M/E/A/N/I/N/G #8

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SYMBOLISM: CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS

Lenore Malen

In the Fall of 1989 I curated an exhibition and moderated a symposium on the topic of Symbolism at Cooper Union in New York. I wanted to take a fresh look at the Symbolist movement. Symbolism sowed the seed for much of the art of the 20th century but it is rarely talked about as an artistic attitude. The exhibition featured 14 artists among them Faith Wilding, Ann McCoy, Thom Cooney Crawford, Christopher Wilmarth, and Francesco Clemente) who explore a way of working largely suppressed in contemporary art. The seven speakers at the symposium dealt with Symbolism as a historic movement and discussed its contemporary manifestations. Peter Schjeldahl, Rob Storr, Nancy Spero, Ellen Lanyon, and myself have revised our talks for M/E/A/N/I/N/G.

I am interested in examining the relationship between Symbolism and allegory. While there has been little critical interest in Symbolism for decades, allegory, which has an affinity with structuralism because it points to the rift between an object or text and its meaning, is considered crucial to postmodernism. In contrast to allegory, Symbolism merely expands the capacity of images to suggest ideas or evoke emotions, without superimposing on them a system of belief or a theoretical position. If the additional meaning that Symbolism provides an artwork is less intellectually precise than that of allegory, it is also potentially more universal, with wider application. It also seems that the very distinction we make between allegory and Symbolism itself needs to be reexamined because that distinction is still based on early modernist theory and has yet to be understood from a more recent critical perspective.

The goal of the 19th-century Symbolists was to convey the essence of subjectivity, obliquely, through a series of pictorial or verbal analogies. For the Symbolist artists and writers subjectivity was synonymous with a mood of reverie and withdrawal. In painting, the mood was conveyed by using a repertory of psychologically charged images with mythological and erotic references. In poetry the mood was suggested through extremes of condensation and displacement: words served as both objects and symbols, having the immediacy of visual images and the abstractness of music. Mallarme’s desire to purify language, to use words abstractly by detaching them from their syntactical context made him a forebear of modernism. Jean-Paul Sartre called Mallarme “the prophet who announces our century.”

The Symbolists left behind a language of ambiguity meant to express the isolation of one human soul from another. Their poetry and painting invited interpretation but withheld meaning: Unlike the Symbolists, artists of our era identify emo-
tion with public signs and drawn symbols from outside of art which enormously invigorate it. While the Symbolists valorized fantasy, we valorize the "real." But now that we have left the materialist and rationalist 80s (rationalist in its obedience to theory) some of the ideas of the Symbolists may have more currency. Symbolism was an anti-positivist movement and its followers embraced irrationality as part of their world view. We may be due for a similar reaction to our own belief that "theory" can explain it all.

Symbolism also offers a concept of a work of art organized around a specific idea (a mood or a thought) which has an idiosyncratic emotional core anchored in subjectivity. It demands a rootedness in the artists' lived experience. In 1886 recalling Zola’s defense of Manet, the Symbolist Gustave Kahn wrote: "Our art’s essential aim is to objectify the subjective (the exteriorization of an idea), instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through a temperament)." In Austria Symbolism was called Gedankenmalerei - "thought painting." Emotion-charged ideas begot form, an idea came before form, before style.

Symbolism was about rapture, gravity, difficulty, sensuality. The Symbolists believed in absolute art, art as sacrament. And while it has been a huge step forward to abolish the elitism that went with some of those notions, (so much was left out of the definition of what "high art" was), there was something to be said for the power that was given to art then to move us.

I want to thank M.S. for her help.

Notes

Ellen Lanyon

Imagination outstrips all the world's magicians: it not only places the real before our eyes in a vivid image and makes distant things present, but also, with a power more potent than that of magic, it draws that which does not exist out of the state of potentiality, gives it a semblance of reality and makes us see, feel, and hear these new creations.

So said the Swiss critic Johan Jacob Bodner some 250 years ago. At that time the 18th century romantics were changing the face of art and paving the way for the introduction of Symbolism — a movement which was to touch and involve all of Europe in the late 19th century. The shift from allegory to symbol and the acknowledgement of myth as a prime motive for symbolic image-making placed the emphasis not on theory and doctrine but rather on the imagination of the artist.

It was such an invasion — winged creatures and tragic fluid figures evoking the poetic state of melancholy. The focus on the theatrical phenomena of the natural world characterized the content while the approach — with this new aesthetic — required a personal and obsessive attitude towards rendering the image.

It was the industrial revolution that was instrumental in killing off these visionaries. From then on a new pragmatism and traditional formalism overwhelmed content. It occurs to me that one must be concerned today that technology, mass media, and life support via the machine can, once again, block the visionary path. However, I do believe that human beings with poetic sensibilities tend to experience a fast recovery and have a tenacious grip on the spiritual survival of the planet.

The question as to what Symbolism has to offer to us one hundred years later has everything to do with the same individualistic/obsessive approach to one’s own art. The pluralism of the 1980s set a pace and it licensed the artist to make use of the symbol as a means of de-coding the complexities which constitute our environment — that environment being both physical and spiritual.

Mallarme charged his peers to deal with no straight description but rather, to elevate the symbolic. As I see it, current trends in painting demonstrate a revised attitude towards the descriptive and narrative as it symbolizes a state of “being.”

For instance, the new landscape painting which endeavors to conjure up an aura of atmospheric light and mystery and some recent figuration which alludes to frozen moments fraught with tension and suggestive innuendo cannot be labeled “straight” and, therefore, respond to the poets’ demand for an imaginative approach. Symbolism can provide the artist with an uncompromised position to act out his or her individuality and resist the run-of-the-pack mentality which prevails today. It can allow for privacy in the midst of an overpopulated artistic milieu. I think it can provide the political artist a means of communicating without resorting to banal realism. It can also allow for a stream-of-consciousness sensibility to evolve and document that visual poetry.

Note: as to the challenge of words versus symbols, I am of the opinion that the visual symbol conjures up a word or phrase in one’s mind to describe the impact of that symbolization, whereas upon hearing a word, or set of words intended to symbolize an idea, one visualizes the meaning and it becomes a registered trademark to the memory. In the silent films a gesture, a stance, an action symbolized an emotion or an intent. The advent of sound reversed the viewer’s interpretation as one followed the language. If I say the word “tower” you might visualize Pisa, a Robert Moskowitz painting, the photo-images of the Bechers, or the music-merchandising emporium on Broadway. But if I am to transmit the concept visually, I can more easily control what you perceive.

In another sense, I feel that a visual image can be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the receptive and emotional stance of the viewer. Words do have a more concrete and established symbolic meaning and are more universally translated into visual images. I have always felt that picture-making is my means of communicating the words I hear in my head and that without the use of symbolic imagery the translation from head to hand would result in mere description and the essence of the creative spirit would be lost. For words and images alike... Symbolism lives on... it is a state of mind.
SYMBOLISM 1989

Symbolism is an aesthetic of the mind's experience of its own reality. It was born in the 19th century, when the mind was first widely recognized as an object and not just a subject of experience. It is an aesthetic of thrilled, scared loneliness, which aims for communication as a rueful act of recognition shared between isolated selves. There is little to be said about Symbolism that wasn't said at the start by Charles Baudelaire. His sonnet "Correspondences" is still the basic text:

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Sometimes let out confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which observe him with familiar eyes.
Like long echoes mingling from afar
In a shadowy and deep harmony,
As vast as night and as clarion,
Perfumes, colors, and sounds are confounded.
There are perfumes as fresh as children's flesh,
As soft as ocean and green as prairie,
And others that are corrupted, rich, triumphant,
Having the diffusion of infinite things.
Such as amber, musk, incense, and aromatic resin,
Singing the transports of the spirit and the senses.

Note the idea of "the spirit and the senses," practically considered as the same thing. Baudelaire's Symbolism is sensuous, as I think any successful Symbolism must be. The most common modern distortion of Symbolism — which unfortunately is gaining a new following — is marked by an exalting of the terms "spirit," "the spiritual," and "spirituality," as if those were entities superior to the physical world. Baudelaire understood that "spirit," if it means anything, points to a lower, more animal component of humanity, not a higher. It is not a level where the functions of reason are transcended, but a level where those functions are humiliated. It is a level where the laboring senses, and the crazy tugs of memory and of sex, revolt against the mastery of reason, rioting in the mind's boiler room. Of all the senses activated in Baudelaire's sonnet, note that the sense of smell is favored. Smell is the lowest, most despicable sense, and the one most deeply linked to memory and sex — hence the most poetic, the most symbolizing. (Next come color and sound — and last comes touch, symbol of factual knowledge.)

After a hundred years, Symbolism is not old-fashioned, though it is fairly cliche-ridden. It is our aesthetic vernacular. New art and poetry are often the last places to look for fresh instances of it. Television is a forest of symbols. A notably poeticizing cultural phenomenon of recent years is the placement in magazines of those fold-out perfume samples — giving us little breaks in our day of fleeting delirium, and raising the thought of a new smell literacy. The way to re-engage Symbolism is not to contemplate vague images of transcendence, but to get back down into concrete contemporary joys and sorrows of the body. Mostly sorrows, in this time of disease, drugs, poverty, and general obscenity. Damage and dysfunction — in a temple of living, broken pillars — are the spiritual as well as political challenges now. You will get less far in all ways by aspiring to goodness than by grasping in particular the realities of hunger, anger, loneliness, and fear. Some say that the aesthetic is a frivolous consideration in face of suffering, but that's a failure to recognize the reality of the aesthetic as a bleeding wound.

As for criticism, Baudelaire knew about that, too. He wrote: "Sharpening as I went / The knife of my mind against my heart." When I speak of humiliating reason, by the way, I don't mean it's okay to be stupid. The finer the mind is that comes to grief in the senses, the richer the result. No cheating. The great fault of most art and poetry, now as always, is dopey vagueness: something indefinite happening to no one in particular. We have no use for that. We want the specific information of "amber, musk, incense, and aromatic resin."

The symbolic is a zone where the individual collides with the universal, producing a flash of light. Illuminated by the flash is the reality of the human heart, which is oxenness of nature and consciousness. As experience, the reality of the heart is not rare, and it is not subject to major innovation. "Fucking is the poetry of the masses," Baudelaire said. It is still true, though now it may be attended by pornography on a VCR. Things complicate, but things don't change. Special qualifications of the true artist or poet are ability and audacity to remember and to express, in specific terms, experiences that illuminate the reality of the heart. Another special qualification is the humility to see one's own experience as precisely not special, but as a mere inkling of boundless mysteries common to everyone. It may be a sign of such humility, though also of humiliation, that we are talking about these things 132 years after publication of Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal. In those 132 years, all sorts of progress have not budged the primitive terror, delight, and loneliness of the heart, which still aches to be set forth in symbols.

ISSUES AND SYMBOLISM

From the impetus of the personal, Artaud cut through the autobiographical, stretching and fracturing the symbolic order. In so doing, he de-emphasized the Western (French) notions of rationality in his search for the self — the body and spirit — a body disembodied, a mind tormented. From this breaking asunder from the classic, the institutionalized traditional came a re-creation of the symbol — a disordering of order.

This new symbolic order (in art) gives space for the re-invention of the body, an expression of the body in society exposing cause and effect, the oppressor and the oppressed.

I believe the symbolic works from the individual artist's subjectivity, its transformative power from the personal to an external reality, then entering the world.

* * *

Nancy Spero
Artaud is exceptional for having uttered the most extreme expressions of dislocation and alienation in the 20th century. He represents himself as the victim par excellence. While violent in gesture and language, he is masochistic and passive. Nevertheless, he plays the part of the female victim.

Women are often put down as screamers or irrational, characterized as one who screams but can’t act. The so-called mad woman is removed from any sort of participation in the external world. Women are made powerless by these kinds of allegations.

