sexual roles are blurred — the mother is the inserter (breast as penis), the baby is the receiver (mouth as vaginal). The mother gives suck, the baby takes the breast.

In painting, breastfeeding is often shown in sappy or antiseptic motherhood pictures. But breastfeeding is given a different meaning in paintings by Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo, Alice Neel, and Mary Cassatt — to name just a few. In Paula Modersohn-Becker's work, nursing clearly becomes a sign for female sexual potency and female pleasure. In her images of the nursing "baby" Diego, and of herself — adult yet shrunk to baby size — suckling at the breast of Mexico, Kahlo represents complex aspects of the power/dependency experience of marriage, as well as her longing to give birth and give suck. Alice Neel depicts the fierce cares which can characterize the breastfeeding relationship. The untrammelled need of the infant is met by the mother's desperate desire to fulfill — another twist on the primal scene. From Mary Cassatt's pictures I feel the almost
unbearably tender vulnerability of this naked meeting of desire and fulfillment.

As we repress these bodily truths in our conscious waking lives, so we tend to fear and avoid their expression in art. They are much more taboo than the depiction of violence, and of the wounding and fragmentation of the body. For that is largely what has happened to the body in contemporary art — it has been exploded and fragmented. Wounding, violence, and fragmentation are our realities and seem to haunt all our image producers in television, film, media, and the visual arts. In the last exhibition season several artists showed work which featured body parts. Barbara Kruger’s show at Mary Boone for example, left me with many questions: How can these fragments be reassembled into a living body? How can these wounds be healed? Can these images — which use the strategies of media language — really dismantle the lies and deficiencies of the image system they are criticizing? Can they adequately represent the complexity of the body/mind, nature/culture split still so deeply embedded in our language and psychology? Or more simply, why don’t these pieces really work for me? Why am I still so unsatisfied? It is mostly unfashionable to talk about healing these days (except among “New Agers” and others considered ‘soft thinkers’) but it is a daring and difficult subject, and more rarely addressed by artists.

Will we ever be able to see the human body as whole (healed)? Meanwhile the parts which have to stand for the whole, and the ways in which they are depicted, take on a greater significance. Kruger’s glossy photo works, while clear and often pungent, lack guts and juice — just what we are looking for most in the arid squalor of contemporary life. Her heart which is not one, fails to tug at my heart. Her body parts lack a true sense of dismemberment and loss. My stumps do not ache at sight of them, as they do when looking at some of Kahlo’s paintings. The messy traces and bodily signs of infancy and motherhood which Mary Kelly presents in her Post Partum Document are mediated by the scientific/psychological writing about them, and by the way they are exhibited in a fine art context. Kelly’s point, of course, is precisely to show this distancing which has split the female body and its functions from the symbolic systems of culture and language.

A roomful of small terra cotta sculptures on simple pedestals. Their reddish brown unglazed surfaces like bare skin. There are heads with screaming mouths. The back of the heads vomit breasts. There are torsos cut off at the waist, each has a full female breast twinned with an incised wound. There is a pelvis with a scarred and sewn-up stomach. Here wound and breast are conflated on one body. (Sculpture by Nancy Fried at Graham Modern Gallery.)

Transgression into the realms of true psychic horror, physical deprivation, and emotional loss in art is difficult because of the ways in which 20th-century history, contemporary culture, and mediated imagery have dismembered and distanced the body. We have been bombarded with horrors in the past 50 years: the devastations, mass killings, and maimings of wars; the starvation and dislocation of huge populations; the ravages of AIDS and cancer; and the mutilations often visited on the bodies of women in the name of modern medicine. The truths and sufferings — as well as joys — of the body, need to be made personal and real to us again. I want to see art that will move me and make me ache with longing and jouissance as the work of Modersohn-Becker, Kahlo, or Louise Bourgeois can sometimes do; and I want to be shaken by images of psychic and physical suffering such as are often depicted by Ida Applebroog, Clarissa Sligh, or Nancy Fried. We cannot look to the media, or to the official cultural language to give us satisfying images — they can only show us again and again how absolutely devoid they are of adequate representations of experience. We must continue to break open this image-system by the insertion of a resonant and trenchant language of signs.

Artists working to counter and change dominant cultural images cannot be afraid to make images both of the wounded, needling, vulnerable self, and of comfort, fulfillment, and possible beauty of bodily experience. Let’s not be afraid to evoke the repressed, to slice through the layers of scar tissue, to reveal afresh the real wound and the real breast — just as the medieval artists had to open Mary’s robe and pierce Christ’s side, in order to exhibit the signs of the needy and desiring body.

Notes
FIGURE/GROUND

MIRA SCHOR

Some people live by what they see with their eyes—light, darkness, color, form. Painters are compelled to express this continuous act of seeing and looking through the application of a liquid or viscous matter on a two-dimensional surface. Despite a barrage of criticism of painting and of representation, even painters who are cognizant or complicit with this critique continue their preoccupation. I am one of these retinal individuals.

Since painting can be most basically defined as the application of pigment matter—which minimally can be understood as Figure—on a surface which is Ground, this re-audition of the Symbolic Order searches for a new vocabulary. Since painting can be most basically defined as the application of pigment matter—which minimally can be understood as Figure—on a surface which is Ground, this re-audition of the Symbolic Order searches for a new vocabulary. Some contemporary critics are astounded that painters have balked at this commitment to the 'primacy' of 'objectivity' and their use of exclusion as one of their principal creative means. In this discourse on art, painting has been described as peripheral, vestigial, an "stavistic production mode," and a "dysfunctional plastic category." According to this discourse, the linear progression of art history brought painting in the twentieth century to certain "logical" end points, namely abstraction and monochrome, after which representation is always a regression; painting is inadequate to the representation of contemporary reality; new technologies emerging out of late capitalism may be more suited to deal with its ideology; painterliness for its own sake, for the sake of visual pleasure, is narcissistic and self-indulgent.

Meanwhile, painting continues. If painting needs defending, from these criticisms and from the paintings which may present justifiable targets for such a critique, what method is most effective for a painter to pursue? I will momentarily defer from resorting to the transcendent, utopian, heroic statement of belief commonly professed by painters as the ultimate defense of painting. For to argue the validity of painting on the ground of belief is a you-word-against-mine proposition, that is "your word" against "my work." On the ground of words, painting stands to be handicapped, often because a certain critical approach may have already devalorized an entire vocabulary. So another strategy is for the painter to examine the critic's words—or, perhaps, for the Imaginary to re-audit the Symbolic Order.

The history of avant-garde painting has been oriented towards a demystification of Figure (narratives of religion and history, finally representation of any kind) and an emphasis and an amplification of Ground: the flatness of the picture plane, the gallery space as a ground, finally the gallery space as Figure, a subject in itself. The history of modern painting—with the possible exception of Surrealism and its progeny—is the privileging of Ground. In his examination of the windowless white-walled gallery space, Inside the White Cube, Brian O'Doherty develops the aesthetics and ethics of the "myth of flatness." In the twentieth century both the picture plane and the gallery space have been "vacuumed" of ornament and incident until the wall and the entire square footage of the gallery space has become the ground for art works which as entities or events functioned as figure. "This invention of context initiated a series of gestures that 'develop' the idea of a gallery space as a single unit, suitable for manipulation as an aesthetic counter. From this moment on, there is a seepage of energy from art to its surroundings." As ground/context are privileged, O'Doherty points to a change in the preferred audience: from the "Spectator" to the "Eye." "The Eye is the only inhabitant of the sanitized installation shot. The Spectator is not present." The gallery wants to be alone. O'Doherty points to the "hostility to the audience" which marks modernism and avant-garde movements, and suggests the ultimate dissolution of the art/audience relationship: "Perhaps a perfect avant-garde act would be to invite an audience and shoot it." This (presumably) tongue in cheek proposal is metaphorically realized in a recent work which functions as a state-of-the-art index on the status of figure/ground, gallery context, and the inconveniently present Spectator. Wallace and Donahue's Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime? (Shooting the Public) [1989], exhibited in the 1989 Whitney Biennial, is a big blue painting with a vertical row of very bright lights facing out to blind and disorient the viewer. As an element inserted into the picture plane, this Figure forces the viewer's eyes away from it and from Ground. The audience has become the figure/subject of the painting, because the piece contains a surveillance camera focused on the public still foolish enough to expect to have a private individual experience of vision. The Spectator and the Eye's desire to look, to see is now scopophilic, which here is critically transformed into Ideology: the viewer is a voyeur and the artwork is Big Brother.

The privileging of ground is consistent with the utopian ideal often expressed by modernist pioneers that painting, liberated from representation and reduced to its formal elements, will transcend its end and evaporate into architecture. Some contemporary critics are astounded that painters have balked at this conclusion. For example, Benjamin Buchloh, in his signal essay "Figures of
Authority; Ciphers of Regression,\textsuperscript{14} links returns to easel painting and to figuration with authoritarian ideologies, both in post-1915 works by Picasso, Derain, Carrà and other cubists and futurists, and in recent painting movements such as German and Italian Neo-Expressionism. The early twentieth-century vanguard painters, and, by implication, all painters who subsequently replicate their historicist error, are indicted for their "incapacity or stubborn refusal to face the epistemological consequences of their own [earlier] work."\textsuperscript{15} The consequence, in this discourse, is spelled out in the title of the essay following Buchloh’s in the Spring 1981 issue of October: "The End of Painting" by Douglas Crimp.

