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# Art Criticism

**rt Critic**

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With respect to the color of the cover:

If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to that reality.

T.W. Adorno, "Black as an Ideal," *Aesthetic Theory*.

# Art Criticism

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# The Meaning of Artistic Form and the Promise of the Psychoanalytic Method

By Mary Mathews Gedo

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Art historians skeptical about the potential value of the psychoanalytic approach to art complain that the method seems better suited to the explication of iconographic than formal problems. Such criticism ignores a crucial fact: stylistic factors play just as important a role as thematic choices in shaping an individual artist's personal iconography. To put it another way: an artist's varying productivity and compositional formats—his preferred repertory of media, shapes, colors, textures, and chiaroscuro patterns—reflect his unique personality just as completely as does the content of his *oeuvre*. From this vantage point, then, all applied analytic approaches might best be described as species of iconography.

Of course, artistically naive psychoanalysts have sometimes reduced iconography to the level of mere narrative in the narrow sense by selecting an isolated example or two from an artist's total *oeuvre*, then reading these works as though they were associations elicited during the course of an analytic hour. But the art historians, for their part, have committed equivalent sins of dilettantism. Sometimes these consist in applying out-

moded or inappropriate psychoanalytic concepts to an artist in a mechanical “cookbook” fashion. In other instances, more sophisticated scholars may bury their analytic insights in such a complex melange of data about the artist’s external situation that it becomes difficult to piece together a coherent picture of the underlying assessment of the relationship between the subject’s character and career. A variation on this approach relegates such observations to brief concluding remarks, or to a special, separate but unequal, chapter of a text.<sup>1</sup>

Efforts of these types probably reflect the scholars’ own deepseated ambivalence toward psychoanalysis or, at the very least, their apprehension over the possibility that colleagues will ostracize them for utilizing methods derived from this discipline.

However, even art historians unambivalently enthusiastic about the potential value of the psychoanalytic approach find the problems of integrating such evidence into their usual framework difficult to resolve. How does one decide what weight to assign to the artist’s individual personality and experiences in shaping his career as opposed to influences derived from the *Zeitgeist* of his era? My own solution has been to focus my attention primarily on artists whose careers have been extensively documented with complete catalogues raisonnés and abundant critical and biographical studies. In such situations, I feel comfortable about addressing myself primarily to the identification of the psychological aspect of the person’s creativity and its ramifications throughout the *oeuvre*. In opting for this approach, I certainly do not intend to depreciate the importance of artists’ cultural and socio-economic environment for their careers. To the contrary, I recognize that all of us—art historians as well as artists and their public—inevitably belong to our own time and culture and reflect that viewpoint. Rather, my findings should be considered as complementary evidence concerning an aspect of the artist’s inner world that art historians often ignore or feel incapable of addressing adequately. Convinced that the shoemaker should stick to her last, I make the maximum use of my atypical background, of the fact that, before turning to the study of art history, I worked for several years as a clinical psychologist especially trained to administer and interpret various intellectual and personality tests and to conduct interviews with a variety of people. This background, plus the fact that I am fortunate enough to have an in-house consultant very knowledgeable about the visual arts in the person of my psychoanalyst husband, John E. Gedo, probably better equips me than most scholars to undertake the applied analytic approach.

Pablo Picasso has formed a major subject for my studies, both because I believe that he is the greatest artist of the 20th century, and hence most worthy of study from every possible viewpoint, and because his is certainly one of the most extensively documented careers in the history of art.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Picasso himself emphasized the autobiographical character of his *oeuvre*, as well as the necessity for studying each and every work in context—carefully noting when, where, why, and how he had executed it—so that one might recreate as accurately as possible his precise

psychological state during its creation.<sup>3</sup>

My method for dealing with Picasso (as well as other artists to whom I have directed my psychoanalytic attention) has addressed the formal as well as the thematic aspects of his art; as I emphasized earlier, I regard such changes in style and productivity to be expressions of the psychology of the artist just as central to his personality as his ostensible "subject matter." The degree of emphasis I have placed on stylistic as opposed to thematic elements has differed, not only from artist to artist, but from time to time within the career of a given person, according to my assessment of the relative importance of various factors involved. For example, though Picasso's art was always tightly linked to his ongoing intimate relationships, his reaction to changes in these associations differed widely over his long lifetime. Typically, ruptures in important human bonds immediately reverberated through his productivity; for Picasso, personal alienation often resulted in creative paralysis. The most celebrated of these paralyzes followed his rejection of his mistress, Marie-Thérèse Walter, after she gave birth to their baby daughter in 1935. However, later in life, when Picasso switched his affection from Dora Maar to Françoise Gilot, it caused less disruption in his productivity and was primarily reflected instead via changes in style and subject matter.