Artaud hated women and perhaps he is not recognized as playing the role of a woman because his symbolic worth is given male guise. His screams are granted male worth, the male rebel.

I identified with Artaud’s sense of victimage — using his language to exemplify my loss of tongue — fracturing his already fractured texts, because I felt a victim as regards to both being a woman and an artist. I used Artaud (for four years — 1969/70) “The Artaud Paintings,” “Codes Artaud”) to explore the boundaries of victimage (imaginary and real) although I know how much Artaud would have hated a woman re-using his language and shifting his implications. I used these fragments of texts in tension with my painted cut-out images to exemplify the artist (myself) rejected in bourgeois society.

I changed all this when I decided to turn my attention to real events, to real victims in real prisons, tortured for political reasons. In dealing with these extreme and actual situations I further began to explore other aspects of women’s experience, not only torture, but war and rape, birth, aging, work, dance, and women from many cultures and time periods even going so far as to envision the elusiveness of meaning occurs at the end of this one. Facing the breakdown of positivist modes of thought at the conclusion of another epoch of history.

Varieties of unease and expectation is but one of the dichotomies Symbolism confronts in purpose that each originally served. Done naively or with intentional disregard for such differences, Symbolist art has had a coercive effect on the psyche, one of the widely shared convictions of artists in the 80s is that the psyche is no longer — nor ever was — sacrosanct territory. Increasingly bombarded by information and minutely mapped by researchers, it has, they believe, ceased to be the safe haven of the spirit and is now just another site of contention between social forces.

Despite postmodernism’s announced aim of demystifying language, however, it has even more consistently remystified it by treating verbal manipulation as the all determining mechanism of identity. Prying symbols loose from their conventional contexts and exposing the political messages they subliminally convey, it has in the manner of its 19th-century antecedents, pseudo-science takes the place of social science. Consider the fantastic politics and economics of Beuys, the smoke and mirrors of Signor Polke, the dandified sexology of Clemente, or the color codes of Brice Marden. Most of all consider that whit-bang meta-fable Star Wars, and the contributions to that trilogy of Bill Mayer’s favorite oracle, the avuncular, and politely bigoted Joseph Campbell. If myths may be judged in importance by the size of the collective unconscious they stir, then forget the “cenacles” and check Variety’s box-office figures and the Nielsen ratings.

Historical consciousness inevitably intrudes upon any Symbolist reverence of the universal and the timeless, whatever the manner of its presentation. Culled from lost archives as well as borrowed from the aesthetic bag of tricksters long gone, Symbolist art has always sought to amalgamate heterodox traditions. Done critically, as in the work of Nancy Spero, this effort not only establishes overlooked correspondences and restores neglected archetypes to currency, it also points up distinctions inherent among the cultures from which these images derived and the differences in purpose that each originally served. Done naively or with intentional disregard for such differences, Symbolist art has had a coercive if not sinister aspect. At best, however, Symbolist art and its postmodern analogues give fair license to curiosity and fantasy, and prove the truth-telling capacity of signs whose past
usages elucidate their meaning but do not, cannot wholly circumscribe or finally pin-point it. It is Jorge-Luis Borges who understood this best. In a short text on Pascal, Borges cited the mystical logician's description of the universe as "an infinite sphere having its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere," remarking in his explanation of this paradox on its long descent from Plato, Dante, Giordano Bruno, Rabelais, and the legendary Hermes Trismegistus. "Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors" Borges began his essay. "Perhaps," he concluded it, "universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors." He is right. For it is in the particular intonations and accents with which such metaphors are uttered that the truth of Symbolist poetics rings out, just as it is in the canon-like repetitions of their echo that it survives, and, in the hesitant pause of periods such as this, is once again heard.

"DARK ART" INTO ALLEGORY: FROM TRANSFIGURATION TO REFIGURATION

DANIEL BARBIERO

In Aesthetic Theory, his last work, Adorno wrote that the dissonances of an aesthetically harsh art he called "dark art" would be the last viable form avant-garde art could assume. Yet even so, "dark art" clearly has been superseded by a more allusive aesthetic of refiguration. This art of refiguration takes formal elements of past styles, and brings them forward into a contemporary context, resulting in a sometimes disquieting synthesis of past form and present context. At work is a process of refiguration, or conversion: the past form is converted into a sign of the present, while the present is historicized through its containment within a formal element taken from the past. The paintings of Anselm Kiefer provide a good example of the process of refiguration: in many of his works, Kiefer has brought forward certain features of Northern Romantic landscape painting, and has used them to contain subject matter appropriate to the present. His Order of the Angels, as well as his other large-scale landscapes, refigure the broad perspectives associated with such Caspar David Friedrich paintings as Monk by the Sea, or Meadow at Griefswald. In doing so, Kiefer converts the panoramic view from a signifier of the Romantic sublime into a container fit for the remembrance of history's destructions. Ross Bleckner has effected a similar conversion of the Romantic sublime in his Architecture of the Sky series of paintings, though what is refigured in these paintings is not only a formal element of the past — in this case, a panorama of the night sky punctuated by a luminous dome of stars — but also a formal idea and some of its reverberations. That idea is the "vault of heaven," to which I will return later. Why an art of refiguration has superseded "dark art" is of interest. The dynamic that drives "dark art" into allegory is not the amelioration of human suffering — and therefore the elimination of the conditions that demand a "dark art" — nor the end of competition between art and daily life. Just the opposite. The force that bends "dark art" into refiguration is the collapse of the New — or rather, the impossibility of the New — which is itself brought about by a number of factors, not all of them confined to the realm of aesthetics. Life simply overtakes "dark art," forcing a turnover of forms that can only survive as allegory.

Typically, Adorno never specified what he meant by "dark art." Judging not only from comments in the book, which can be maddeningly general, but also from Adorno's long involvement with the music of Schoenberg and his circle, we can guess that "dark art" is an Expressionist, avant-garde art of some variety. For Adorno, art, as witness to suffering, transfigures suffering; perhaps no better short definition of Expressionism, and especially of the musical Expressionism that claimed Adorno's loyalty, exists. Perhaps it is fortuitous that Adorno was so
devoted to music. For it is in the progress of 20th-century music that we can see, outlined very clearly, the eclipse of “dark art” by refigured art. For the “darkness” in musical Expressionism derives not from words or settings, but from the tensions and manner of resolution set up in the relationships among pitches: these relationships create a kind of soundtrack of trauma. “Dark” painting is a more diverse matter, for its “darkness” can derive not only from a darkness of color (literally, a “dark art”), but also from grim subject matter, grimly rendered. (Leon Golub comes to mind with this latter prerequisite.) If we accept “dark art” to be some form of Expressionism, what then is the trajectory it traces in order to arrive at allegory?

In order to answer the above question, we must first ask whether or not “dark art” can remain dark. This would seem doubtful. For through familiarity, even the sign of suffering witness — the “dark” artwork, say, for example, Pender­ecki’s Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima, or Picasso’s Guernica — is converted if not to the sign of pleasure, then to the mark of aesthetic discrimination. Taste acts as an organ of absorption, and one can develop a taste for the signs of suffering in the same way that one can develop a taste for truffles (only more easily, perhaps). With repeated exposure, even the strongest forms become familiar. The familiarizing effects of a media culture of saturation vis a vis any kind of advanced art has become an accepted truth that has hardened into either a cliche or an article of faith, and is thus beyond or beside argument. Yet beyond the familiarity that repetition and reproduction afford, taste’s ability to allow the assimilation of even the darkest aesthetic seems less strange when we remember that every gallery show, every concert is a referendum in which one votes not by a show of hands, but by applause.

Another factor in the move away from an effectively “dark” art is the relationship between art and the institutions that show and support art. The constitution of the object itself has become increasingly institutional, its aesthetic status deriving as much from institutional demands and uses as from the object’s formal properties. It is within the institution that conventions of aesthetic judgment are formulated and enforced. To summon up Boulez’s image once again, it is here, under the auspices of the institution, that the terms of the aesthetic referendum are proposed and their acceptance ratified. Although institutional considerations have always been a factor in aesthetic judgment, they have become more noticeably recent, especially with the rise of art that, like the work of Louise Lawler, Haim Steinbach, Michael Asher, Fred Wilson, and Renee Green, deals almost exclusively with the art object’s institutional framework. The artwork seems to function as the product of a specific community: far from self-defined, the object’s status and reception are dependent less on its satisfying particular aesthetic or formal demands, and more on where it appears.

Since Duchamp’s Readymades, the institutional status of the artwork has come to dominate not only the reception of the artwork but also its legitimation. One need think only of Hans Haacke’s parody of Duchamp’s In Advance of the Broken Arm, in which Haacke, like Duchamp, offered a snow shovel as a work of art. Duchamp’s caused an outrage, while Haacke’s went to the Philadelphia Museum, and that was the point: as a result of Duchamp’s snow shovel, an art institution would accept a snow shovel as a work of art worthy of display. Now more than ever, the aesthetic realm has become a matter of etiquette, as the artwork has been overwhelmed by the venue of its presentation.

Institutional etiquette allowed “dark art” to become the object of a discerning appreciation and that same etiquette has gone far to facilitate the conversion of “dark art”’s strangeness into convention. This conversion is an understandable, and even predictable, event, given the importance of institutional considerations in respect to art. It is in the nature of institutions to dampen expression and encourage its replacement with convention — which in turn reinforces the institution as a community of judgment in taste. The conventionalization of “dark art” represents a crisis of form rather than a solution to the crisis of form; in the case of Expressionist music, conventionalization meant an increased rationalization of form — in the guise, for example, of serial formulae — which tends to breed its own kind of formal incursion of form. The path that runs from Schoenberg, through Webern and finally to Nono, is the path of rationalized Expressionism that culminates in the creation of inert blocks of sound mass, or the deployment of melodic material in ways so hidden as to escape detection by the ear. As the history of musical Expressionism shows, it is doubtful whether the intentions of an expressive art can survive the assimilation of the conventions used as expression’s medium. These conventions, which in musical Expressionism include the sound blocks, “unnatural” bowing techniques, tapping, exaggerated vibrato, and so on, that one can hear in the Penderecki Threnody, or the dissonant sound blocks of Nono’s Per Bastiana, come to sound mechanical not only by virtue of the method of their composition, but also in their reproduction through performance. The tendency toward total organization of musical material, as exemplified in fully determined serial atonality, though preserving the harsh sounds of an anguished subjectivity, eliminates the dimension of the composer’s subjectivity. No work of music from the first station on the way to silence, musical Expressionism has come to stand not for the cry of the individual in the industrial wilderness, but as a soundtrack to be played in the labyrinth of over­rationalized living situations that have constricted us so. The development of musical Expressionism demonstrates how “dark art” loses its nuance and becomes understood merely as the mark of horror, with an accompanying striving for redemption called away. The situation of Expressionism in painting is more ambiguous, for in painting there is little equivalent of the kind of strict and universal codification that overtook atonal music.

What are we to make of Adorno’s lament that “dark art,” defeated by the familiarity that conventionalism both breeds and assumes, moves toward self­extinction, or “silence”? Certainly, Adorno meant “silence” in a metaphorical sense, yet when considering new music’s search for direction, it can be taken quite literally. Composer George Rochberg saw the compositional logic embedded in the evolution of atonal music — that music derived from Schoenberg’s and Webern’s Expres­sionisms, Adorno’s “dark art” par excellence — as leading inevitably toward a real silence. According to Rochberg, the first station on the way to silence is a music of temporal indeterminacy, that is, a music that negates the sense of time through the use of microscopic subdivisions of temporal units, thereby losing or suspending any
perceptible sense of time. Yet musical silence is not as simple as that: silence is predicated on time. Cage’s “4’33’” is a work Cage claimed never to have “interrupted” with subsequent work, is a unit of measurement which, like Duchamp’s Standard Stoppages, functions as a recognizable, if peculiar, standard. The four minute and thirty-three second unit of time, for Cage, can be multiplied or added according to the time demands of larger works. The paradox of musical silence is that it can carry the listener into a state of stopped time though an awareness of the movement of time. Suspended time, like silence, is just another form of the movement of time.