Buchloh’s views of painting emerge from post-war German art; however, while the self-conscious flirtation with fascism in Anselm Kiefer’s traditionally “heroic” paintings may indeed represent formal and political regression relative to, for example, the oeuvre of Joseph Beuys, Buchloh’s frustration is engendered even by traces of mystifying notions about painting in, if not the works, at least the words of artists whose practice is said to (properly) confront the “despair of painting.”\textsuperscript{16} Excerpts from an interview between Buchloh and the German painter Gerhard Richter serve to recapitulate, in the mode of a Pinter play, what the critic of painting wishes and what the contradictory artist prefers.

Benjamin Buchloh. . . And that is really one of the great dilemmas of the twentieth century, this seeming conflict, or antagonism, between painting’s representational function and its self-reflexion. These two positions are brought very close together in your work. But aren’t they brought together in order to show the inadequacy and bankruptcy of both? Gerhard Richter: Bankruptcy, no; inadequacy, always. . . .

B: The claim for pictorial meaning still exists. Then even your Abstract Paintings should convey a content?
R: Yes.
B: They’re not the negation of content, not simply the facticity of painting, not an ironic paraphrase of contemporary expressionism?
R: No.
B: Not a perversion of gestural abstraction? Not ironic?
R: Never! What sorts of things are you asking?

B: When I think about contemporary political painting, I prefer Barnett Newman. At least he did some magnificent paintings.
R: So it’s said. Magnificent in what respect?
B: I can’t describe it now, what moved me there. I believe that his paintings are among the most important.
R: Perhaps that too is a mythology which would have to be investigated anew. Precisely because it’s so hard to describe, and because belief is inadequate in the confrontation with contemporary paintings.
B: Belief is inescapable; it’s part of us.
R: They [Richter’s paintings] have a normal seriousness. I can’t put a name on it. I’ve always seen it as something musical. There’s a lot in the construction, in the structure, that reminds me of music. It seems so self-evident to me, but I couldn’t possibly explain it.

B: That’s one of the oldest cliches around. People always have resorted to music in order to save the foundations of abstract painting.

B: . . . Why is your only recourse that to the metaphor of nature, like a Romantic?
R: No, like a painter. The reason I don’t argue in “socio-political terms” is that I want to produce a picture and not an ideology. It’s always its facticity, and not its ideology that makes a picture good.\textsuperscript{17}

It seems possible that it is precisely its “facticity,” its actuality, that is disturbing to those for whom painting is “dysfunctional” and “atavistic.” “Aesthetic Terrorists” mock “the metaphysics of the human touch”\textsuperscript{18} on which defenses of painting depend. Buchloh adds an infantile and animalistic dimension to painting by calling for the “abolition of the painter’s patte”\textsuperscript{19} (Fr: paw), not just his/her hand but his/her paw. The painter’s patte is an “atavistic production mode,” and atavism is used incorrectly as a synonym of “dysfunctional” to signify a “morbid symptom.”\textsuperscript{20} But something atavistic is a still vital trait resurfing from our deep past. Rubbing two sticks together to make fire when a match is handy may be dysfunctional, but the need for, and the fear of fire are atavistic tropisms. Human mothers, like many mammals, still clean their children’s faces with spit. They don’t use their tongues, like lions, but they do the job roughly, with their “pattes,” and the gesture has a function beyond the immediate and pragmatic: it marks a bond, it is a process of marking whose strength is precisely its atavistic nature.

The desire for an art from which belief, emotion, spirit, psyche would be vacated, an art that would be pure, architectural, that would dispense with the wetness of figure—Marcel Duchamp calls for “a completely dry drawing, a dry conception of art”\textsuperscript{21}—may find a source in a deeply rooted fear of liquidity, of viscousness, of goo.

Whose goo is feared may emerge from a reading of Male Fantasies, Klaus Theweleit’s analysis of members of the German Freikorps, mercenary soldiers who put down worker rebellions and fought border disputes in the years between the end of WWI and the advent of the Third Reich, precursors, and often future members, of the Nazis. The “soldier male” (according to Theweleit’s term) has never fully developed a “secure sense of external boundaries,” a pleasurable sense of the membrane of skin. He fears the “Red fluids”—of the masses, blood, dirt, “morasses,” "slimes," “pulp," woman—which he perceives as constantly threatening to dissolve his “external boundaries.” He also fears the liquid forces insecurely caged within his own body interior and unconscious. The “soldier male” resolves these conflictual fears by the construction of a militarized, regimented body, by incorporation into a deseualized phalanx of men, and by the reduction of all outer threats back to the red pulp he imagines everything living to be, by killing. “He escapes by masking others to the pulp he himself threatens to become.”\textsuperscript{22}

The “uncanny” nature of the revolutionary mass, which the Freikorps were waging war against, with “its capacity for metamorphosis, multiforality, transformation from one state to another”\textsuperscript{23} is akin to the silithery properties of paint.
This capacity for mysterious transformation, appearance, and disappearance "corresponds precisely not only to the man's anxiety images of the multiple forms and faces of the mass/Medusa they aim to subdue, but above all to their fears of uncontrollable, unexpected stirrings in their own 'interiors.'" 23

Against the unregimented flow of paint, some critics posit the mechanistic one, of architecture, or of language. Buchloh questions the importance of New­man's painting "because it's so hard to describe." If words fail, then the visually undeniable must be "investigated anew," or eliminated. Not surprisingly Buchloh favors the insertion of words into pictures, especially through collage, where the binding infrastructure mucilage, the glue, is dried, clear, and hidden behind the image. Fear of flow also condemns Richter's analogy of painting to music, which though invisible, is the quintessential flowing element through the ear which offers no protection between interior and exterior.

A stated desire to "purge" color of its last remnants of mythical transcenden­ental meaning; by making painting completely anonymous through seriality and infallible repetitiveness,24 and a preference for photography over painting indicates that the problem for some critics is not with color but with pigment. Pigment is matter which interferes with the ideal of color. Its incremental nature makes any individualized manipulation of it distressing, and so it must be bleached out, cleansed, expurgated, photosynthesized onto a laminated sheet of paper on which color has been dematerialized.

Perhaps it is not surprising that many of the critics who would stop the amorphous flow of paint have most enthusiastically supported women artists who work in photography and video. Clearly, the ranks of post-feminists/post­modernists do include women who sometimes paint, Sherrie Levine, Wallace and Donahue, and Annette Lemieux to name but a few. But there is a strictly unsen­sual, de-personalized use of paint. Their material is always subsumed to media­tion.

"We really don't directly experience anything anymore,"25 says Lemieux. Lemieux's statements often reflect the literalism of the collage aesthetic (or ethic), so indicative of a generally held distrust of illusionism. "When one wants to talk about a helmet, it seems ridiculous to paint a helmet when one can acquire a helmet and present it. It would communicate better."26 The degree to which painting is a sophisticated process of conceptualization is crystallized by this simplistic alter­native.

Robert Pincus-Witten notes in a catalogue essay on Lemieux that "the sheer presence of oil upon canvas seemed too much like painting so Lemieux settled for the expedient of executing [both] works with her feet."27 On the white ground of a long horizontal painting (1989) Lemieux has padded back and forth with black paint-soaked bare feet. This instance of the painter's "patte" is acceptable because the painter's animal tracks are left on a vacated ground (the artist has walked away) for the sole purpose of averting the intentionality of painting (figure). It is taken as axiomatic by some of its critics and apparently by some painters as well that "painting's own recent history raises barriers to the accessibility of a language with which to represent historical or political fact."28 This axi­
fear of narrative, since, historically, what must be excluded from art discourse is tainted by femininity. Painting’s presumed loss of access to a language of historical and political representation must be considered in its connection to the equally axiomatic: “prohibition that enjoins woman—at least in this history—from ever fancying, representing, symbolizing etc. (and none of these words is adequate, as all are borrowed from a discourse which aids and abets that prohibition) her own relationship to beginning,” as Luise Irigaray writes. For “woman” one can insert “painter” as far as critical language is concerned. Further, woman’s presumed lack of subjectivity, of access to self-representation, is the ground for the narrative of the One who “must resurrect the earth with this floor of the ideal.”

That ground was gendered female was never in doubt. Painting in the high Italian Renaissance increasingly became a system for ordering and subduing Nature, laying a grid on Chaos (femininity), which in the twentieth century became a process of razing and asphaltling. For if the ground began to move and “if the ‘object’ started to speak? Which also means beginning to ‘see,’ etc. What disallows vision of the subject would be paint.” It might entail the death of the end-of-painting scenario which should have been played only once according to late modernist critics, and which is to be endlessly re-simulated by postmodernists. The narrative of the death of painting is meant to jam the signals of the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. “Death is the sanction of everything that one can insert ‘painter’ as far as critical language is concerned. Further, woman’s presumed lack of subjectivity, of access to self-representation, is the ground for the narrative of the One who “must resurrect the earth with this floor of the ideal.”

According to Walter Benjamin: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.” If ground begins to move, if figure rushes back onto evacuated ground, the sanction of death will reassert its authority over the narrative of the death of painting. In this patriarchal narrative the artist invisibly sets himself up as the next duck in the shooting gallery: the narrative of traditional art history can only admit to a formalist attack on the past. In a sense, this is a totally “abstract” painting in which enclosure is implicit in the composition. Light is as bleak as darkness. The figures of the imprisoned lunatics barely indicate scale. What is striking in this painting and Goya’s other paintings on witchcraft is the muttity of the brush, the gentleness of the paint strokes as they construct brutal subjects. These little soft brush marks are seductive, but the pleasure they give is the honey that traps the eye of the viewer, seduced by “painture” into looking at images of the past profound enough to subvert the present.