Although I have always been cognizant of the fact that my psychoanalytic approach to art inevitably reflects the years I spent as a clinician, I have practiced my method more intuitively than programatically and had never fully articulated how I go about it until Joseph Lichtenberg asked me to write an essay about the ways I use empathy in my psychoanalytic approach. His request forced me to reflect upon and to try to define my methods more precisely. Certainly, an ability to empathize with the artist under consideration—to identify with, yet maintain a critical distance from my subject—seems central to my method.<sup>4</sup> Problems growing out of a scholar's identification with—or reaction against—the artist under study probably affect art historical conclusions far more often than we realize. Although such "transference problems," as analysts have dubbed them, invariably skew the results of even the most seemingly straightforward non-psychological investigations, they often prove fatal to the latter.

In order to guard against such difficulties, ideally the art historian interested in the applied analytic approach should work with a psychoanalytic consultant. Although few, if any, of my colleagues can duplicate the convenience of my arrangement with an experienced psychoanalyst consultant always readily at hand, other solutions are possible. Wayne Anderson, for instance, obtained group assistance of this kind from the Boston analytic community in preparing his psychological study of Paul Gauguin's career, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost*.<sup>5</sup> But it remained for the psychoanalyst George Moraitis, who has worked with several prominent historians, to provide the first explicit model for such collaborations. As Moraitis has defined and practiced this technique, it neither mirrors psychoanalysts nor involves psychotherapy; rather, the collaborating analyst and scholar limit their attention strictly to issues involving the latter's problematic reactions toward

his subject, reactions that endanger or impede his investigations. The interested reader should consult the recent book-length study, *Introspection in Biography*, which provides extensive examples of the "Moraitis method" for assisting such self-inquiry, presented in the form of paired essays by the analyst and his various collaborators.<sup>6</sup>

Because I dealt with the empathic aspect earlier, here I will give greater emphasis to other parameters of my method. My own methodology involves not only empathic insights enriched by such a collaborative dialogue, but also techniques and procedures growing out of the years that I spent doing psychological research and administering projective tests, especially the Rorschach Ink Blot Test.<sup>7</sup> Such experiences have taught me to maintain an attitude of hovering alertness to *all* aspects of a master's *oeuvre* and to attempt to integrate formal and thematic elements of his production into a single, unified interpretation.

The task of verifying such psychoanalytic observations about an artist's *oeuvre* is always very problematic, as art historians critical of this approach constantly remind one: "You do not have the artist on the couch." In Picasso's case and that of other artists of the recent past, survivors who knew the person during his lifetime can provide *some* degree of validation.<sup>8</sup> But such testimony cannot be equated with confirmation—or refutation—obtained from the subject himself. One obvious solution to this dilemma lies in the study of living artists through face-to-face interviews, as well as through the direct examination of works and writings. Of course, interviewing the artist has its own set of built-in risks: personal revelations relevant to the *oeuvre* may seem too private or painful, or simply be unavailable to the artist's conscious recall. Moreover, even if an artist is aware of connections between his art and his inner world and freely reveals them to an interviewer, he may not wish to share such information with his public. Finally, the danger that one might "put words" into the person's mouth or inadvertently bully an especially courteous artist into agreeing with the interviewer's own private assessment of the situation must also be faced and mastered. (In this regard, the cooperation of a skilled psychoanalyst collaborator should prove helpful.)

Despite my wariness about such problems, I decided to undertake a demonstration project for this journal, bolstered by my repeated observations that many Chicago artists I had interviewed seemed quite aware of the highly personalized motives underlying major changes in their styles, subject matter, and productivity. Surprisingly, such iconographic changes have proven just as readily recognizable in the art of the abstract painters I have interviewed as in that of figurative artists. Indeed, perhaps because the abstractionists feel themselves protected or shielded by the seemingly non-representational character of their compositions, they often appear more comfortable about discussing the psychological roots of their creativity than their peers engaged in figurative painting.

In order to provide an in-depth demonstration of the causal role psychological factors play in creativity, I decided to limit my focus to the *oeuvre* of a single person, and I invited the Chicago Abstractionist William

Conger to participate in my initial experiment of this type. Conger, a solidly-established painter with a growing national reputation, seemed an ideal subject for a number of reasons, including his characteristic frankness in alluding to the psychological aspects of his art. From such comments, I knew that he had discovered his definitive abstract style in 1972, while creating *Flossy's Night*, a painting that evoked rich autobiographical associations during its evolution.