What, in the visual arts, provides the equivalent of silence? It would be natural to assume that that would be some form of Minimalism, perhaps, with Ad Reinhardt’s or Frank Stella’s black paintings standing as perfect examples. Yet here, the ambiguity of expression in painting begins to show. The example of Stella’s black paintings is interesting: for here, “dark art,” which Adorno characterized as having black as its “background colour,” meets silence in the same work. The effect is as “dark-expressive” as it is “silent.” The move toward austerity may be interpreted as a move toward silence, especially if one believes, as did Adorno, that aestheticism is not proper to art. But austerity may be just as plausibly interpreted as a stripping down to essentials, as a laconic eloquence—or expression—rather than an impoverished silence. The antithetical relation between expression and silence, made so literally plausible in music, does not necessarily hold in painting. So perhaps the analogy between Minimal Art and “dark art” on the verge of silence is not appropriate. Even less silent is Conceptual Art, though it oftendispensed with the object altogether. For its silence was a deafening protest against art’s objecthood. By “silence,” Adorno almost certainly meant non-expression, and one could view austere, non-expressive art as being an art of self-negation only if one believes not only that the main purpose of art is expression, but also that silence is incompatible with expression. The antithetical relationship between expression and silence is an antithesis only if one accepts the conventions of Expressionism as a standard against which to judge all artistic products and activities. That acceptance is open to question, and becomes more difficult to maintain as one moves from music into painting.

What of paintings such as Bleckner’s Architecture of the Sky that move the dark vestiges of expression beyond silence and into the realm of refuguration? With these paintings, the sign of a sublime Romanticism—the figure of a mystical darkness ornamented by stars arranged into the significantly ordered pattern of a vault— is converted into a sign of irrecoverable loss. Bleckner carries forward the motif of the “vault of heaven,” which is the main source of the paintings’ allusive Romanticism, but it is brought forward into a present that can no longer believe in heaven. We cannot read the Romantic motif as the Romantic did, and because of this, Bleckner’s paintings force the expressive into the realm of refuguration—though their sombre appearance will not allow any loss of darkness. Bleckner’s paintings seem to represent a refuguration of darkness itself. The result is an effective art that is both dark and refugorative at the same time.

With Expressionism precluded and surpassed, the products of the aesthetic realm pass from the expressive to the allegorical. It is important to stop here to at-
scape painting has taken an entire genre from the reliquary, and made it accommodate a content that in many ways represents the defeat of the genre as it originally was conceived. Kiefer’s work has seen fit to turn this once-mystical genre into a record of scorched earth.

Despite its lack of expression per se, however, there is a transcendental element to an art of refuguration, though it involves a transcendence whose distinguishing marks are not to be equated with those found in any variety of Expressionist art. The transcendence refuguration allows approximates the transcendence that metaphor affords. Bencivenga finds this latter in the “straining” of words and phrases that have been taken from one context and placed into another.

The decay of “dark art” stands as a larger symbol of the absorption of the New. For avant-garde Expressionism was driven by its pursuit of novelty of technique and effect, both of which eventually deteriorated into convention. But if novelty is no longer possible in art, the synthetic allegory can remember novelty as a melancholic, negative trace. Because of its reference to the forms of the past, the refugurated work may appear to be striving for a content of statism, but its meaning is fluid instead: the literal, historicized form of the refugured artwork may be moribund, but the figurative content of that form is liberated nonetheless — through the “strain” imposed by a contemporary context.

What is interesting about the current aesthetic of allegorical refuguration is its historical awareness: that is, its awareness of its own position in time. This quality is what distinguishes it from allegorical art of the Middle Ages, for instance. The medieval system of allegory strove toward a timelessness of form as well as of content, both of which were supposed to derive from the allegory’s status as the vessel of the revelation of scripture. Over against the illusion of duration, which medieval allegory both assumed and strove toward, contemporary refugurated art substitutes the state of being “time-related” — it is conscious of its historical contingency. Without an awareness of its position in time, the drawing-class perspective of Kiefer’s landscapes would be merely an exercise in rendering an outdoor scene “realistic.” For, as Adorno noted in a different context, historical transience is the paradoxical ground on which duration is constituted. As he succinctly put it when discussing Husserl’s philosophy, “It is a fallacy that what persists is truer than what perishes.” Thus, current aesthetic refuguration is meaningless when not considered in relation to temporal dynamic: its larger content is the decay of meaning over time, which provides the source of its understanding of the formal motives it reimagines. Consequently, there is in refugured art a pervasive atmosphere of porosity, of having come after. To paraphrase a conceit of Nietzsche’s, it is born posthumously, like the artificial ruins that were in vogue in the eighteenth century. Perhaps a synthetic, allegorical art is inevitable after the negative charge of “black art” is lost, and the triumph of the New adjectives to convention. What is interesting here is the uneven pattern of development of different art forms: the disintegration of avant-garde Expressionism and the rise of refuguration in music dates back to the early 70s, with the work of Johnston and Rochberg, while the rise of a painting of refuguration did not come about in force until the early 80s, when it flourished with the so-called return to painting, and especially with the rise of the Transavanguardia and Anarchismo in Europe.

Undeniably, Appropriation Art was also a variety of refugurative art, though on a limited scale. The Appropriationist did set past forms into the context of contemporary aesthetics, but without the intention of allowing these past forms to provide the basis for a formally synthetic art. Appropriation artists were less interested in the appropriated forms qua forms, and more interested in the settings in which those forms are given value and are supported. In order to pursue this interest, Appropriation Art had to isolate rather than recombine the forms it investigated; perhaps we can think of Appropriation Art as an art of analytical refuguration, in contrast to the art of synthetic refuguration discussed above. Thus the dynamic at work in Louise Lawler’s photographs of artworks in museum settings, for instance, is not the synthetic dynamic of past forms brought forward to present content, but rather an analytical dynamic of isolation, in which past forms are revealed in a present institutional setting.

Even so, Appropriation Art did open a clearing for synthetic refuguration, and for that reason, its relation to synthetic refuguration is essential, rather than merely peripheral. For Appropriation Art performed a critical perspective on the concept of originality. The Appropriationist understood the insistence on originality for what it was, i.e., an historical construction rather than a transcendent value. After a century of Modernism, this revelation may have been a shock, but once the insistence on originality had been properly historicized, the way was open for an art of synthetic refuguration.

While violating the particulars of Adorno’s formulation of the aesthetic realm — by overthrowing expressive art and rejecting aesthetic autonomy — allegory does not dismantle so much as it mimics the movement of time through the object. Produced by the decay of aesthetics in time, allegorized art bears witness to the profoundly historical nature of the aesthetic, and provides corroboration for the historical dynamic Adorno saw at work around him.

Notes
6. Ibid.
7. Adorno, p. 58.
11. Adorno, p. 41.
12 QUESTIONS OF ART
LUCIO POZZI

PREFACE

During the Spring Semester of 1990, I visited the Yale University Graduate School sculpture studios for 12 weeks and conducted a Fine Arts Seminar at the School of Visual Arts in New York City for 6 weeks. For both of them I prepared this set of 12 Questions and a short introductory paragraph.

The matters discussed were called "questions" so as to stress a factor of research over the production of answers. Some of the questions, however, were posed in a declarative, somewhat biased tone, rather than the tentative one questions should be couched in if they are questions at all — in order to stimulate discussion and provoke possible dissension.

Some of the themes were purposefully presented more than once under different headings. In formulating the questions, I engaged in the kind of unsequential logic I follow in my art. Unsequentiality is a form of discourse which is neither founded on sheer free association nor on classical rules of correctly edited disquisition. Instead, it is based on a foundation of analytical awareness of the data to be explored, combined with a process of exploration that links the facets of research without justification.

Many risks have been taken in drafting these texts, the conclusions of which are, for me, quite strange at times. Many young artists in the graduate schools are wary of the terms of artistic discourse as it is currently conducted. They seem to welcome less linear procedures. In both schools, the resulting discussions were heated and often developed in unexpected directions, as when in talking about quality one group engaged in a two-hour long debate about food. I made sure I would write each question only the day before I would present it, so as to keep an improvisational freshness in the process, and incorporate the previous week's conversation in it.

The questions presented here differ slightly from the original ones and incorporate some of the results of the discussions they prompted.

O. INTRODUCTION

This workshop is an exploration of the conditions within which we, as authors, approach the making of art. It consists of 12 Questions. We should consider the questions as open matters and seek neither confirmation nor negation of them and expect no specific solutions. Rather, I suggest we seek only an awareness of the contradictions and references contained in each.

I shall try often to step away from the "objective," removed, position and speak instead of my personal dilemmas, passions, and desires, in the hope of prompting equivalent responses. "Objectivity" and its pseudo-scientific stance is often a cause of manipulation in the arts.

The title of my position in Yale is "Senior Critic." Such a title could imply an objective authority which I consider uninteresting. I prefer the critic in every artist to be the manager of the permanent crisis creativity cannot but be in. "Critic" and "Crisis" share the same root in Greek: Krinein = to judge (to understand) the passing from one condition to another.

1. STYLE

A misinterpretation of style, originality, consistency, and novelty has become a ruling dimension of artistic exchange. These attributes are thought of as conditions an artist must not only seek but be bound by and more often than not program him or herself into.

A signature style is often considered to represent a guarantee of aesthetic value for an artist's production. But a signature style is most of the time the result of an artist's censorship of her or his contradictory creative impulses in favor of formulas. These result in the Product Recognition needed to facilitate easy marketability of the art objects.

Formulaic style diminishes the creativity of both the author and the receiver of art because it introduces the apparent accessibility of trademarked homogeneity into the art.

Rigid agendas for the development and distribution of formulaic art produce the culturally totalitarian regime of Consumer Orthodoxy. Under the appearance of pluralism, Consumer Orthodoxy actually regulates the exchange of visual data at the expense of intellectual research and, especially, of emotional feeling.

All aesthetics sharing Consumer Orthodoxy's practices, even those, such as Neo-Marxism, which many believe to be opposed to it, submit to the unregenerative course it ties culture into. Indeed, both Consumer Orthodoxy and Neo-Marxism discourage the single experience in favor of generalization and both foster the typecasting of every artist in a specialization.

Only by conceiving of style, originality, consistency, and novelty as unintentional byproducts (recognized a-posteriori) of an earnest research which disregards prescriptive rules but favors probing methodologies, can we establish creative discourse in the arts.
2. EXHIBITING

The exhibition of art objects, transported from where they were made, assembled, or found to a site where they are put up for public sale, is a fairly recent development. Before, art was displayed either publicly or privately after it had been acquired from the artists.

The current practice of regularly exhibiting artists' new work exacerbates the eternal conflict between private impulse and public stance.

The sites where art is exhibited have become a facet of the media structure which now mediates the sharing of aesthetic experience. While the media appear to be democratic means of exchange, they also inevitably prescribe its conditions, thus affecting both the authorship and the receivership of art.

The media, mere instruments per se, are, in this period and in this society, signals of Consumer Orthodoxy, which, like all orthodoxies, represents a specific ideology characterized by specific rules of operation. Within the scope of these rules, exhibiting one's work implies a sort of declaration even when one does not mean to make one. The pieces in a show always seem to have their singular power reduced under a general umbrella statement, at the exclusion of their ramifications.

For the artist, working towards an exhibition often means being prompted on the one hand into an occasionally useful shortening of decision time, and on the other into an undesirable censorship of contradictory creative impulses, so as to comply with orthodox rules of marketability.