However, the emphasis on technique in recent confections of “beautiful” painting by Ross Bleckner, Mark Innerer, Joan Nelson, and their followers is curiously related to the belief, emerging out of the critique of painting, that painting has become, or will be in the future, a craft. In this country in particular, craft has such negative connotations there is almost no way of interpreting this fate so that painting would retain intelligence and contemporaneity. And yet easel and panel painting came out of the guild economy of the Middle Ages. The great Sienese painters were craftsmen: Giovanni di Paolo is said to have kept a model book of other artists’ compositions which he freely borrowed from; an early instance of appropriation, or a functional use of more advanced artists’ ideas and a respect for his elders. These craftsmen served their communities and respected their discipline. At its best, “craft” might not be such a dread fate.

For a painter there is certainly tremendous pleasure in working out a thought in paint. It is a complete process in terms of brain function: an intellectual activity joining memory, verbal knowledge, and retinal information, is given visible existence through a physical act. But the value of painting cannot rest on any individual artist’s private pleasure. Painting is a communicative process in which information flows through the eye from one brain, one consciousness, to another, as telemetric data speeds from satellite to computer, without slowing for verbal communication. Incidents of paint linger in the working mind of the
painter as continuous thrills, as possibilities, like words you may soon use in a sentence, and — in a manner which seems to exist outside of spoken language — as beacons of hope to any human being for whom visuality is the site of questions and answers about existence. The black outline of a rock in a Marsden Hartley landscape, the scumbled white of a shawl in a portrait by Goya, the glaze of a donor’s veil in the Portinaris Altarpiece, the translucent eyelid of Leonardo’s Ginevra di Benci; the pulsing red underpainting of a slave’s toe in a Delacroix, the shift from shiny to matte in a passage of indigo blue by Elizabeth Murray, are only a few of a storehouse of details of painting which are of more than professional interest to me.

In French “terrains vagues” describes undeveloped patches of ground abutting urban areas, gray, weedy lots at the edge of the architectural construct of city. “Terrains vagues,” spaces of waves, the sea of liquidity, where the eye flows idly and unconstructed, uninstructed. These spaces are vague, not vacant (terrains of painting’s end, but the “self-forgetful” terrains on which paint, filtered through the human eye, mind, and hand, flickers in and out of representation, as figure skims ground, transmitting thought.

Notes
4. O’Doherty, p. 36.
5. O’Doherty, p. 69.
7. O’Doherty, p. 73.
8. O’Doherty, p. 76.
9. That scopophilia, the love of looking, sounds like a psychological disorder (along with necro- and pedo-) seems related to its ubiquity in recent critical texts.
16. The epigraph to “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression” is a quote from the Praxis Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears.”
18. Theweleit, p. 213.
21. Theweleit, p. 35.
29. Irigaray, p. 140.
30. Irigaray, p. 135.
32. Benjamin, p. 87.
33. Benjamin, p. 91.
34. Richter/Buchloh interview, p. 20.
35. Buchloh: But if one looks at your iconography in the 1960s, I find it difficult to construct a continuous death thematic. . . . It seems to me completely absurd to want to construct a traditional iconography in your painting. Richter: Perhaps it’s just a little exaggerated to speak of a death thematic here. But I do think that the pictures have something to do with death, with pain.
36. October 16, p. 59, also Richter and Buchloh agree on this usage in the interview quoted above, p. 20.
39. O’Doherty, p. 73.
40. O’Doherty, p. 76.
41. That scopophilia, the love of looking, sounds like a psychological disorder (along with necro- and pedo-) seems related to its ubiquity in recent critical texts.
42. October 16, Spring 1981.
43. Buchloh, October 16, p. 42.
Late Nadelman

Brandt Junceau

Praise by choice. — An artist chooses his subjects, that is his way of praising.¹

One sees, or doesn’t seek, what is in a work of art.²

My interest in Elie Nadelman is that of one artist in the work of another, a helpless attraction to work for which I have a tenacious fascination and, as yet, unforeseen uses. I know of it only by reading and having chanced to see a few pieces in a private collection. It is not shown in any New York museum.

Many connections branch into the late work, none leave it. It might have been numerous and finely connected to work of our time had it not been occluded in Nadelman’s home during his lifetime and lacked a place in the modernist context that followed.³ Its persistent obscurity is not only circumstantial but was built into the work on a number of levels by a deliberate effort of the artist. It has been shown regularly since Nadelman’s death but it remains a desperately obscure body of work. Though late, there is yet time for it to be known while it is most apropos.

The late work consists of some 500 plaster figurines from six to an occasional maximum of twelve inches high, untitled and undated. This work began in October 1929 with the Depression and ended with Nadelman’s death in December 1946. The dolls are the souvenirs of a shrinking world. Their whole domain, for which they were created, from which they never left, is Alderbrook, the Nadelmans’ estate in Riverdale-on-Hudson, the bracketed mansion of a bracketed man.

The Depression shattered the Nadelmans’ fortune overnight but removed the pieces bit by bit, painfully, over a number of years. The house was the last and central fragment. The whole object of Nadelman’s last years was to hold it. To this end the Nadelmans sold their townhouse/studio in Manhattan and the remainder of the estate in Riverdale, including his carriage house studio and the museum built for their folk art collection, which also was broken up and sold. Nadelman’s last studio was a ground floor back room of the house, unsold work crowding the basement and avoiding sunlight in attic rooms.

The Nadelman folk art collection was unusual in its time for including what today we call popular culture. Nadelman appreciated the ephemera of contemporary America as maybe only an emigre could. For Nadelman these images of contemporary life were coequal to the art of the past. The images surrounding his workbench ranged from fragments from Tanagra to newstand scraps and trinkets from Woolworth’s. He was much a gatherer and classifier as a producer of objects. The collection formed a fund of images which his work both referred to and completed. When it was dispersed he told a friend, “The dismantling of the folk art museum did also dismantle something in me.” As the collection disappeared the ongoing project of making the dolls became one of the most densely referential work in modern sculpture. A race of tiny mementos for a collector who was himself their maker.

The smallness of the dolls is that of a class of objects apart from simply small sculpture. The smallness of the figurine sits between that of small sculpture, which is dimensionally small but not reduced, and that of the miniature. The charm of the miniature depends on exactitude and fidelity to an original we recognize and check it by. In depending on this correspondence it is the captive of its model whereas figurine-ness exists precisely in the deliquesence of fidelity. It is the wayward sister of the miniature.

Figurine-ness begins in the process of modelling an image for production casting. In modifying forms for slippery releasability and making those stubbornly particular accede to a generalized whole, depiction becomes equivocal. In preparing an image for reproduction it is necessary to blur features, smooth particularities, fill voids, and hollow solids in order that the mold release the product cleanly. Minor forms give up their independence to the mass for the durability of the whole. Forms that extend from the center are modified at their roots, thickened and smoothly let in to the central mass. Fine forms and edges are lowered and rounded to a more or less continuous surface unified by glazes that smooth still further the transition of one form into another. Painted signs replace forms lost to a covetous surface.

In the elimination of the particular, boundaries are lost. In the figure and ground of figure and figurine the figurine is partial to the ground: to intersite, transition, confusion, and ambivalence. It is the diminution and de-articulation of the figure. Where figure means representation, figurine is a partial representation; where figure also means idea, figurine is figment. Figure is logical, complete, and authoritative; figurine is imaginative, incomplete, and permissive. It is a turn of figure whose effacement of difference makes it naturally subversive. In the figurine masculine and feminine mingle freely, androgyny is almost endemic.

The figurine submits to its nature as small domestic object. It functions as a purchasable mnemonic device (memento and souvenir) and as collectible; a piecemeal component of a mental catalogue by whose acquisition the mind gains a pleasure of control and completion. It is at home among furniture and looking out from behind glass, among objects it can pose with, with those of a manual ritual nature — at arm’s reach on a desk or table. It transfers to the figure the condition of a use object. It is casually handled, fondled, dropped, and broken. Actual fragility is available as attribute and metaphor.

After the Depression, Nadelman’s working methods were trimmed to fit the retracted scope of his career and to slip easily into the space and life of the house. The dolls are plaster or terra cotta cast from plastaline originals. Plastaline is an oil based, non-hardening “clay,” ideal for extended or irregular sittings. It releases cleanly from small plaster molds which Nadelman made himself. Each subsequent plaster cast, besides permanently fixing the plaster original, was itself a workable state. The plaster could be scratched and filed and new accretions of plastaline added. The accumulation of pellets that made and unmade them is
plainly visible from behind. Successive states are remarkably desultory; rapidly established, summarily dropped. Their backs carry small flats where they had been repeatedly laid down in their soft plastaline state. A web of light pencil lines indicates changes and additions. Drawing in pencil completes some pieces just as painted features had completed earlier work in bronze. The work is mess-free and quiet. Nadelman worked in the inner rooms as well as in his back room studio. Casting only in plaster, in molds he produced himself, made exposing his work a matter of choice, not necessity. He appeared to have stopped working altogether. "When people came to call, as at first they did, from friendship or curiosity, he showed nothing but his splendid white raspberry bushes which he carefully mulched and harvested."