The exhibition streamlines contradiction — the very source of regenerative thinking. The selection of what is to be exhibited, whether it follows the gauge of fashion or of an assumed standard of quality, seldom succeeds in presenting the true richness of an artist's art. It resembles the loss of magic engendered by the narration of a dream.

I know many artists who exhibit only a fraction of what they do, so as to keep a chosen image of their art in the public eye. Others lend great importance to timing. They feel artistic value is not so intrinsic in the work as much as a function of when the stance of a certain artistic approach is introduced to the public. A brown painting exhibited today could appear to derive from an obsolete concern to everyone, but, if shown tomorrow, it could be called fresh and new.

The research artists who desire to share with their audience the flow of thoughts, feelings, and inventions they pursue, become like publications unfit to the Post Office mailing standards. They must either choose marginality or being discussed about the social aspects of art are mostly about the relevance, impact, or effect achieved by certain strategies, specific actions, or works. Before modern times, artists were aware of the social content of their art, but would rarely and indirectly address it with the explicit purpose of social reform or improvement — in other words, within an overt and pointed critical agenda. The social fabric was somehow assumed as a given. A challenge to it was considered to be more a task to be carried out, in the theoretical field, by secular and religious philosophers, and by the military in the practical field. Not by the artist, who was encouraged to a stance of detached wisdom. Around the time preceding the French Revolution, the idea of socially active art began to dawn in the mind of many.

We have, since then, witnessed the exchange of innumerable opinions about the social factor in art, and many times seen harsh and even persecutory disagreements in the matter. Polarized, "either/or" thinking has made sure that it would be so.

Now that many of us understand that polarized thinking and the setting of priorities feed the short-cycle market of goods and ideas at the expense of intellectual speculation, we are faced with trying to find long-term methodologies of art which might indicate alternative thinking approaches.

The social question is one of many operational dilemmas for the artist today. It is to be singled out and used the same way as mathematicians deal with sets they know no answer to: by giving them a name and operating with their unknown entity as a unit in which unsolvability is implied.

3. PRIVACY

In the modern movement there has been controversy about the private dimension. Some have promoted the privacy of the public, others of the private. Technology, the machine age, and mass society have been cited as the reasons why the private should be subordinated to the public. Several artists have flaunted depersonalization in their art as a response to modern society's reality.

Depersonalized art, they feel, better represents the one-dimensionality of men and women's lives and, by indulging less of the egotistic concerns of an individual artist or cultural elite, it offers a common denominator of access to mass culture.

In contrast, technology, machine age, and mass society have also become an incentive for a radical emphasis on private activity by other artists. Their opinion is that as the means of social intercourse become homogenized, private idiosyncrasies become more important. As a quantified exchange dominates collective life, quality is to be found there where proof and verification are impossible; in the unfathomable personal sensibility of every individual. These artists' purposefully cultivate misunderstandings, mistakes, and incompleteness as the mental areas where authors and audience can meet in not completely predictable creative terms.

4. THE SOCIAL

Everything one does in art has social significance. The questions, however, being discussed about the social aspects of art are mostly about the relevance, impact, or effect achieved by certain strategies, specific actions, or works.

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1. For the early part of this century, one could cite, for instance, El Lissitzky or Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. In more recent times there is a whole line of practitioners of depersonalization from Don Judd and Andy Warhol to Peter Halley and Jeff Koons.

2. Giorgio Morandi or Paul Klee could be examples to mention in this regard for the recent past, while maybe Louise Bourgeois, Saint-Clair Cemin, Kathy Muehlenman, or Robert Grosvenor could be counted as such in the present.
The apparently unbridgeable polarities of activism and contemplation in art are to be dealt with by the establishment of a range of variables between them. Extreme activism for an artist could be: to renounce the making of art and enter social or political work. Extreme contemplation could be: to renounce the making of art and live the ascetic meditating life of the hermit. Between the two are myriads of opportunities offered within their range of variables.

Among these, the artist should allow him or herself free choice to engage in those s/he desires or feels the necessity of, without privileging either of them. Designing a targeted political poster, for instance, or engaging in a community collaboration, might stimulate the artist who designed or initiated them to next make a simple nonmillitarian thing, and vice versa, and so on. A flexible method reaches deeper and achieves in the long run more critical effects than the specialized repetitive production of either applied, sloganistic, or absolute, remote, goods. What matters is how the art is approached, not what approach might be best.

Last year, members of OPUS B (Original Performances in Unusual Settings in Baltimore) invited me to conduct a painting workshop in a nursing home for the elderly, the mildly deranged, and some paraplegics. The mere presence of art in deprived circles can contribute a lot with no need to explain, theorize, discuss, or publicize. I came away with a plan to encourage art students everywhere to contribute a few hours every year, on a voluntary and private basis — to collaborate in visiting projects with any available institution.

5. PLAY

The puritan dismisses play as an unacceptable component of the creative act. But play is also sometimes used as an allib for people to reduce the Frank exploration of their feelings.

The study of play in religion or in innumerable circumstances ranging from the artist's studio to the jail, from childhood to death, is the subject of too vast a speculation for me to even try to summarize it here. We can nonetheless hint at some of the conditions by which we might want to consider play within our decision-making process in art.

The concept of play can be associated with two contradictory practices: 1) play a game according to consensually accepted rules; 2) transgress the established rules of any set. In the latter case, play is linked to transgression (as caprice, fun, arbitrariness, pun, joke, humor, irony) and to flexibility (as alternative, leeway, range, tolerance, scope). While in past times fulfillment of consensus was sought by art in several societies, the modern movement has favored transgression but only as a passing from one inflexible methodology to another as rigid one. In the modern scenario, consensus is found mostly only among members of a restricted group of people who try to supersede other groups as masterful representatives of their societies' aesthetic culture.

The inflexibility of modern transgressive sequences and the exclusive connotations of their propagandas or promotional actions, have led to the Academy of Transgression, an institution as substantially totalitarian as the Academy of Conservation. The Academy of Transgression, after a few decades of tangentiality to the mainstream of culture, is now embraced by Consumer Orthodoxy as a reliable, predictable partner for the sequencing of fashion.

In the face of such imperious forces, all the critical artist can do, I feel, is to interiorize both polarities of structure and transgression so that neither ever becomes a rule but both participate as ingredients of the specific decision-making process of his or her art.

To "just play" while making a piece of art, is as necessary as it is to acknowledge the limits within which one has chosen to operate. The artist becomes nowadays both the king or queen and the jester, the clown and the shaman, the sane and the fool. Artists who follow this line of thinking oppose to the monolithic and standardized production of art a relativistic network of possibilities among which they play. It is important however to remind ourselves that play is a matter of method and not of forms: there are no certain colors or shapes nor any arrangements of them one can prescriptively identify as playful. In the creative decision-making process, play is active in the trespassing of expectations (even of the expectation of play, should play have become a normal and in the mental leaps an artist may trust her or himself into, while engaged in the making of a work of art.

6. FABRICATION

Deus ex machina was the Latin definition of a classical Greek theatrical device by which the solution of a play's quandary would come through the appearance of an all deciding god (deus) from the stage's machinery. By the same token, ever since ancient times, many artists have sought the unraveling of their unsolvable contradictions through the use of machines in their art.

With the development of industrialization and now, of electronics, artists have begun not only to legitimize the machine as having artistic validity equal to that of other techniques, not any more as having a value of escape, but to simultaneously also construct a dichotomy between the machine and the hand as discordant instruments in art-making. The machine has been identified as, alternately: advancing the cause of the future, of progress, mass production, or as furthering dehumanization, one-dimensionality, loss of identity in the arts. The hand has been understood to represent either a detrimental nostalgia for past craftsmanship, for the personality cult and oligarchic uniqueness, or as the saviour of humancentric values, individuality, and spontaneity. The machine has represented democracy for many, while the hand has represented elitism. For some, the machine was alienation while for others the hand was health. There has been futile debate about whether photography, film, television, advertising, or industrial design are complete arts or not.

Today, the question is complicated by a practice common to the production of art once an artist begins to experience a reliable market for his or her work: the fabrication of the whole or of parts of art by others following instructions given by the author. This practice is analogous to that of the architect or of the composer.
Of course, Consumer Orthodoxy nurses the apparent unbridgeability of this as of all other dichotomies by encouraging artists to specialize so as to market faster the goods they produce.

How can we find a heterodox model applicable to the question of fabrication? In the last century, at the start of the industrial revolution, John Ruskin bemoaned the loss of group participation in the modern creative process. He recalled how the construction of a Gothic cathedral had been an anonymous collective enterprise, which offered creative opportunities to every individual participant. Nowadays, as well, the fabricator, printer, or assistant can contribute original ideas to the making of art if the author allows it, but, instead of communal anonymity, the author’s name is the only one finally attached to the work.

I think we can accept art to be made by hand or by machine, by one person or by many, depending on how its making is engaged in. It is a matter of ideological and aesthetic approach. After all, most tools used to make art are primitive or complex machines themselves, and most materials are milled by machines even before we manipulate them (manus = hand; mani-pulate = handle by hand; manufacture = make by hand).

Standardized, linear thinking can be found in both the hand party and the machine party. It can lead to undesirable homogenized results in both.

The artist might do well to entertain no prejudice against any of the tools s/he perceives as being of interest for the setting up of a situation. By developing in him or herself a form of regenerative critical thinking, the artist might avoid the prescriptive connotations our civilization presses us to attach to our activities. Even though some of us might react to such pressure by favoring the hand over the machine, we should nonetheless beware of the pitfalls of mechanistic thinking in exclusive favor of either, more than of those potentially inherent in the use of any one technique or other.

7. SITUATION SPECIFIC

Site-specific art has taught us to incorporate contextual ingredients in the making of a piece. But this concept is often understood in too restrictive a manner, because by site we often mean the sole physical plant of the place in which we set up a work. The concept is often used to support an aesthetic negating the validity of less localized practices such as transportable paintings and free-standing sculptures.

I’d like to extend the concept of site-specific art to become that of the situation-specific. Situation-specificity may include not only physical contexts but also wider and important contexts of individual and collective memory, feeling, technique and social circumstances, with no exclusions.

Rather than privileging the specific environmental scale of a parking lot, for instance, over the apparently less specific intimate one of a small painting, situation-specificity calls for us to pay equal attention to the parkinglotness of the parking lot and to the paintingness of the painting, each inclusive of all the emotional and historical layers and ramifications they imply.

8. INTENTIONS

In a dynamic and critical scenario of creativity, it becomes impossible to statically and hierarchically conceive of intentions as a monolithic, binding component of artistic decision-making. Intentions become more ever changing, ever updated, flexible instruments for the conduction (not the definition) of the art being made. They are a springboard for a flight or fall one never knows the end of. It is impossible to compare works of art to the original intentions of the artist. One may do so only for conversation’s sake, but one can not believe such comparisons lead to an explanation of the art. The deeper (departure) intentions and the formal (arrival) meaning of the art are often unknown to the artist himself/herself and a matter of continuous, unfinished, unending cultural discourse for its audience.

This opinion runs counter to that of the heirs of Freudian or Marxist positivism, who believe that the referential network surrounding art is not only fathomable but must also objectively, intentionally be addressed in the creation of art. As positivism remains captive to the territorial demarcations which generated it, its careful and justified approach leads more often than not to an unregenerative artistic routine which feeds Consumer Orthodoxy and the Short Cycle Market precisely what they want: recognizable goods whose declared intentions are used as marketing booster.

While an analytical assessment is useful at the start, it often becomes detrimental once the creative ball is rolling. As an author, jettisoning part of my intentions when they reveal themselves to be of no further use in my creative process, enhances my art. As a spectator, I feel often excluded by the self-serving explicitness of positivist art, whether it be “splashy” or “neat,” while whatever attracts me in it is that which escapes the author’s and my descriptions and engages my unexplained intellectual emotion.

9. INEFFABLE

The ineffable is that which cannot be said in words. This could imply the concept that that which can not be said in words can be expressed otherwise. The visual arts and music are among the means we use to probe the dimensions of the ineffable, whether it be “splashy” or “neat,” as long as whatever attracts me in it is that which escapes the author’s and my descriptions and engages my unexplained intellectual emotion.
their possibilities even more by seeking logical, sociological, political, or ethical proof and verification for artistic events. Are there alternative referents we can muster to avoid engagement in a professional practice dependent on predictable conditions? Or, is it interesting at all for us to find such alternatives?

Assuming that the decision of producing art and the choice of materials confine us to a program, and assuming also that everything today ends up becoming an institution, I still find myself attracted by a desire to observe that which happens to the creative mind between those point-of-departure choices and those arrival institutions.

I know the mind does not proceed in a straight line. If it allows itself the opportunity, it stumbles upon personal discoveries which are akin to sheer illumination. These discoveries inevitably divert it from the programmed path it had set for itself. The mind goes from tiredness with the data it has involved itself in to enthusiasm for new data, in an apparently disordered kind of spiral process of growth through which it then returns again to the data it has already touched. What leads the mind to permit itself creative alertness? Is it erotic, sensuous, and intellectual desire — the unstoppable curiosity about the next and other steps it envisions.

Through this model of the thinking and sensing process I have attempted to describe above, I have found myself seduced by impermanence and insecurity, as alternatives to the false certainties my culture offers. Conventions have become interchangeable codes for the process of experience rather than rules one should conform to. Analytical structures have become instruments — never binding, never prescriptive — upon which I play the intuitive leaps I trust my desire in. Theories are deduced from artmaking rather than being its hypothetical guidelines. Art has become for me an emblematic testimony to itself as a personal and social entity, and it is not a goal-oriented activity.

11. SOURCES

From ancient Greece through Rome and in the Renaissance and beyond, some city artists and intellectuals have drawn in, their poetry, theatre, painting, and sculpture, from an idealized vision of rural or pastoral simplicity. Recurrently, periods develop in which the roughly hewn or the rustic are also revived and revered in architecture and design, because they are believed to echo realities more pristine than the ones entertained by urban decadence.

Today, we have made an ever greater variety of sources for art available to ourselves. We started taking from the realms of the machine, the folk and popular arts, science fiction and colonial exploration, advertising and crafts, and are, now bereft of any commonly accepted standards. We have not only lost the central conditions outside of which we could pursue the exotic (geo = outside, in Greek) but also have even lost the reassuring certainties of progress. All that is left is an endless quest for chimeric outer sources. Basically, now all is exotic and nothing is central.

1. During the discussions, an interesting objection was made to using the word effort, because for many it implied an association with a feeling of burden. It was suggested to use words such as striving or yearning instead.
Art has become dial-a-source. Inevitably, all approaches have become quite legitimate and choice derives not from objective conditions, as some of us still would wish, but, willingly or not, from referring to the fluctuating international clubs of taste which are substituting for all previous standards.

The club of taste I find myself sharing the views of is attentive to artistic process as it's own source, as Felix Guattari puts it: an organic growth incorporating memory, feeling, society. Process never achieves prescriptive certainty and its results are never fully consumable. I see life as rooted in uncertainty and gauged upon existential aimlessness. I am reassured (not frightened) by this view because from the innumerable orders of experience, in conflict or synony, derives the creative drive.

Art, to me, is nothing but a testimony of a flow where order and disorder are interchangeable and where the darkness of inspiration and desire fulfill unknown purposes within the appearance of time and space.

12. QUALITY

row row row your boat, gently down the stream
merrily merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream

So many voices: the agitating mess of a mass world. It's strange that so many of us live here and don't burst. Why do we take it upon ourselves to call ourselves artists? In the bustling flow, we choose almost at random some substance to activate, and from that first matrix we spin a lifetime of things and words and mysteries.

Looming under or above or behind or in front of it all — maybe actually entwined in it — is a yearning for quality.

We touched upon it a few times in these 12 exchanges, especially when circling around the concept of ineffable magic. Yet I am mentioning quality at the conclusion of our untargeted forays, because it is perhaps the most controversial topic we could discuss, because it is a subject one can never discuss, because only absolute silence or total noise represents best its infinite constellation of possibilities.

I find quality in a toy made of sticks and nutshells by a child in a valley of the Caucasus and in a pie cooked by an old man in Lima. Quality is found in a gesture a person might address to another in a Beirut cellar under bombardment as well as in a corner of a most vulgar millionaire's apartment in New York.

In Europe, in all the countries being ravaged by World War II, one business which never ceased flourishing was the sale of flowers.

Quality is mourning. It is celebration of birth. It is to admit the fragility of life and the intensity of passion. Quality can be destructive as well as constructive; it is optimistic and pessimistic. It is a genius, a tutelary spirit, a demon we sense the presence of not in ourselves but as ourselves, and yet ever escaping.

I lace my tragedies and joys with the calm and pressing tide of

AUTHORITY AND LEARNING

MIRA SCHOR

What can be taught and what can be learned? What atmosphere is necessary for art students to expand their own original attraction to whatever it was they understood to be "art," to learn about their own instincts, tastes, and personal narratives, and locate these within the complex history and practice of art? How does one help students flourish whose identities and proclivities might be marginal to whatever the mainstream might be, stylistically and in its ideal artist personae? My early interest in teaching was simultaneous with my decision to "be an artist," and with my belief, whether illusory or not, that traditional studio art instruction had taught me little about how I make my own work. My commitment to teaching was also more conventionally rooted in my desire to right what I perceived as prevalent forms of abuse in art teaching, and my desire to transmit what I had experienced as life-allowing methods for thinking about being an artist.

To teach is to place oneself and to be placed by students into a position of "knowledge and authority." Regardless of one's age or degree of knowledge or personal authority, the role "teacher" gives power. Abuse follows. Some of the abuses of authority which I found as an art student and which I have seen and heard of being perpetuated to this day can loosely be grouped under the category of gender abuse, with a gendered imprint, as well as actual gendered narratives and players. Inasmuch as we think of hierarchy in gendered terms, existing as we do, willy-nilly, in a patriarchal system, then systems of authority in art institutions are patriarchal. Even, occasionally, when women artists/educators are involved.

These abuses expand from the obvious form of actual sexual harassment, forced sex for grades or promotion — which one hopes is rare and is now more readily subject to legal recourse — to the more common story of apparently consenting sexual relationships among faculty and students, to those aspects of teaching whose gender characteristics are occulted under the false rubric of "universality." This most pervasive and persistent form of teaching abuse is marked by the lack of specification of the positionality of the speaker. When critiques of student work and advocacy of particular aesthetics are uninflected by genuine qualification of the generational aesthetic and gendered reality of the teacher, when the position of the speaker is not rendered transparent, difference and multiplicity are ignored and denied.

One of the positions that I speak from is that of a feminist artist, not just a woman artist, among several positions and allegiances I embody as a teacher of art. From this position, the issue of seduction between male teachers and female students in art schools and art departments is a disturbing one, but verifiably persistent at the anecdotal level. This may seem like an unworthy subject for
pedagogic inquiry but it raises questions which are at the heart of any investigation of authority, of gendered abuse in teaching practices.

Male (usually) teachers colonizing female art students is about as newsworthy as dogs biting men. So what’s wrong with it? Certainly ambiguous women art students want power, or, as a first step, contact with power. Men still usually have the actual power and the appearance of power within the microworld of the institution (and the art world). From the other side, the temptation is great. Now that I’m — not quite so young — it is miraculously and pervasively clear to me how sexual people in their late teens and early 20s are, whether they try to be or not. It is a tool they instinctively (and often unknowingly) use to get attention, since they have few other tools for power, lacking experience and political position. What is wrong — to use a term of morality or ethics — is that completing the drama of seduction fulfills the traditional idea that woman’s main trading chip within patriarchy is her sexuality, which is temporal and temporary. The woman student does perhaps gain closeness to power but in this transaction she learns that her sexuality (or, more precisely, the newness of her sexuality) is more potent and valuable than her talent. What she wants, what any student wants, is attention. If attention is paid to her work and to the quality of her mind instead of to her sexuality — even if she provokes the latter as a trading item — then another lesson is taught, focusing on capabilities she will have for longer than her youth — non-biological productivity and intellect.

And what of the reverse situation? Women teachers/male students? It just doesn’t seem to happen as often. Fewer women faculty have as much institutional power, for one thing, so male students want contact of some kind with male faculty too. Untutored women have more at stake, their job security rests on conformity and probity. And women risk being seen as ridiculous, “cradle-robbers.” The overarchingly gender hierarchies and conventions prevalent in society at large remain operative within a (woman teacher/male student) student relationship. So the woman risks loss of whatever power she has. Surely the mechanisms are similar in homosexual teacher/student relationships. No matter what the set-up, rewarding students for using their sexuality as a principal tool rather than paying attention to their minds beyond their sexuality, is abusive. Having shifted generations, I can see a greater extent than in my early years of teaching put myself into the shoes of all the male teachers I’ve known who have had affairs with students and, looking into the needy face of a younger person, understand the predatory nature of the trespass, the degree to which it is a betrayal of trust.

And yet, seduction is important, even a necessary aspect of teaching. Constance Penley, in her essay “Teaching in Your Sleep,” notes “the extreme power of the transferential relation, of the narcissism underlying the demands of both students and teachers, or the basically eroticized nature of learning (the constant appeal for recognition).” To keep the attention of a group of restless people, every acting skill is in order, and charm, humor, ardor, all help sustain focus. It is important that the teacher be alive, vibrant, and sexuality and seduction are important signs of life.

Beyond seduction, teaching techniques and philosophies commonly expressed and performed in art schools are suffused with the idea of abuse, plain and simple, as pedagogy — the kick-in-the-pants method of criticism. How many group
history, which is a gendered construct, or rather, is a construct elaborated by a discipline which has orchestrated the elimination of the feminine from its pale. These abuses of teaching, which I am suggesting have a gendered profile, are a mountainous obstacle for any student to get past. All students, and women students are particularly affected, must push their way past obstacles to learning about their own work which have been placed in front of them not “for their own good,” as might be the claim, but for the good of the institution.

Despite these obstacles, and my delusion that no one had taught me anything notwithstanding, I did learn about making my own work. Some of how I learned cannot be recreated or proposed as a model: my parents were artists who worked at home. In college, I was mainly taught the ABCs of visual art in art history rather than studio classes. Thus, color, composition, form, and style, all the normalizing information one must pick up somehow were taken in either subliminally, in the intimacy of family, or at the useful distance from my own creative work which art history instruction provided.

There are aspects of my schooling, however, which can perhaps serve as suggested models for teaching and learning art making.

I was a participant in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1971-1972, under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The Program undertook the dual project of critiquing male authority, specifically how art education had to that point dealt with its female students (who usually form the majority of the undergraduate art student body), and of trying to formulate presumably different and fairer authority structures which would not dispirit and destroy female creativity. Like many feminist activist groups at the time, there were immediately contradictory forces apparent, between any group’s need for leaders, certain individuals’ desire to lead, and a movement which ideally sought to undermine leadership as presently constituted. Penley notes the “contradictory demands around authority” inherent in feminist teaching.

Ideally, she [the teacher in the feminist classroom] carries out a very deliberate self-undermining of her own authority by refusing to be an “authority” at all, or by insisting that the validation of knowledge issue not from her acquired group of the material but from the students’ own experiences as women and through a collective working-through of the issues raised. Another demand, often just as conscious even when recognized as contradictory, conflicts with the demand that she relinquish her authority. The woman who is a feminist teacher is expected at the very least to be an exemplary feminist, if not a “role model.”