Nadelman appropriated the politesse of a gentleman who exhibits and expresses little intimate feeling. He rarely discussed his feelings or his work, even with his wife. What Nadelman revealed of himself in his work is known, if at all, by juxtaposing fact and intuition. "To vary knowing and feeling is the artist's purgatory" in making art, and his method of reading the work of others. The late work makes speculation a necessity but braces it with regular intervals of coded specifics.

Certainly the events of the Depression strained the resources of his studied manner. The mixed, contradictory and inelegant thoughts that were coded out of his persona were mulled and folded in the tiny figures he made and remade for his last fifteen years. I believe the complexity and irresolution of his feelings becomes the diversity and confusion of the dolls. I see in them stratified layers of alternating articulation and dearticulation which may be uncovered by a repetitive investigation that peels, rather than slices, toward the center.

The sense of form in Nadelman's earlier work is as exclusionary as it is precise. In the late work Nadelman maintains a precision in his operations that he foregoes in their object. Existing transitions are blurred, and new ones are added, between things ordinarily held distinct. The modeling of the dolls confuses form within a filmy envelope, or dipped; a mobile fluid running down prominences and filling hollows, bridging them, sucking forms in extension into low relief and determining it. The resulting surface is indicative of underlying incident but not identical with it. The image appears veiled; the high points pressing upward from the original envelope of the figure. Surface is separated from the underlying form that to a form.

Equivoocation begins in a build-up of plastaline pellets that distends the original envelope of the figure. Surface is separated from the underlying form that determines it. The resulting surface is indicative of underlying incident but not identical with it. The image appears veiled; the high points pressing upward from within a flimsy envelope, or dipped; a mobile fluid running down prominences and filling hollows, bridging them, sucking forms in extension into low relief and leaving those in low relief awash, lapping at their edges and eroding them. Detail disappears into the mass or floats delicately upon it. The inexact mimesis endemic toing those in low relief awash, lapping at their edges and eroding them. The classicism that runs throughout Nadelman's work is deepest in the dolls. Here it is the classicism not of temple pediment but of kitchen charm and bedroom idol. The dolls are kissing cousins of the small cast votives of Tanagra and Pennsylvania. Both cultures kept cheap domestic charms of plenty, fertility, and good fortune. Nadelman may not have shared the beliefs of the ancients or the Pennsylvanians but he recognized their small prayers as his own. It was the temper of his mind to reduce feeling toward a median, to make the problematic amusing and obsession a pastime. It amused him to repeat ancient forms of wishful longing in his own obsessive effort to manage his disappointment. The light touch and high playfulness of the dolls, their smallness and multiplicity, trace an effort to divide and lighten an overwhelming burden.

The dolls condense head and hand, becoming the image of both their mental source and their manual means of production. Hand-formed and hand-like in form, their oversized heads are the palm to the fingers of their body and limbs. They suggest an intimacy of hand and mind that has excluded the rest of the body. Their small size does not actualize the potential of the artist's whole body. Their retracted source is a closed and shortened loop of hand and mind. The perimeter of an artist working from and to himself. In the high classicism of ideal measure the body carries as much, or more, expression as the head. The body is the extension and picture of the soul. Intelligence is suffused throughout the body. The human form is the picture of the soul, which flows as much up from the body as down from the head. Disproportion reveals the disquiet of the soul. In the dolls the body is impossibly small, a mere secretion of the head. The seven, nine, and ten head proportions of neo-classicism and mannerism are reversed to a three and four head measure. The dolls picture a purely interior life, head births whose physical nature is blurred, mitigated, and trivialized. The life of the mind is so deeply retreated as not to even ripple the expression of their faces. The face mirrors and windows little motion of the soul. Heads as large as the torso they sit on show little will for action, their bodies little leverage for it.

The child-dolls play the cherub's role of onlooking and mimicry. Gossiping, flirting, whispering, listening, looking, looking out, around and back over their shoulders, passing the word and watching for signs, dodging the swings of a causality they can neither foresee or understand. Immature, overmatched, of indefinite age and sex but eager senses they can do little but notice all. Their hands are cupped to their ears, they lean into whispers.

Their child's play of coy poses is itself a pose. The doll's triviality conceals significance. Decorative style delays, or altogether detains, attention before allowing it to proceed to a less resolved and more private level. Private content is secreted where it will be least expected, in a trivial form that glories in its own superficiality. It may be laid to the doll's insistence on charm that the depth of a language calculated for subtlety and complication has been considered "merely"
decorative.

The dolls' unresolved form is equally charming and mishapen, a grotesque which effortlessly confuses category and gender. The dolls claim the child's nascent form, wax upon which the world will write, and erase, at will and at random. The cap and hair ribbons of the child tumesce into knobby horns and crowns of oracular child gods. Their hieratic form announces the extranatural stature of unified opposites. The signatory bow of Nadelman's early work now rests overgrown and heralnic, or only a lace of scribbled pencil lines, over the crux of legs and body that concretely reveals gender. Duplicitous decoration fixes and diffuses attention. The subject raised and erased is the inmost leaf of the dolls' irresolution, their androgyny.

The theme persists from his earliest classicizing work as a divine state unrealized or botched in nature, available to the gods and the arts, a slurry form from which earthily form is drawn and poured and to which it returns. Here it is emblematic of an unpartitioned mind, "resonant and porous... incandescent and undivided." Androgynous child-gods subsume Nadelman's final classical reference, the genius curulatus, a hooded cupid that represents the departed soul. The late work is the summation of a life's work, the last thoughts that condense beginning and end, hope and disappointment. They picture the inmost mind at fitful labor, clinging to specifics, tolerating ambiguity, playful and duplicitous, forthright and evasive.

Nadelman takes a prominent place among the American artists between the wars. Many lived out a lopsided relationship with European modernism, unable to ignore or digest it. They made a practice of assimilating modernism piecemeal, only as required to fulfill their own agendas. They extended a native tradition of idiosyncratic art and founded a tradition of unprogrammatic contemporary art which is modern but not modernist. Nadelman's best work is stubbornly idiosyncratic, resisting, diffusing, and confusing classification. They will not stand for any cause but their own, an unmediated private language exclusive of polemic, equally inclusive of an extended past and an entire present. The dolls may acquire a larger audience or rest where they have lain so long awaiting those who would seek them out. My guess is that they will become known when they are needed.

Notes
2. Elie Nadelman, in conversation with his son, Jan.
3. To the best of my knowledge the late work has been shown only after Nadelman's death, in small selections in the following exhibitions:
4. Tanagra was a town pre-eminent among several ancient Greek Boeotia for fired-clay figurines and groups in poses and activities from everyday life.

Further Reading
Writing on Nadelman, and in particular the late work, is scant. I would recommend foremost Lincoln Kirstein’s Elie Nadelman, noted above (#5), from which most other studies begin. Kirstein is also author of the Museum of Modern Art’s 1948 catalogue and Elie Nadelman Drawings, New York, Hacker Art Books, 1970. Klaus Kertess’ “Child’s Play: The Late Work of Elie Nadelman,” in Artforum, March 1985, is the only piece, previous to my own, written on the late work exclusively.
THE CRITIC AND THE HARE: MEDITATIONS ON THE DEATH OF MY RABBIT

ANN MC COY

The rabbit in question, a black doe named Celeste, for eight years had provided me with a much needed link to nature in New York City. She was a forest spirit who instructed me in the mysteries of the animal realm. In Greek art and mythology the hare was associated with Aphrodite, goddess of love and miraculous fertility. Aphrodite’s academies taught the value of sympathy, compassion, and positive human relations. The rabbit seemed to possess all of these qualities. The hare also belongs to the moon goddesses, and as Hare in the Moon represents the “other side” or unseen aspect, the unconscious, which if honored, is the source of spiritual wisdom – the “light in the darkness” which guides the traveler. In ancient China, the rabbit was emblematic of the yin (Earthly and yielding) force on account of its lack of belligerence, its ingenuity in finding ways of avoiding direct attack.

The critic in question arrived at my studio on December 5th at four o’clock as scheduled. He spent the better part of two hours looking at my work and listening as I spoke of the relation of what he was seeing to dreams, visions, and the collective unconscious. Outwardly polite, a good listener, this critic, associated with modern ideologies like neo-Freudianism, object relations, and Marxism, sat patiently as I went on to speak more specifically of my dreams of the vulture goddess Nekebehet and her meaning for the modern woman. As I finished, the critic turned and said, “All animals are children.”

This reductionist statement surely didn’t apply to vultures, whom the Egyptians emblazoned upon the breastplates of mummies. As ‘mothers’ of the dead, vultures were considered female only and fertilized by the spirit-wind. Four words from the critic robbed the vulture of its numinous power as a symbol in my dreams, thence in my work. I felt robbed of an essential part of my vocabulary. The critic asked to use my bathroom. I said of course he could but that the rabbit was in there. I could go in and put her in her cage. He blanched at the thought. I said I could go in and take her out. He balked, with hands on the door jamb and stood rigidly for a second or two. He didn’t want anything to do with the rabbit. So, I thought to myself, he’s phobic when it comes to animals, and particularly afraid of animals associated with the feminine.

We are still as much possessed by autonomous psychic contents as if they were Olympians. Today they are called phobias, obsessions, and so forth...

— C.G. Jung

After quoting Yeats and calling me an “Irish romantic,” the critic hurriedly left in search of a safe place to relieve himself.