Penley concludes this passage by saying that “Feminism, then, like psychoanalysis, is characterized by its willful reliance on nonauthoritative knowledge.” 10

No utopian solutions were found, within the Feminist Program. One might note that women unused to power perhaps exercised it awkwardly at times, divided within themselves by conflicting desires, and beset by a fluctuating and delicate sense of their own right to any authority (an uncertainty bred into them by their acculturation within patriarchy). Also, women students, also acculturated within the same system, held women in slightly less awe than they did men, so there were overt debates, arguments, passionate efforts to rebel against the exercise of authori-

...ty within the group. Within a separate and private space, women could analyze and learn to fight over power.

The Program existed in the middle of an egalitarian educational project. The history of CalArts’ early years has been reformulated by Art History, as is its wont, into the house that John Baldessari built, contributing in a conveniently linear pattern such postmodern artists as David Salle, Ross Bleckner, Matt Mullican, Troy Brauntuch, Eric Fischl, Barbara Bloom, as well as Ashley Bickerton and Mike Kelley. The discipline of Art History turns clover-leaves into one-way streets. In fact, CalArts, perhaps for a brief period only, was distinguished by the inability of any one group or aesthetic to dominate over any other. No one group could consider itself the elite without recognizing that another elite existed down the hall: Post Studio/Baldessari, Feminism/Schapiro & Chicago, Late Abstract-Expressionism/Bruch & Hacklin, Happenings/Kaprow, Fluxus/Knowles. Each ideology provided a liberating corrective to the others. This variety of mostly avant-garde movements of different vintages and ideologies co-existed and cross-fertilized within a unified space.

The atmosphere, ideology, aesthetic, and sexuality of this era at CalArts is best expressed, not in the paintings of Salle or Bleckner, but in the colorful, silly, exuberantly gay and utterly sweet confines of PeeWee’s Playhouse (PeeWee, a.k.a. Paul Rubens, a.k.a. Paul Rubenfeld, CalArts 1970-1974). There is no one authority figure in PeeWee’s Playhouse, not PeeWee, not Gumby, not the King of Cartoons. The secret word is not held by a single authoritarian figure or movement, but is a signal for a group of players to yell as loud as possible, and have a lot of fun.

Sex, sexuality, and exhibitionism were rampant at CalArts at the time. The first day I arrived, a teacher was pointed out to me, “that’s Ben Lifson, he took his pants off at the Board of Trustees Meeting.” Traditional demarcations of authority were eroded at the outset because students and faculty were united as rebels mourning the Disney family. But sexual abuse was subject to the political awareness caused by the presence of the Feminist Program.

The faculty at CalArts made the initial assumption that every student was an artist, posting at least the pretense of some equality between faculty and students, all artists together. When I began to teach, the first thing I had to adjust to was the obvious reality that most of my students were not artists and would not become artists. Even in art school, not all students will go on to become professional artists, but a lot of studio teaching services computer majors, so there can be no pretense of the equality of identity assumed by CalArts. Even CalArts’ graduates could not escape statistics, nevertheless its utopian and communal premise was lived up to just enough to make every student feel they had something valuable to offer the community in some cases students in one area taught courses on subjects in which they had prior experience, such as a studio major teaching a course on economics, and just enough to destabilize the idea of centralised authority or knowledge limited to a privileged teacher.

Whether as an appropriate circumstance for this concept of knowledge and authority, or as a direct result of the basically egalitarian premise, traditional classroom teaching was overshadowed by other formats: gossip in the cafeteria; teachers disagreeing with each other publicly (undermining each other’s unique claim to
"knowledge"); apprenticeship within the Feminist Program intensive projects such as Womanhouse (1972) worked on by faculty and students together; and, most importantly, shared lives for hours and days on end, more a ship of fools than a school. Wacky eccentricities marked the school: one teacher sat in the library and could be checked out like a reserve book.

In this atmosphere, I did learn about my own work, but very little was taught in anything resembling a linear transmission of information. It would be truer to say that I lived at CalArts for two years, than that I studied there. I could wander within my own mind, undisturbed but constantly exposed to visual images and ideas, many of which challenged my assumptions not only of what art should be, but of what should be, period. That a group of people generally wolder than myself accepted me as an intrinsic thinker and producer made it possible for me to absorb and eventually adopt some of the dramatically opposite models of art they represented.

This permissive atmosphere also meant that seriously disturbed kids could wander the deserted building at midnight like so many drowned Ophelias without anyone noticing something wrong, but it was also an interesting antidote to the infatuated conservatism of young people who may have purple hair, wear nose rings, and listen to strange music but are still oppressed by pervasive fears of non-conformity and by institutionalized art teaching which itself erases most forms of marginal production while paying lip-service to unbridled creativity.

CalArts had its share of critics where girls were made to cry, but undergraduates and graduates attended the same crits, and the traditionally rigid separation between drawing, painting, and sculpture were evaporated, leaving a freedom of access and movement for uniformed artists. It boggles the mind that after all definitions of each of those disciplines have changed, particularly considering the expansion of what defines sculpture, many art schools and art departments within universities still metaphorically and geographically isolate the disciplines so that painting may be located in one building, while sculpture is taught in some trollydotic cave across campus where women students have to dress like loggers, under the direction of male sculptors of the type referred to as "tuskers" in Canada.

The ABCs of art were themselves redefined, from the accumulation of skills to the emphasis on context and content. Correct solutions to problems were less important than the reasons for being an artist, the personal narrative, the area of aesthetic intervention, or the political critique.

In this atmosphere, small bits of direct technical information were, not paradoxically, especially memorable. One such incident took place within the Feminist Program: although we did learn a lot of factual material, from construction techniques to the reexcavated ovens of women artists of the past, the Program was marked by intense psychodrama, wrenching moments of personal exposure within consciousness-raising sessions, painful lessons in every aspect of political organization. In the middle of all of that, Miriam Schapiro once said to me with a painful sincerity, "do not also have your pupils to dinner. choose their clothes, and tell them who they marry. I want to understand that your authority, if any, comes not from an institutional position to be blindly obeyed or blindly rebelled against, but emerges from my survival of the very same obstacles they encounter and from the distance I've traveled down the paths of investigation, even though I have no power perhaps even informed by that lack of power. And, when I feel as trapped as they do in a fluorescent-lit room, I want to cook them a giant meatball and have a party.

Humor and community, and the concerted effort to try, if not to ever fully succeed, to undermine traditional, gendered authority structures and to render teaching transparent, can help create a situation in which what cannot be taught — intelligence, drive, self-criticality — can be learned.

Notes
2. Sometimes a teacher's assumption that such relationships are normal are so blatant as to be laughable. My intro painting teacher in 1968, during a tutorial in his office, asked me how old I was, and when I discovered that I was under the age of consent so that, I suppose, he would be subject to the Mann Act if he took me over state lines, he shook his head, chuckled me under the chin, and chuckled that I was "too young". Too young for what?
6. Many students were aware of the workings of power which made this co-existence possible. All of these people had been hired by Paul Brach, the Dean of the Art School, who by making no bones of his disagreement with most of them yet encouraging their difference, taught an important lesson in the properties of authority.
7. Jeremy Shapiro, 1972-73. This deftly underscored the recognition that he did have knowledge, and yet gave the students temporary command.
8. Recently two words intrude into my classrooms, where the institutions I work for impose physical and pedagogic limitations: "Giant Meatball." I remember that a class at CalArts looked like a giant meatball as could fit in an oven, had a party, and ate it. I tried to track down that giant meatball. I thought this might have happened in a class given by Emmett Williams, a Fluxus artist and poet, so I looked up "Food" in the elaborately cross-referenced Index of the Fluxus Codex (Uon Hendrickson, Fluxus Codex, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988). I found a list including "fish jello, liquid white glue eggs," and, almost what I was searching for, "giant bread filled with sawdust," (p. 141).
9. There was the "giant," now where was the meatball? I finally found one on the elegant frontispiece of The Mythological Travels of a modern Sir John Mandeville, being an account of the Magic, Mountalls and other Monkey Business Stories of the Square of Daniel Spoerri upon the Isle of Symi, together with divers speculations thereon (Daniel Spoerri, New York City, by the Parking Lot of the Chelsea Hotel: Something Else Press, 1969). For lunch I made dolomites, which in Symi are also called yepareide, a variation of keftedes (in Symiotic, pitaridai), and are meatballs wrapped in grape leaves," (pp. 200-201). The recipe follows.

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WE INTERRUPT THIS READING... Janet Kaplan

The deconstruction of art history is well under way as critical theory sets out to examine the paradigms of the discourse and "the new art history" raises multiple challenges to the old. But what does that mean for the concept of the survey, that pedagogical staple through which so many students are introduced to the field? Is a survey text/course still viable or useful? Can it still function as an introduction to a discipline that is in the midst of intense debate? If not, what will serve to replace it?

In search of transformative models, much recent scholarship has led/coaxed/forced the field of art history into uneasy but enriching dialogue with feminist, marxist, psychoanalytic, and postmodernist discourses. The concept of art making as the production of a unique object springing forth unmediated from the individual inspiration and free expression of a solitary genius is now under intensive scrutiny. The idea that the art object reflects meaning is being expanded to include awareness that the object is also a producer of meaning — creating varying meanings in the shifting space of reception among its various viewers. In the field of feminist studies, one specific focus has been on gender omissions. Substantial work has been done to uncover and examine the work created by women through the ages. Some "encyclopedic" surveys have overlooked/buried/forgotten the female artist. In addition, valuable attention has been paid to the politics of representation — to decoding images of women and the meanings they constitute. Much more work needs to be done to examine class and race issues in terms of the codes of their representation as well. Of course, none of these concerns are unique to the field of art history. But, as a notoriously conservative discipline, art history has been slower than other fields to explore the ramifications of these problems.

One place this is particularly manifest is in the context of art history teaching. At the introductory level, the field is still largely held thrall to the construction of the survey book — whether by Janson or Gardner or others — whether revised or expanded — in which the student/reader is led along the plodding path of key monuments across the ages as though they offered a comprehensive sampling of some definable whole. To be sure, the list of what is to be included has broadened — somewhat. Even the survey by Janson (long the hold-out in terms of male-only exclusivity), in its newest expanded version revised through a passing of the mantle of authority from the late Janson pere to Janson fils, now includes some women. But no one has yet been able to produce a comprehensive survey that is truly inclusive regarding issues of class, race, and gender, as well as medium and subject matter. It may well be an impossible task to create a truly balanced and inclusive survey. The very concept of a comprehensive introductory

survey of the field may be untenable and perhaps should be abandoned (as it has been in other fields) especially since the add-Others-and-stir variety of corrective scholarship does little to challenge the fundamental paradigms of the field. But elimination of the survey has proven to be a difficult and unpopular step.

Given the continuing perception in many quarters that some form of survey text will endure as an introductory teaching tool, I would posit a new kind of book to accompany a more deconstructive survey course. Not merely expanded to be more widely inclusive in a way that celebrates difference, it is expanded to be self-critical as well. Constructed along the lines of a survey it would take on the key canonical "master" works directly, but with some crucial differences. There would be several strategies at work. First, the list of works included, significantly broadened in terms of categories, would also be severely limited in quantity so that there could be no illusion of encyclopedic inclusivity, no inherent suggestion that if it didn't make it into this volume, it couldn't be too significant.

Second, and more radical, there would be critical challenges to the traditional litany that would take the form of disruptions to the reading. Targeted to the most well known of the canonical works, these would raise the widest possible disruption to the reading. Targeted to the most well known of the canonical works, these would raise the widest possible range of issues and approach the work from multiple interrogative positions. Not shunted off into supplemental readings, these challenges to the text would be interpolated directly within the text itself. This serves to ensure that the disruptions really do disrupt, thereby denying the illusion of closed, single, unified meanings that traditional surveys emphasize.