This piece was originally published in an exhibition catalogue, 1988.
BOOK REVIEWS

JOSE GUADALUPE POSADA: MESSENGER OF MORTALITY
edited by Julian Rothenstein, introduction by Peter Wollen,
essays by Jean Charlot and Diego Rivera

Since the turn of the century, political cartoons and murals in Mexico have been considered forms of "street art." Political cartoons were published from the 1880s on in prints and chapbooks capturing the imagination of the masses. Jose Guadalupe Posada's lurid, eye-catching engravings, often accompanied with jocular lyrics, reached millions of readers decades before the Socialist Revolution of 1910.

Posada was born in 1851, and died in 1913, just when the revolts of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa were taking place. Very little is known of his biography and most of it has been recorded in Posada: The Man Who Portrayed an Epoch, by Antonio Rodriguez (Mexico, Editorial Domes, S.A. 1977). His father was a baker who had a small shop. The young Posada was a student in the Municipal Academy of Drawing in Aguascalientes and later became a wall painter. By 1871 he was already producing lampoons for El Jicote ("The Wasp"), a newspaper of the opposition. Political reasons forced him to move to Leon, Guanajuato, and afterwards to Mexico City, where he created a fruitful partnership with Antonio Venegas Arroyo, a producer of street gazettes. It was here that Posada created thousands of cartoons and lithographs, love letters, school books, card games, penny dreadfuls, and commercial advertisements like posters for circus performances or bull fights. His engravings almost always had a political twist, and at times illustrated topical ballads for which Venegas Arroyo wrote satirical verses. Often they would be distributed anonymously, leading over the years to the appearance of falsified "Posadas." He ridiculed the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz and made fun of the foreign debt and the colonization of Cuba by the United States. It contained a lucid forward by Eduardo Paolozzi, an introduction by Antonio Rodriguez, and some 150 engravings. Messenger of Mortality, with a larger format and a soft cover, contains more than 500 illustrations. It accompanied the Posada exhibition at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, U.K., in 1989, and has been edited by Julian Rothenstein. Its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in 1989, and has been edited by Julian Rothenstein. Its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities in

The Redstone Press did a beautiful job in 1988 gathering Posada's wonderful engravings in a boxed, hardback edition titled Mexican Popular Prints by Jose Guadalupe Posada. It contained a lucid forward by Eduardo Paolozzi, an introduction by Antonio Rodriguez, and some 150 engravings. Messenger of Mortality, with a larger format and a soft cover, contains more than 500 illustrations. It accompanied the Posada exhibition at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art, U.K., in 1989, and has been edited by Julian Rothenstein. Its most outstanding element, besides the engravings, is the introduction by the art historian Peter Wollen. He analyzes the artist's life and oeuvre and points to some similarities between him and the European avant-garde such as Gustave Courbet, a French painter enchanted with popular imagery. He discusses also the interest some artists like Piet Mondrian had in the Mexican cartoonist because of their re-evaluation of non-canonical and "primitive forms of art". Wollen even refers to Posada's impact on the Russian lubki (posters and small books containing ballads, tales and tracts) made by Mikhail Larionov and by other Russian Golden Fleece and Donkey's Tail artists. Larionov became acquainted with Posada through his friend Rivera, whom he frequently visited in his Paris studio. Other cultural links are noted, such as Posada's appeal to Sergei M. Eisenstein, as well as to a few Surrealists like Andre Breton, who cherished the calavera as a cruel and morbid, yet humorous creation.

In Posada we are transported to a universe of gothic, at times grotesque, magical, and bizarre incidents. He deals with the urban poor, lumpen street people, and loves the catastrophic, satire and death. Death is his major preoccupa-
personal expression and vanguard mythology, and the particular emotional and qualified by the dislocations of war and political exile, the difficulty of reconciling her many journeys, literal and metaphoric, is not the focused trajectory all too known male Surrealist colleagues. Yet the path that unfolds as we follow her on narrative magical realism seldom equalled in the twentieth century. Departing from orthodox Surrealism and toward a version of fantastic and veris­ tic­ al­ ly ambivalent relationship to the Surrealist movement. By the late 1950s, she had moved away from orthodox Surrealism and toward a version of fantastic and nar­ ra­ tive­ mag­i­ cal­ real­ is—­seldom­equalled­in­the­twentieth­century.­Departing­from­ ear­lier­writers,­Kaplan­de­mon­i­strates­that­Varo­was­no­more­follower­of­her­be­­l­ known­male­Surrealist­col­leagues.­Yet­the­path­that­unfolds­as­we­follow­her­on­ her­many­journeys,­li­ter­al­and­metaphoric,­is­not­the­focused­trajectory­all­too­ often­constructed­by­biographers­to­explain­the­careers­of­successful­male­artists.­ It­is­rather­a­looping,­layered­skein­of­commitments—­to­art­and­to­friends—­ quali­fied­by­the­dislocations­of­war­and­political­exile,­the­difficulty­of­reconciling­ personal­expression­and­vanguard­mythology,­and­the­particular­emotional­and

UNEXPECTED JOURNEYS: THE ART AND LIFE OF REMEDIOS VARO
by Janet A. Kaplan
Abbeville Press, New York, 1988, $35

Remedios Varo was one of a group of young women, all of them beautiful and talented and virtually none of them French, who sought an artistic identity among the Surrealists in Paris during the 1930s. Janet Kaplan’s long­waited cri­­ ­tical­biography,­Unexpected­Journeys:­The­Art­and­Life­of­Remedios­Varo,­is­the­ first­book­in­English­to­document­the­Spanish­painter’s­life­and­to­establish­a­con­ vincing­artistic­context­within­which­to­view­her­work.

Like­her­female­contemporaries,­Varo­maintained­a­tangential­and­distinct­ly­ ambivalent­relationship­to­the­Surrealist­movement.­By­the­late­1950s,­she­had­ moved­away­from­orthodox­Surrealism­and­toward­a­version­of­fantastic­and­nar­ ra­tive­mag­i­cal­real­­ism­seldom­equalled­in­the­twentieth­century.­Departing­from­ ear­lier­writ­ers,­Kaplan­de­mon­i­strates­that­Varo­was­no­more­follower­of­her­be­­l­ known­male­Surrealist­col­leagues.­Yet­the­path­that­unfolds­as­we­follow­her­on­ her­many­journeys,­li­ter­al­and­metaphoric,­is­not­the­focused­trajectory­all­too­ often­constructed­by­biographers­to­explain­the­careers­of­successful­male­artists.­ It­is­rather­a­looping,­layered­skein­of­commitments—­to­art­and­to­friends—­ quali­fied­by­the­dislocations­of­war­and­political­exile,­the­difficulty­of­reconciling­ personal­expression­and­vanguard­mythology,­and­the­particular­emotional­and

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Remedios Varo was one of a group of young women, all of them beautiful and talented and virtually none of them French, who sought an artistic identity among the Surrealists in Paris during the 1930s. Janet Kaplan’s long­waited cri­­ ­tical­biography,­Unexpected­Journeys:­The­Art­and­Life­of­Remedios­Varo,­is­the­ first­book­in­English­to­document­the­Spanish­painter’s­life­and­to­establish­a­con­ vincing­artistic­context­within­which­to­view­her­work.

Like­her­female­contemporaries,­Varo­maintained­a­tangential­and­distinct­ly­ ambivalent­relationship­to­the­Surrealist­movement.­By­the­late­1950s,­she­had­ moved­away­from­orthodox­Surrealism­and­toward­a­version­of­fantastic­and­nar­ ra­tive­mag­i­cal­real­­ism­seldom­equalled­in­the­twentieth­century.­Departing­from­ ear­lier­writ­ers,­Kaplan­de­mon­i­strates­that­Varo­was­no­more­follower­of­her­be­­l­ known­male­Surrealist­col­leagues.­Yet­the­path­that­unfolds­as­we­follow­her­on­ her­many­journeys,­li­ter­al­and­metaphoric,­is­not­the­focused­trajectory­all­too­ often­constructed­by­biographers­to­explain­the­careers­of­successful­male­artists.­ It­is­rather­a­looping,­layered­skein­of­commitments—­to­art­and­to­friends—­ quali­fied­by­the­dislocations­of­war­and­political­exile,­the­difficulty­of­reconciling­ personal­expression­and­vanguard­mythology,­and­the­particular­emotional­and
Kaplan shows Varo to have been both influenced by her closest colleagues—particularly Esteban Francés, Salvador Dalí, and Leonora Carrington—and also capable of subverting Surrealist ideologies. Her experiments with sfumage (smoking) and decalcomania (blotting) transformed the technique of automatism from a device for revealing unconscious sources to a means of consciously controlling the viewer's access to an imagery. Her artistic sources are revealed to be complex and as closely linked to the intellectual and cultural life of republican Spain as to that of Surrealist Paris. Moreover, Varo’s later work (despite lingering problems in dating the paintings produced in Mexico during the 1950s) offers a refreshing antidote to Surrealist constructions of Woman as ethereal child or erotically-manipulated set of body parts. No longer the repository of male desire, the Varo heroine (often an amalgam of its author’s multiple personae) is an intrepid voyager. Rain forests, mountains, and deluges are no match for her wind-driven shells, her fantastic vehicles fashioned from bits of clothing, abandoned pods, and gerrymandered riggings. When not in flight, she is a pseudo-scholar overturning the received wisdom of centuries of masculine control over knowledge and replacing it with new laws of gravity, new forms of molecular structure. She is a creator too in her own right, capable of charming birds out of trees by playing a ray of sunlight like a harp, or creating musical order out of chaos. Varo’s commitment to parodying male structures of knowledge and art (as, for example, in her “scholarly” paper De Homo Rodans written in 1969 and advancing new hypotheses on the origins of man and his ancestors, or her thesis on the origins of the “First Umbrella,” the remains of which she claimed were found in the course of a Mesopotamian dig, several strata below tablets bearing cuneiform script) raises new questions about the use of parody by women artists and its function in the visual field.

Varo’s contribution to the evolution of a “peinture féminine” remains to be theorized. Future attempts to locate her more firmly within current academic discourses on female subjectivity and representation and sexuality will be heavily indebted to Kaplan’s pioneering study. Loaded as it is with biographical, historical, and artistic information, Unexpected Journeys makes for good reading. Refreshingly devoid of academic jargon, it offers all the “pleasures of the text” along with its scholarly exegesis. — Whitney Chadwick
For the very notion of tradition as precedent relies upon a model of lineage and genealogy for artistic and intellectual practice which runs the dangerous risk of replicating patriarchal systems in which legitimacy is achieved through inheritance and influence. Moreover, it is clearly impossible to separate out a woman's tradition (let alone a feminist one) as autonomous. Women's work must be seen as part of a heterogeneous set of practices in which men and women have participated, but with an investigation of the role of gender in determining the position of specific individuals according to their circumstances. I would argue that the notion of tradition, with its metanarrative pretensions and unifying tendencies, works against this investigation, and that both Pollock's book and Robinson's anthology offer evidence of the problems encountered by feminist artists and scholars attempting to formulate contemporary positions while investigating historical frameworks. Since much feminist work continues to involve questions of legitimation for both the subject matter and method the issue of tradition remains active. Tradition involves not only the search for a lineage of role models but also an assessment of the means by which women situate themselves in any order of representation (critical or historical) given the exclusionary policies which have governed the construction of the feminine subject position up until (and — some would argue convincingly — including) the present.

There are no simple answers to any of these questions, and the combined arguments raised in these books make evident the extent to which such questions are continually refracted into component and often conflictual aspects by the increasing visibility of women artists from varying ethnic, class, and political backgrounds. As a result, feminist art history and art practice have developed multiple facets — from the recuperation of women artists, their reinsertion into the narrative and vision of art history, to the challenging of the terms on which such canons are constructed, to the critique of contemporary criticism and its phallic biases, to a full scale rejection of the need for tradition itself. In spite of the obvious struggles which arise as a result of differing agendas, one hopes that the cumulative effect of all of these activities will be to intervene strategically in the altogether too stable power structures of conventional and — need we say it? — male dominated domains of art history and practice.

Griselda Pollock's approach to the study of art history from a feminist perspective has been based on a received tradition of art history and the terms on which its canon has been formed. In _Vision & Difference_ Pollock examines the construction of the female gendered subject in nineteenth-century art as a thematic object of depiction, a position structured within the work as the focus of the male gaze, and, more importantly, as the site of origin of a female look. Pollock is working with both Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches, and is careful to elaborate class and gender as operating factors in the determination of a woman's social position, challenging a Marxist approach (as in the work of T.J. Clark) which identifies women as a class only. Her discussion of Elizabeth Siddall, the woman who served as model to a number of Pre-Raphaelite painters, demonstrates that an adequate assessment of Siddall's position requires understanding the ways in which the intersection of both the axes of class and gender positioned her in relation to the structure of the society in which she lived, and to the men whom she served as muse and model.

The feminist critique of the depiction of women is already well-established, and though Pollock's contributions are valuable for their sophistication and scholarship, the most provocative material in this book is that which explores less well established ground as in the chapter "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity." Pollock convincingly argues that the entire spectular project of modernity, as it has been conventionally understood, was masculinist: the organization of space, the identified sites and the occupation of public, urban environments, as well as the codes according to which such gendered sites/sites were inscribed in the works of such male artists as Degas, Guys, Manet, and Renoir. Contrasting these works and modes with those of female impressionist artists, Morisot and Cassatt, Pollock clarifies the differences which such gender-determined spatial ordering effected in the work. In short, the space of the late 19th-century city, long considered the site of modernity is, Pollock reveals, the site of masculinity. Pollock's examination of the spatial domains inhabited by and inhibiting women artists introduces an essential bifurcation of the historical perspective, and a methodological implication for the examination of all spatial renderings in the visual arts with respect to gendered subject positioning.

My only reservation with Pollock's discussion is that in building a consistent argument she aligns almost all domestic interiors with a set of negative qualifiers, terms them claustrophobic, restrictive and so on, seeming to accept the prioritization of the male associated realms of street, theater, square, and spectacle as expansive, liberating, open. To forego any nuancing of the relations to domestic space — the intimacy of enclosed gardens, balconies (safe sites of privileged looking), private boudoirs as peaceful refuges — leads to a reductive reading of the elements of the images. Her interpretation of depiction of foreground/background relations, of window frames vs. external boulevard feels warped by a retroactive projection in which all women artists always felt trapped, resentful of their entrapment. This reduces formal interpretation to a code of equivalences which seems too grounded in contemporary values and too aligned with a radical feminist position which could not have been fully available to most nineteenth-century women.

By her reconstitution of the social construction of the activity of _looking_ as a gendered activity, Pollock becomes involved in the analysis of the enunciative apparatus of the female gaze. While much of the feminist critique of visual representation has been concerned with pointing out the extent to which women have been the objects of the male gaze, constructed for the scopophilic pleasure of the man (whether as persons or as images), the ways in which _women_ look, construct their own visual space and represent it, have been paid little attention. At one extreme of feminist criticism, the very activity of looking is considered to be male, and no feminine subject position is considered to exist. Articulating the notion of the feminine gaze raises some of the same difficulties as that posed by considering the woman as speaker/writer in relation to the (supposedly) phallic symbolic order of language: do women take the place of men and participate in scopophilic pleasure either by identifying with the female objects or reverse the situation by placing male figures in similar positions? Do women alter the system of representa-
tion and prevent the depiction of women and/or men because of the pornograph-
ically dominating power of the gaze? Do women look for a tradition of the femi-
nine look and work to recover its spaces and modes, inscribing gender difference
within an art practice?

The women artists and critics anthologized by Hilary Robinson present a
wide range of feminist positions. Radical, lesbian, third world, and ethnic women
concerned with foregrounding their identity are represented along with women
whose work has been informed by critical theory. This book will also (as Pollock's)
provide a valuable teaching tool, since it is difficult to get systematic access to
these materials. As critical theory has established its own hegemony in university
curricula it has unfortunately tended to repress the fuller range of feminism and
art practice. The vitality and diversity of the contemporary feminist art scene are
well represented here, though I long for a large, opulent book filled with visual
material of the same richness and range.

In the opening essay, Zena Herbert's account of the repression of her work
through censorship by other women points out some of the problems with the at-
tempt to establish a unified code of feminism (or implicit "rule of correctness" as
Angela Patriomt terms it), as do the discussions of the depiction of lesbian sex-
uality (Anne Robinson), feminist erotica (Kathy Myers), and black women's pedagogy (Chila Burman). The tensions which erupt in certain passages of this an-
thology show how the emerging discourses of feminist activity in the visual arts
are unlikely to consolidate any single position of power. The only unifying theme
is that the personal is political, and, in reverse, the political so highly personalized
that it requires individuated articulation to be effectively expressed. The useful-
ness of engaging women in dialogue with each other is made clear in exchanges
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Margot Lovejoy has written a much needed history of Postmodern art. *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media* delineates the relationship between today’s electronic technologies and cultural change, thereby formulating a comprehensive and forceful social philosophy of our technical civilization. As the technology of photography created the conditions for Modernism, electronic technologies have created the present conditions for what has been called Postmodernism. Lovejoy reviews the entire history of the impact of technology on art, starting with the Camera Obscura, through photography, film, video, and up to the current breakthroughs in computers and robotics.

But beyond technique she widens the scope of the inquiry into the consequences that technology is having on society and art with references to the writings of Lyotard, Benjamin, Foucault, and Virilio. Carter Ratcliff in his Forward helps give the reader a sense of what the dominance of electronics might mean for the present and future of art. The new artistic opportunities offered upon reflection of this survey are many, but so are the insights into today’s deepest artistic conflicts. The surge of retro/neo/conservativism indicative of 80s art can now be seen as melanchole doubt over the threatening disintegration electronics brings to the established. At bottom this reflects a defensive regression to a pre-electronic world in the face of the re-identification needed to work with the new ocular power. This new epistemic field that electronics brings to art, the various enunciative modalities manifest in its discursive impulse, and the iconoclastic disdain for the once lucent face of the re-identification needed to work with the new manifest in its discursive impulse, and the iconoclastic disdain for the once lucent face of the re-identification needed to work with the new. The decay of the modern mode in favor of a more complicated, inclusive, and erudite view, (without the romancing of the disciplining and normalizing potential of technology) is probed, not in order to restore a naive faith in the nobility of pre-electronic ideas of art, but rather to cast light on the manifold implications of art’s pre-electronic history within this book.