An example: PICASSO'S DESMOISELLES D'AVIGNON AND THE LANGUAGE OF H.W. JANSON — A DISRUPTIVE READING

When Picasso started the picture, it was to be a temptation scene in a brothel, but he ended up with a composition of five nudes and a still life. But what nudes? (Janson, History of Art, Third Edition, p. 681)

THE NUDE/SPECTATORSHIP/AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: In the drawing of that original "temptation scene" Picasso seated two male customers among the women who have adopted various revealing postures with which to show their "wares." The African-looking masks with their pink disfigured bodies add a silenced exoticism to the sexuality of their display. Among the men's choices is one woman who crouches, her back turned to the viewer, her legs opened, genitals exposed, but visible only to them. In the final painting, the customers have been removed from within the frame of the picture and the crouching woman has been reoriented, facing out, again to her potential customers, who we who are the spectators of the work. Ultimately, Picasso did not need to include those men in the scene because the exchange between viewer and painting already implies their existence. The gaze he constructs for us as spectators is inherently and intentionally male as well as white. Thus the viewing becomes an act of commerce. From what position, then, can a woman, especially a black woman, view this work — other than by seeing herself through white male eyes as an eroticized and bestialized object of commercial exchange?

THE BROTHEL AND CLASS REPRESENTATION: What of the class issues here as violent disfiguration and dismemberment are played out on the bodies of...
prostitutes who are often the victims of bodily violence (from their customers, their pimps, the police) in real life as well.

The three on the left are angular distortions of classical figures, but the violently dislocated features and bodies of the other two have all the barbaric qualities of primitive art. ... Picasso used primitive art as a battering ram against the classical conception of beauty. (Janson, pp. 681-2)

THE BARBARIC AND THE CLASSICAL: The image of a battering ram of primitive barbarism used against classical beauty carries racist connotations of erotic black male bodies sexually violating white purity — a racially charged confrontation of cultures, again played out on the bodies of women. The association of primitivism with barbarisms calls into question the ways in which Western art has constructed "primitive art" as the production of an unsophisticated and savage Other.

THE NUDE: THE PRIMITIVE AND HISTORY: The Western tradition of using the nude female body as a site for innovation is here reinvoked with particular vengence. Fragmentated, fetishized, and silenced, these figures embody a relationship between male artist/viewer and female object that inscribes hierarchical power. Is this historical conjunction accidental or do Western turn-of-the-century struggles for female liberation have some connection to the violence of this modernist assault? And what of the use of the primitive Other as a site for creative "discovery?" As James Clifford notes, "[that] the modernist appropriation of tribal productions as art...occurred just as the planet's tribal peoples came massively under European political, economic and evangelical domain cannot be irrelevant."

Issues of cultural appropriation have prompted oppositional art work such as that of the black African-born British artist and curator Lubaina Himid who has undertaken to "displace the relationships of dominance/subservience that have used the artefacts of non-Western cultures to 'prove' the superiority of white culture." Exploring a strategy of appropriate reversal she takes Picasso as her pivot. As a revision to his post-Cubist paintings of women (white) running on the beach, she poses her painted construction, Freedom and Change, 1984, which includes two huge black women charging across a beach who are led by a team of dogs. Running with great abandon, they leave behind them two small white men who are stuck in the sand up to their necks.

SEXUALITY: The poses of these nudes, with arms up in a position of exposure and surrender, is in direct opposition to their aggressively confrontational stare. This ambivalent presentation of these femmes fatales, at once powerless and threatening, alluring and repelling, suggests that Picasso is expressing, at the very least, a dread of women, the attraction/rejection of the castration anxiety.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. (Janson, credit line under the reproduction, p. 682.)

CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND MUSEUM INSTALLATION: Even the credit line, which appears under the photographic reproduction, yields material for discussion. As Carol Duncan has hilariously outlined, using a series of installation photos of the old MoMA, in her famous lecture "Hot mommas at the MoMA," this painting functioned as a centerpiece in the permanent collection by which the old Museum of Modern Art led the viewer through an itinerary of modernism from Picasso to de Kooning that was carefully built on women's bodies.

For this essay, I address the text of Janson to present traditional art historical discourse as a point of departure for oppositional critique. While Janson may have become a fatiguingly easy target, it is still the most widely used introductory text and as such, an important focus for disruption. Engaging this and other canonical texts also serves to acknowledge language as a crucial site of struggle over content and meaning in art.

Similarly, the Desmoiselles d'Avignon was not chosen out of interest in this artist's particularity nor for the further enshrinement of canonical work. Rather, with its "masterpieces" pedigree, and pivotal position in the modernist discourse, it is especially useful for critical resistance.

The focus here has been on interrogation of the object for the meanings it produces. One could put the artist, medium, period, cultural context, subject, style, or reception under such scrutiny as well — but my project here is to tackle that most theory of "left overs" from "traditional" art history, the art object itself. Such a reading not only disrupts the tradition, it also acknowledges, in Victor Burgin's words, that "there can never be any final closure of the meanings of an image; there can never be any question of arriving at the sum of signification, the parts will never add up to a non-contradictory whole."

Related to concepts developed in feminist literary criticism of "reading as a woman" and "the resisting reader," the strategy here is to establish a stance of critical distance and interrogatory challenge as an integral part of the introductory acquisition of basic information. Thus, the questioning of authority that is crucial to developing true political/cultural awareness becomes a central methodology in introductory work. It brings what lurks on the margins into the center while challenging the center itself. If exploding the canon is to have any substantive effect in transforming the paradigms of the discipline, its artistic and scholarly strategies must become interventions to that which is normative. Recognizing that art history itself is cultural practice, an open-ended multi-valent reading can accumulate the changing definitions of evidence and significance that a newly revitalized art historical practice requires.

My gratitude to Diane Neuman and Iris Rogoff with whom I have had illuminating conversations that helped to shape this essay.

Notes
2. Using extraordinarily offensive language in his presentation of primitive art, Janson likened "primitive abstraction," which he terms "abstraction by inbreeding," to the in-
breeding of dogs. This language persists in all editions of the text. Ibid., third edition, p. 39.


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**STASIS**

**CURTIS MITCHELL**

Taboo defines the parameters of a culture. When they are broken the culture is threatened. Preservation demands the perpetrators be banned or punished. Laws are legislated for this purpose, but laws do not evolve. The world and morals do.

Government mediates between cultural self-definition and a changing world. It decides what change to accept, and how. We have a republican government. The executive branch can not legislate policy. Where the law is found wanting in its ability to punish transgressors of cultural norms, the public steps in. Trial by ambivalent consensus. The hero is a villain. The villain is a hero. A hero because he stepped beyond. A villain because he stepped beyond. Culture is not seamless. Concepts are not seamless. Images are. Villainous or heroic, he is a figure.

We have a separation of Church and State. Preachers are above avarice. When they are not, the law intervenes. But in matters involving faith, law is insufficient. It becomes a public issue, and publicity reigns. In heaven, the preacher may or may not be fallen. In the world, he is a star. Thought is dialectical. Faith and publicity are pure.

We have a free enterprise economy. A minimal amount of trust is assumed. Insider trading violates that trust, and must be punished. But the law is ineffectual in measuring increments of perfidy in a field in which insidiousness and fair play collude. Mr. Milliken will appeal. Mr. Milliken is rich. The rationing of ethics is arguable. Wealth is a fact.

We have freedom of speech. In art, nothing is assumed but attention. Attention to culture. Attention to taboo. Culture denies attention to taboo. When taboo is displayed as taboo, the public feels threatened. “Their” culture is threatened. Culture censors. To censor is taboo in art. Art censures culture’s censor. Censoring celebrates as well as stifles. Censuring announces as well as denounces. Taboo is further entrenched, perpetuated, and strengthened.

Serrano takes a sacred icon, physically covers it with a profane taboo, and stylistically wraps it in a popularly accepted aesthetic of advertising, simple harmony, color saturation, and formal pleasantries. Mapplethorpe takes the sexual taboos of homo- and auto-eroticism and glosses them with the popularly accepted aesthetic of fashion photography.

The hegemony of our cultural values is inherent in these works. Bourgeois capitalism owes its longevity to its ability to assimilate the gloss of opposition and difference, then to flaunt this gloss with pith. It divides, then sublimates what it can. The rest it maims with clemency, obliterates with amnesia, or corners
with fear. To envelop a taboo in the suffocating seduction of a pleasing image is an apt analogue to this predatorial process. But there is a glitch in the analogy: we do not sublimate any part of the taboo. They protect it as taboo, a necessity vinegar to the saccharine sweetness of the surface. Without the taboo, the viewer is lost in a pictorial formula of instantaneous acceptance. Bourgeois fluff. This fluff is calculated to speed the taboo to your nerve centers. You do not consider the taboo, you reconsider the effect of the taboo. Shock, not understanding. Serrano and Mapplethorpe are as much dependent on the taboo as taboo as they are critical of it as taboo.

Culture is a Berklean notion, best expressed by altering Donald Judd’s formula to: “It is taboo if I say it is.” People’s lives are directly placed in jeopardy by this attitude through the solipsistic ignorance of those in power. Jesse Helms has not the same critical stance as Serrano and Mapplethorpe, and will garner votes in his calculated defense of moralism. Mr. Helms sees our culture conservatively. Taboos must be kept intact. It must be recognizable enough to be feared, not enough to be understood. Once understood, taboo falls prey to individual choice. The fact that the taboo in the Serranos and Mapplethorpes have a pre-digested package makes their presentation even more threatening. Helms treats each entire piece as taboo, and uses a different envelope. Not fashion or advertising, but beyond recognition. Taboo is the enemy, something to be obliterated from consciousness.

Exposure can incite fear or understanding. The works of Serrano and Mapplethorpe provide exposure to taboo. They go no further, be it in the direction of Helms’ no-lose situation. Shut down the Corcoran show in the name of cultural imperative and pre-conceived public opinion. Parade the works under the banner of disgust and fear. He saves taboo from the clutches of understanding, he gives taboo a dusting for a longer life, he breathes hot air into an already over-energized public moralism, and he gets to dress himself in white in the process.

The ensuing controversy remains in the realm of censorship, not taboo. The works of these two artists will be shown again, probably more now then before. Controversy breeds publicity. Publicity breeds familiarity. Familiarity shows before, we saw taboo in an acceptable format. When these works are shown again, we will only see taboo. No progress has been made toward an acceptance of difference. Controversy remains. Spectacle remains. Taboo remains.

Taboo exists for a reason, but a taboo can be irrational. Shock is irrational. Our culture has an appetite for shock, but no digestive capacity. It can be promulgated for immediate effect, to the perpetuation of paranoia, and the inoculation against introspection. It can also be treated on a less polemical level, to the advantage of independent thought, the dilution of fear, and the vaccination against vacuity.

WHY WE NEED “BAD GIRLS” RATHER THAN “GOOD” ONES!

CORINNE ROBINS

The world has always divided women into good girls and bad. From time to time, women achieve a public bad girl status of being at once admired and mocked. Thirty years ago, Marilyn Monroe, last month, Madonna — the public wallows in such women flaunting their sexuality, rewarding them alternately with love, idolatry, and hatred. And, as has been pointed out by numerous feminist writers in the last decade, such women perform for the rest of us a public affirmation of our female identity: man being the sex that defines humanity; women standing for sex or the gendered other. But, meanwhile, the word ‘bad’ took on new connotations as, in the twentieth century, we learned that women who wanted to be more, who wanted to be artists and makers rather than symbols and muses were begging their assigned role, were not playing the game and by trying to ‘pass’ themselves off as exceptions, were in fact ‘bad’ while, as throughout history, good girls were silent, submissive, and anonymous. (Such good and bad categories handed down to us by men, and which many of us have accepted unthinkingly, still remain to be examined.)

Up until very recently, the few women allowed to participate in the principal modernist art movements were accepted in a submissive, handmaiden role. The greatest women artists of the first half of the century lived exactly that part, women such as Sonia Delaunay and Barbara Hepworth. Hepworth by way of justifying her second-rung status in English avant-garde circles, said “I think art is anonymous. It’s not competitive with men. It’s a complementary contribution.” Hepworth’s generation of women, gave up all thought of winning too much attention. Attention would endanger their limited acceptance by male colleagues. Rather, they had to fight hard to remain in the game at all costs, including the cost of self-knowledge.

That was then. After all, the women’s movement has been in place now for over 20 years. Nevertheless, the fact is we have just survived, and none too well, the backlash era of the 80s. Marilyn Monroe, last month, Madonna — the public wallows in such material is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ categories handed down to us by men, and which many of us have accepted unthinkingly, still remain to be examined.”

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Grace Hartigan adopted the painting name of George Hartigan. The students' reaction in 1982 took place at the height of the neo-expressionist movement in New York, at a time when dealers like Mary Boone when asked about her all male roster of gallery artists, replied, "It’s the men now who are emotional and intuitive... and besides, museums just don’t buy paintings by women." The resolutely anti-feminist wave had already receded a bit in 1986 when other students, this time shamefacedly rather than indignantly, came up after class to ask "just how long did I think they would have to be women artists?"

Why is all this still relevant? Why in 1990 as part of the Women’s Caucus for Art National Conference titled “Shifting Power” did we elect to put on the exhibition entitled “Bad Girls”? And why was the title of the show such a draw with the Caucus members, who submitted over 150 sets of slides? And finally, why was the chief complaint of one critic who wrote up the show that “we weren’t bad enough”. Obviously, in the 90s being ‘bad’ isn’t enough. Our aim must be to be the ‘baddest.’

First off, this may be because by implication bad girl artists, marginal artists — and most of the best women artists in the 20th century have unwillingly been just that — are artists who make their own rules. All through modernism the boys — the Abstract Expressionist boys, the Surrealist boys, the Cubist boys in their turn set up the rules of their style as being at once exclusionary and universal. In fact, they set themselves up as genius clubs of artists and proceeded to reinforce each other as they set about to convince the world that they alone were the purveyors of their secret, greater vision, and therefore stood first in the canon of contemporary art history — a canon to which girl artists need not apply.

"Firing the Canon" was the title of the major panel jointly sponsored by the Women’s Caucus and the College Art Association this year. Griselda Pollock, one of the panelists, in her book Vision and Difference gives the following example from the writings of George Moore by way of an explanation of what male art historians (and women artists as well) require from artists who they feel worthy of entering into the canon of art history: "Madame Lebrun painted well, but she invented nothing... failed to created a style. Only one woman did this, and that is Madame Morisot, and her pictures are the only pictures painted by a woman that could not be destroyed without creating a blank, a hiatus in the history of art."

This canon of great artists, the CAA panelists agreed, is about "unique" vision as recorded in standard art histories. It was a 'canon' from which women artists were totally absent, they also agreed, because it was men who did the recording. Another reason for women’s absence seemed to lie in the fact that before 1970, women did not function in groups, but for the most part remained isolated as a nameless sub-group that denied its difference in order to receive some token acceptance from within the art community. These women, grateful to be able to do their art and who made art on the odd chance of being able to show it, were artists who for the most part did not call attention to what they were doing. The uniqueness of some of their visions was something that went undiscussed even by themselves.

The feminist movement changed that situation for artists like Louise Nevelson, Louise Bourgeois, and Alice Neel. Thanks to it, as a recent poster by the Guerrilla Girls points out, one of the advantages of being a women artist is "knowing your career might pick up after you’re eighty." The Guerrilla Girls group, form-
gether with mounted chewing gum signature miniature vulvas which Wilke wore during them. The point of the piece was that the artist, partially stripped, confronted the public with these dainty vulva chewing gums decorating her body. According to Wilke, the use of chewing gum pieces refers to early primitive rituals of decorating the body — the naked body being what we all have, the communal fact bringing us together. Wilke's work has always been funny, with deadly serious intent. Over the years, a humorous toughness together with a total confrontational attitude have been Wilke's "Bad Girl" trademark.

Today, more and more women artists making visual objects are part of an on-going backlash to the backlash of the 80s. The ten other 'bad girl' painters, photographers, sculptors in the exhibit were Nancy Brown, Elisa D'Arrigo, Carol Goebel, Harmony Hammond, Bonnie Lucas, Joyce Romano, Hope Sandrow, Linda Stein, Selina Trieff, and Rhonda Zwillinger, a group who in their work and their mediums were diverse and visually compelling.

Nancy Bowen's large green female butt (women's butts have always been the prerogative of male humorists), and Linda Stein's terrifying array of cutting tools on a kitchen chair with giant shears along the wall (the ultimate castration weapon) were menacing indeed. From Selina Trieff's androgynous pilgrims with mock-pigs (that most 'unclean' and anti-religious animal) to Carol Goebel's rusting wall creatures, the work was purposefully, visually confrontational. It seems the objects women artists are making today are growing larger, more defiant, and more memorable.

What then is one to make of the spectacle of well behaved feminist theoreticians in the art world ignoring a vast segment of art done by women in favor of their on-going conversations with each other? It seems to me doubly ironic that this type of conversation began with the New Museum's 1983 "Representation: Gender and Difference" exhibition; and that Tucker, in a recent article, "Women Artists Today: Revolution and Regression," complains "that lack of change in the intellectual discourse has, except for the occasional woman artist, left things very much where they were. What is certain," Tucker claims, "is that there is at present no agreement even as to what constitutes feminism itself; there is certainly no way of seeing women as an unalloyed force for good or a unified sisterhood or nature."
we need to be aware of the trap of considering gifted women artists as ‘exceptionalists’ rather than as in the forefront of a ‘minority’ power party. It is important for us to acknowledge a commitment to the next generation of women artists, as Bourgeois, Nevelson, Neel, Schapiro, and Spero did. It is to these artists’ credit that all of them refused the role that required that they detach themselves from the bulk of women artists. Otherwise we will remain ‘exceptionalists,’ expected above all to act like ‘good girls’ and to regard any and all approval as somewhat provisional.

As a new decade begins, it seems to this writer a matter of urgency that women artists, critics, and politicians alike unite in the face of the threat of outside control of our bodies’ reproductive organs and falling numbers in terms of our overall representation. We must not allow ourselves to again be placed into wholly ‘women’s issues’ but continue to expand our territory. It would seem to be in all our interest, to opt to become as ‘bad’ as visible and perhaps as intransigent in terms of our actual greater numbers as we can be.

Notes
1. Germaine Greer, Griselda, p. 18.
Max Klinger's brochure, Painting and Drawing, I suddenly saw that I was not a painter at all.” Gradually, she made the transition to line. In line she could pare down superfluities. “Today I made a sketch: the old Sacrifice. The young mother who is arming her child, but who can scarcely stand on her feet. Shouldn’t that be possible as a lithograph in just a few lines? ... In it (the lithograph) only the essentials count.” (September 28, 1919)

The series that propelled her to fame was The Weavers, etchings and lithographs which she worked on for three years during her late twenties, after watching the performance of Hauptmann’s play by the same name. “That performance was a milestone in my work. I dropped the series on Germinal and set to work on The Weavers. At the same time I had so little technique that my first attempts were failures.” In Consultation, a posee of workers, huddled in discussion at the end of a table, wear dark coats that hide the outline of their bodies. Only pale faces emerge from a heap of darkness. The light of the table draws the spectator into the whispers of a group plotting revolution, amplifying the quiet tension of the scene. She made The Weavers while raising her two sons, a responsibility which seemed to inspire her further, rather than daunting her. Her devotion to her family is obvious in nearly every page of her diary. When her sons left home, she wrote “... formerly, in my so wretchedly limited working time, I was more productive because I was more sensual; I lived as a human being must live, passionately interested in everything.” Often times she worked obsessively for weeks, other times not at all, too burdened by depression and sheer exhaustion.

“No More War!” “Serf for the planting must not be ground.” She voiced these mottos vigorously until her last days. For Kollwitz death is a monolithic force of destruction, an abstracted devil stealing the lives of Germany’s youth, but it is also a final peace, a resting place from a life that wearied her. Her drawings and sculptures are elegies to youth and humanity. With amazing clarity, they express a vision of life contingent on the awareness of death. Kollwitz draws the head of a woman bowed low but not slumping, contemplative, her eyes staring downward, engrossed by something not pictured for the spectator. There is a heavy stillness and quietude in the finely detailed, weathered face. Kollwitz’s figures are brooding and yet impregnable. Her gestures, with such keen attention to line, portray human suffering, yet the staunchness of the faces, the way bodies cling to one another erecting a fortress around themselves, averts some of the pain.

Kollwitz’s work is at once religious and secular. Images of Mary and Jesus appear, but mostly there are men and women, usually working class, who bear the pain of the world. Although raised on the sermons of her grandfather and father who were ministers of the Free Congregation, Kollwitz transcended the ingrained Christian ideology in favor of the spirit of individualism. There is an acceptance of God’s existence, but also a distance from some of the conventional baggage that attends this faith. As she wrote after the death of her son:

The idea of eternity and immortality doesn’t mean anything to me at present. The spirit in Peter goes on living. True enough — but what does this spirit mean to him? The great world spirit which entered into him and which goes on working after its dwelling shattered ... What was important was the particular form which grew ... What continues is spirit in itself, but yet not Peter’s spirit. Peter’s spirit was inseparable from his body. That is why for me there is no consolation at all in the thought of immortality. ... (December 1915)

Initially Kollwitz considered herself a Socialist. In her work, she depicted the proletariat; yet she did so without any overt political agenda: “... my real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful.” (1941)

Generally the diaries address the war on an abstract level, rather than by reactions to specific events. At the outbreak of World War I, she reconciled herself to the departure of her son for military service with the consolation that he must serve the country. Ultimately, the horror of war eclipsed this sense of duty, and she fought patriotic propaganda. By the end of the war, she wrote in her diary, “I thought I was a revolutionary and was only an evolutionary. Yes, sometimes I do not know whether I am a socialist at all, whether I am not rather a democrat instead. How good it is when reality tests you to the guts and pins you relentlessly to the very position you always thought, so long as you cling to your illusion, was unpeasably wrong.” (June 28, 1921) Surprisingly, however, she recorded little about World War II or the Nazis in her memoirs, although her son mentions briefly her public denunciation of them.

It seems she often wrote when she was not working, and so the documentation sometimes takes on this abstract homogeneous flavor, as she expressed her angst when not producing art. When the letters seem most distant, however, she casts away these lamentations with a fresh perspective.

Recently I began reading my old diaries ... I wrote only when there were obstacles and halts to the flow of life, seldom when everything was smooth and even. ... As I read I distinctly felt what a half-truth a diary presents. Certainly there was truth behind what I wrote; but I set down only one side of life, its hitches and harrassments. (New Year’s Eve, 1925)

One might question then the skewed quality of these memoirs, which were heavily edited by her son. Her two retrospective essays, however, and those by Hans and her granddaughter Jutta broaden the perspective on her character. Her son recalls moments when “she was so happy that ... she would walk hand in hand with me, singing folksongs. She loved nature, especially the picturesque aspects of nature, and she drank in whatever she saw.” This is the contradiction faced by a woman who chose to examine and embrace life so completely. She received terrific horrors and terrific joys. Refusing to compromise, she negotiated the terms of her life daily, “I ask myself again by what law man ought to live. Certainly not in order to attain the greatest possible happiness. It will always be true that life must be subordinated to the service of an ideal.” (October 11, 1916) — Elyse Cheney
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