The decay of the modern mode in favor of a more complicated, inclusive, and erudite view, (without the romancing of the disciplining and normalizing potential of technology) is probed, not in order to restore a naive faith in the nobility of pre-electronic ideas of art, but rather to cast light on the manifold implications of art’s new ignobility. *Postmodern Currents* recounts the involvement of such artists as Jenny Holzer, Les Levine, Nam June Paik, and Bill Viola with advanced technology such as video, computer, and copier. Other artists discussed include Laurie Anderson, Gretchen Bender, Dan Graham, Judith Barry, and Krzysztof Wodiczko.

Not understanding what electronics is doing to art and our world, many have been beset with anxiety and a feeling of insecurity. For others the new situation has brought out a feeling of ecstatic freedom. In proposing and expanding this thesis, Lovejoy reopens the debate over the social, political, economic, and philosophical meaning of electronic impulses in our age. She has provoked us to re-examine our assumptions, and by doing so, she helps us see beyond our banal and traditional assertions. The effect is an uncontainable intellectual explosion, a heated recognition of the fluidity that has overtaken contemporary society. — *Joseph Nechvatal*

**Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media**
by Margot Lovejoy
**Forward by Carter Ratcliff**
**UMI Research Press, $44.95**

HYPERFRAMES: A POST-APPROPRIATION DISCOURSE
by Tricia Collins & Richard Milazzo
Antoine Candau Editions, Paris
Volume 1 of 3, French & English

We carry analysis of Self to the extreme, we let the multiplicity and intertwining of rhythms harmonize with the measure of the Idea. — Jean Marcus

What is Collins and Milazzo? Often they are thought of as creators of decorative texts, texts of free flowing form, swirling, with a skipping or undulating rhythm that often obscures the difficult. In *Hyperframes*, a collection of their writings based on two Yale lectures, their writings for their magazine *Effects: A Magazine for New Art Theory*, and for numerous art exhibits they organized (up to "Paravision," May 1980), they continue to fascinate us with their fantasy of invention, their predictions of postmodern anti-functionalism, and their touching desire to utilize the news media as a means of spreading beauty as evenly through society as comfort or hygiene. One of the most intriguing aspects of their theoretical work is its attempt to reconcile two diametrically opposed attitudes, one which believes art to be the handmaiden to the social, at the call of machine technology, while the other holds that the social is to be enslaved by art—shaped, formed, molded to suit fancy. As a result, some see them providing the hope of art in life, while others are sure of the outcome in degeneracy, where their easily identifiable curvilinear or whiplash motif is turned into a meretricious trademark manufactured as a calling card to culture.

In *Hyperframes*, their restless, moving, agitated texts take on a nervous, expressive quality, giving art historical ideas an ornamental, sinewy value which initially overrides all other considerations. But on closer inspection they can be seen to reach out in the direction of logical and geometrical constraining striving not so much for the electronic as for the archaistic form. Only a superficial appreciation of their prose style restricts us to a floating, impossible, and twisted understanding. This style overflows in an exigent pattern, which at its best has serious connections to ideas in social and political reform.

The texts in *Hyperframes*, despite their quirks, confusions, and consistent refusals to be categorized, are an integral part of the present-day art scene. Yet they also seem to reach out into the 21st-century, while at the same time standing at the end of a long series of 20th-century anti-styles, which consciously set out to react against what had preceded them — styles whose very existence depends solely on the new, the desire to shift ground constantly, and negate all that has come immediately before. The texts presented here long to break with today’s slavishly copied historicism, but like all things that insist on being totally new, they are bound in some degree to the past which they reject and which indirectly inspires their efforts.

*Hyperframes* charts the erosion of the early 1980s ‘picture’ theory, the refutation of critique, and the refutation of (self) expression, as it became manifest through neo-expressionist painting. One finds here a disillusionment with neo-expressionism and the seeds of the counter discourse of critical painting, with its signature conceptual reformation of abstraction. Ross Bleckner, Peter Halley, and
Annette Lemieux's work is exemplary of this trend. One can also begin to see the eventual abstraction-appropriation collapse which was indicative of the early, struggling, new, post-conceptual work, as exemplified by Sarah Charlesworth's photos, or Peter Nagy's 'canon' paintings. Also, the rise of new hybrid forms are championed here with writings concerning the early work of Phillip Taaffe, Joel Otterson, Gretchen Bender, Allan McCollum, Peter Nadin, Haim Steinbach, Jeff Koons, and Joel Fisher among others; culminating in a general theory of formal irony. Collins and Milazzo ask us to look with them for the flamboyant change of appearance, as well as the essential spirit which produced it. To be different, unique, unpredictable is their main theme.

But there is a deeper motivation behind this restless desire for change. With a new social conscience foremost in their minds, they critically continue the search for ways in which technology can be used realistically, to incorporate new mediums into the hermetic world of art. Today the manufacturer shows no inclination in slowing down the rapid mass production of the image in order to think about either its form or function. These images flood the mushrooming consumer market. But Collins and Milazzo have gone far to reconcile the new information, industrial developments with the world of poetic imagination. It is their implied belief that that explosion was inevitable and that in the struggle for existence only the fittest survive, with the one difference being that their new aesthetic demands more than just a close scrutiny of art in the age of electronics. Instead the image now would be transformed and transcended, and so likewise the critical text.

Finally, I detect a strong drive towards secular mysticism adding its own rarefied flavor to their writings. Such a modus vivendi presents the other side of Collins and Milazzo's writing: weird, fantastic, mysterious, rich, wasteful, and esoteric. It is that approach that led to the art for art's sake attitude adopted by Oscar Wilde who argued that life itself should be art, with no utilitarian value. Perhaps some of this attitude indirectly produced these texts, with their free-flowing draperies, entangled, as they are, with the dreamy expression of heavy lidded eyes, semi-erotic, semi-chaste, like the text of an exotic cult whose aims and purposes are never to be divined. — Joseph Nechvatal

LUCKY GUYS: SOME RECENTLY FILED CATALOGUES

Mel Bochner: Drawings, David Nolan Gallery, NYC, 1988
M.W. Wilson: Textenbuch der Botanik, Text by Octavio Zaya, Fernando Alcaldes Gallery, Barcelona, 1988
John Chamberlain, New Sculpture, Text by Donald Judd, The Pace Gallery, 1989

Long after the exhibition is over and the artworks are dispersed, a catalogue continues to stand for that body of work, mark its progress, convey an idea and idea of what went on there, where too few, it often seems later, ever saw it. Whether artist, gallery, or museum generated, all catalogues have for intention the desire to preserve, promote, and validate a period of artistic work. In what seems a recent explosion of printed documentation, of prose-saturated press releases, of catalogues of all shapes and sizes, it is clear the degree to which the art world and the artist have realized and acted upon what writers have known all along: the printed word (the half-tone reproduction) travels easily in handy formats, serves to connect an artist's work to an expanding, widely spread audience, giving the particular exhibition a posthumous existence.

Enter the catalogue essay. Catalogue essays buttress the reproduced imagery, locating and disseminating the various meanings of the work. Though largely ignored as a form, when a good writer bears down on the work of a fine artist, a hybrid form of belles-lettres is born. Part biography, part description, part evaluative analysis, part rhapsody, the catalogue essay's specificity, its contribution to the art of perception, can be considerable.

From the images reproduced in the catalogue Richard Deacon, though perfectly well presented, I'm not sure I could yet call myself a fan of this British sculptor's work, especially as to the effect his labor-intensive surfaces have in the overall feeling of his shapes, but to read Peter Schjeldahl on the forty-year-old artist is a dazzling experience. In baseball parlance, Schjeldahl is a veteran game winner. He knows the situations and the hitters; he's all elbows and knees. His pitch is always nibbling the corners, tantalizing and unhittable, "I rack my brains for things to say," he once said, ten years ago. His practice generates perhaps the most fluid engaging prose style in the art-writing business today.

Schjeldahl's five-part essay on Deacon brings into focus the concerns, materials, and significance of this artist. And what better raison d'être for the catalogue essay than that it create the appetite for the kind of aesthetic experience detailed within. Schjeldahl is a poet of the offbeat aperçu ("Deacon suggests that stumbling may be a way of dancing" and "The work looks over-qualified to be sculpture"), a writer for whom the sentence is a pliant muscle in the flexing of his intelligence.

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When enthusiastic, the writer can be giddy with praise; when grappling with obstinate form not above confessing to a certain frustration. In the case of Richard Deacon, one can sense how the effort of writing the essay, of thinking through the sculptural and linguistic subtleties prompted by Deacon's various modes, contributed to the hard-won and scrupulous claims being made. Writing discovers the perception adequate to the work. Under Schjeldahl's mind-churning-for-meaning gaze, his image-rich prose establishes the context of the social, workmanlike, and aesthetic overtones that situate Deacon's work in late 80s sculpture, for which we are, simply lucky.

A few short paragraphs borrowed from Paul Valery's essay "Degas, Dance, Drawing" introduce Mel Bochner's "Drawings," the French polymath's characteristically condensed eloquence offering several useful ideas when thinking of Bochner's work. One is that drawing is an "impetuous impulse rushing upon its fulfillment, upon the possession of what one wants to see." Another is, that the mind is not a given, but a thing to be made, and is only itself when employing "all its reserve forces."

Documenting a late 1988 exhibition at the David Nolan Gallery, the catalogue lists eleven works, all charcoal on paper, most taking their names from Roman streets, though a few are identified by what has become an ongoing series, "The Quartets." All but three pieces are made up of four panels of rectangular paper, arranged in various formal ways around a central void. On these sheets of paper, as if from some deep space of undifferentiated matter, fly any number of drawn cubes, some hurtling in spiral formation toward the viewer, others spinning madly through galactic spume, agitated by a more random hand. Within this monadic tumbling physicality, Bochner plays surface against depth, specificity against indeterminacy, finally coaxing and conjuring his ur-matter cubes from the smeared out erasures of previous orders. All elements of these drawings feel as if they were seized from some originary whirlwind.

Bochner can create a slow absorptive space, or he can heat his forms to the melting point. In one moody disjunct two panel piece called "Via Della Pace," he seems to insert a psychological dimension by the tenuous touching of two cubes at the juncture of the abutting sheets of paper. While everything around this point of contact recedes into the vastness of inchoate gas, this touch dominates the piece, and doubled by the "peace" in the title, seems to steer the discourse toward a more personal note. By an always felt consideration of foreground and background, of directionality and momentum, these drawings are asking, albeit in their own stripped down way, a more humanist question. Where have we come from, where are we going, what values will sustain us enroute?

M.W. Wilson is a catalogue for an exhibition of paintings in Barcelona by 30-year-old Australian, Mark Wilson, who moved to New York in 1982. I came by accident upon examples of this painter's work at the Fawbush Gallery in NYC, and showing interest, was given this catalogue. With text in Catalan, Spanish, and English, the catalogue sports fifteen color plates, two studio photos, and a great title page stolen from an old-time German botany book. This seductive immersion sent me back around the rooms at Fawbush, studying more closely his painted surfaces, the stained browns, golds, dark greens, terra cotta, seeing with a clearer eye the way he played off presentations of foliage, floral wreathes, or ornamental filigree against a deep space of vertiginous, sometimes disruptive gestural bravado. I liked the catalogue, I liked the paintings.

This perhaps ideal scenario, where paintings lead to a catalogue that takes one back to the paintings, would not have occurred if the paintings hadn't been of interest to begin with. Catalogues can pump up mediocrity, but they can't keep it there, because gas leaks from faulty vessels.

Writing (Frazier, Bachelard) whose major metaphor is a botanical one. Because like plants we grow, bear fruit, and wither, we are inextricably linked to the vegetal realms. Wilson's best works embody this idea; like frescoes unearthed from Pompeian villas, they're still blooming amidst the wreckage. Straddling the idea of regeneration and inevitable decay, Mark Wilson is memorializing transiency. The paintings and the catalogue exist to prove it.

In John Yau's essay, "A Vision of the Unsayable," Brice Marden's 23-year career as a painter is divided into three separate periods, periods that correspond to shifts in the outward look of the paintings. Underneath it all, as we follow Yau's chronological tour, the essayist is building the case for Marden as a pure painter not of signs, not of appropriation or collage, but a painter of origins, paintings, in the catalogue, for some reason, looked better than the real thing! Or, almost. Certainly, the catalogue helped fill in the picture, provide evidence of an ongoing investigation of imagery, that, preceding the Fawbush works, gave to this young painter a suddenly felt historical significance.

Would this smartly produced catalogue have had any effect on me if I hadn't liked the pictures to begin with? I hope not. Was my susceptibility to the validating power of print allowing Wilson's work to take on a greater significance than I would naturally have accorded it, based on a quick scan? The catalogue was, after all, a catalogue. I was something I could take away, study later, be reminded by, confirm my hunches. If the preservation of work in book form is also its promotion, was I being "sold"? Catalogues, and their essayists, claim meaning for their subjects, thereby conferring value on them. When money (a.k.a. "serious" attention) is woven into the pages of a catalogue, the art machine's validation process is in full swing. And in the back of your head you might hear the doubting question: Why would anyone waste their resources on someone without talent? Just as in the front of your head you might hear the opposite: What kinda hype is this?

And then, most of us have noticed this effect: some big physical paintings look stylishly civilized and manageable in catalogues, where they can be "gotten" in a blink. Proportional reduction in size of actual works is a fact of print, making a tough painting palatable to the information scout on a print-raid run. Catalogue imagery's representation is always a misrepresentation.

In Wilson's case (in my case), because the reproductions caught and held my eye, I was able to increase my sense of where he'd come from almost instantly, scanning the catalogue pages without having to take a step or change my focus. This seductive immersion sent me back around the rooms at Fawbush, studying more closely his painted surfaces, the stained browns, golds, dark greens, terra cotta, seeing with a clearer eye the way he played off presentations of foliage, floral wreathes, or ornamental filigree against a deep space of vertiginous, sometimes disruptive gestural bravado. I liked the catalogue. I liked the paintings...
sources, archetypes, a painter whose style doesn’t change much but whose approach deepens.

Beautifully produced, and quite possibly already out of print, this cloth-only catalogue reproduces 13 color plates, 40 b&w images, and six studio interior photos. The works represented all date from 1983-1988, though Yau’s essay begins at the beginning, 1966, and like the retelling of the life of a saint, describes key miracles along the way. In this generous and thoughtful portrait, Marden becomes the type of the artist as self-effacer, a kind of alchemist mystic whose cautious decisions and cool restraint fashion canvases of hushed introspection. Interesting to note that in his quest to extract maximal force from a minimal presence (a subdued force from a maximized “presence”), Marden keeps his personal attention on things of this world, be they windows, doors, seashells, twigs, the female, Chinese poetry, or other art.

Summarizing Marden’s summarizing and usually compelling colors, his inventive divisions of the square or rectangle, and his new interest in drawing in paint, this catalogue monitors the ongoing adventure of an important artist on the brink of annexing more and more figurative allusions to what had once been a monochromatic effort to hold painting together by a single thread. One note, however, on the most recent phase: as achieved as some of these late works are, there’s something about more large-scale western calligraphy and/or interlocking “triangles” that seems to freeze-dry the pleasure before it’s delivered. There is an attempt at scale and wholeness in these works, but unlike Pollock, they barely seem alive. As composition, they wander, content to go nowhere. As serious as they appear, and as exquisite as some of the field colors are, they may be too willful, too big a canvas for too small a risk. The drawings, on the other hand, seem right.

John Chamberlain is an expensively produced, brightly illustrated presentation of the 62-year-old sculptor’s new work. This catalogue boasts an ingenious text by Donald Judd, who, gathering all he’d written about Chamberlain in the past (beginning in 1962), with new writing on the sculptor from late 1988, together with remarks on or by Jackson Pollock and others, has provided an articulate backdrop against which to see these latest products.

Citing excess, redundancy, voluminousness, and color as Chamberlain’s continuously reinvented qualities, Judd’s descriptions are always evaluative, his incisive analyses are always judgmental. He praises Chamberlain’s “simultaneously turbulent, passionate, cool, and hard” works for having introduced “the developments of American expressionism into sculpture.” Because of his clearly partisan thrusts, reading Judd is always helpful. He can make a difficult but limited vocabulary of description register clear tones. If he says wrong-headed things from time to time, they are meant to be provocative, to stimulate thought, as in, for example, “Now there is only one fine painter: Agnes Martin."

Turning to the bright and shiny reproductions, the reader is struck by their three-dimensional variability, their packed, colorful composition, their elusive “figurative” overtones, and the degree of structural integrity and expansiveness of emotion the best ones proudly convey. Strange that, unlike his early 60s car pieces, at no time does the viewer ever sense that these crumpled bent and compressed hunks of automobile scrap ever had anything to do with being a mere car. Packed with dizzy incident, fearless glitz, husky with brush sweep from every angle, Chamberlain’s in top form, he’s dealing with Rodin’s Balzac, his favorite color is white.

**Barry Le Va: 1966-1988** is a coffee-table-size, 176-page survey of California born (NYC since 1970) Barry Le Va’s primary work in sculpture, installation, and drawing. This copiously illustrated, informative catalogue is crucial if you want to know what the past 22 years have been like for this difficult and rewarding artist. In an extended essay by the show’s curator, Elaine A. King, titled “Logical Interferences,” the main ideas and shifting phases of Le Va’s output are put into good working order. In a follow-up essay, “Between the Lines,” Le Va’s drawings are examined by the consistently insightful discourse of Klaus Kertess.

Le Va seems to like the way apparent disorder, by the simple addition, placement, or adjustment of only a very few elements, becomes orderly. Conventionally asking the question, what can be included in sculpture, his floor pieces defy pinball logic, but challenge any viewer to follow the game. Le Va operates as if no system remains pure, or is interesting if it does so. Using few materials, but amply spread, his bearings, fibre board troughs (trampoline, cast hydrastone cubes or truncated columns) gain in complexity, rather than ease.

In the beautiful drawings of the early 80s you can see him dismantling the erector set in favor of interruptions, resistance, overlays, sudden densities, axial momentum, ovals, circles, speeding lines, the hum of purposeful labor made quietly impossible. A terrific sense of Le Va’s improvisatory adaptability in the set of making these abstract renderings of mechanical energy suffuses drawing after drawing. Very much bearing the stamp of their maker’s hand, these works create gorgeous original spaces with traditional geometric means.

Studying a Le Va sculpture, the eye is environmentalized. Using floor and wall, it appears, in its bizarrely divided extents, to diagram space toward some activity whose logic defies us. One is forced back upon the particulars; one thinks about the dance of decisions that went into the making of this elemental conundrum. If Chamberlain looks classic now (may be he always did), Le Va still seems outside, still pushing his investigations into uncharted perception, a good to easy certainties that frame most art production. — Geoffrey Young
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