An unusually articulate man capable of expressing himself in speech and writing with a fluency that few individuals can equal, Conger has kept a day-journal for several years in which he has recorded his ongoing commentaries about works in progress. He indicated his willingness to share these notes with me, and they proved an invaluable source for evoking the internal climate which gave rise to his more recent production. For comparable information concerning earlier pictures, I depended on Conger's written reconstructions, supplemented by interviews that clarified obscure points. The essay that follows derives from such material, collected during the past five years.

As an undergraduate art major during the late fifties, Conger began his career painting in the requisite neo-Jackson Pollock abstract-expressionist manner. By the time he started his M.F.A. studies four years later, he had come full circle, to concentrate on representational art, primarily studies and paintings of a single figure shown in three-quarter or full-length view.<sup>9</sup> Although a number of these works featured his young bride, Kathy, most of them depicted imaginary personages. (Mrs. Conger recalls how her husband used to boast, laughingly, that he had "invented" these people. Surprisingly, none of these invented personages elicited the autobiographical associations which *Flossy's Night* would stimulate. Perhaps it was the more amorphous, "non-representational" character of this canvas and its progeny that stimulated the production of such personalized material on Conger's part. Or perhaps the disguises provided by these more abstract compositions permitted the artist to fill them with undecipherable personalized images.)

The years 1967-70 marked a transitional phase in Conger's art; increasingly preoccupied with abstract shapes, he now began to limit his representational experiments to drawings based on studies of his family or himself, rather than on his fancy. His major thrust during this period involved works featuring discrete biomorphic or geometric forms silhouetted against a uniformly painted ground. His earliest creations of this type might more accurately be described as painted reliefs. He cut out shapes from wood with a jig-saw, then painted and mounted them, sometimes on panels, sometimes directly on the gallery wall.

### FLOSSY'S NIGHT

By the time he began *Flossy's Night* in 1972, Conger had abandoned both his figurative drawings and his relief paintings. The canvases which engrossed him during 1971-72 all feature rather flat shapes floating on a light, often decidedly blond, ground. These paintings were all carried out in the

careful old master technique he continues to employ.<sup>10</sup>

He began *Flossy's Night* early in June, 1972, as another of these blond abstractions. By the time he left for a vacation with his family at month's end, the canvas seemed to be progressing fairly rapidly—at least by Conger's standards. When he returned from his holiday at the ocean in South Carolina, however, the artist experienced exceptional difficulties in returning to the painting. Although he usually composes primarily on the canvas, utilizing a quick, tiny sketch as a general guide, Conger felt so stymied that he interrupted work on the picture to make a larger, more detailed preparatory drawing. This unusual procedure resolved his dilemma: the dark background which he devised for the drawing inspired him to darken the blond background of his oil. He surrounded the shapes he considered definitive with a dark, red-brown (virtually black) color, quickly modified or added the remaining forms, then glazed and varnished the canvas. Only after he had completed the painting did Conger think of the title, *Flossy's Night*.

To the artist, the picture seemed very different from all his earlier canvases. The profound emotions he had experienced while creating it, the strange mixture of sadness and elation it had induced, the memories it had stirred up—all these set the picture apart.

The dark background produced a strange illusionism which made the whole work rather brooding. I especially liked the green bands that outlined a window shape [this form, located in the upper left of the canvas, resembles three vertical segments of a mullioned window]. I called it *Flossy's Night* because the melancholy of it reminded me of my mother's long and tragic illness. [The artist's mother had died 12 years earlier, when he was 23. Although her real name was Florence, her intimates all called her "Flossy."]

This canvas has continued to enjoy its special place in the artist's affections ever since he completed it. The demands for his pictures have so far exceeded his ability to supply them that he never manages to retain a painting for his own collection, despite resolutions to the contrary. But he has never sold *Flossy's Night*, which became the foundation on which he built his subsequent paintings! Many of the forms initially invented for this picture appear elaborated in the canvases that followed. The new color scheme he employed for it, especially the nocturnal background, became his preferred color scheme for years, one which he has only occasionally abandoned. Although he began many of the paintings which grew out of *Flossy's Night* with a lighter background and a more lyrical mood, he eventually transformed most of them into his new preferred "black" style.

But the most important lesson Conger learned from *Flossy's Night* did not involve the manipulation of formal elements. Rather, he recognized that the strong emotions which gripped him during its creation imparted a new sense of power to the painting. This realization altered his subsequent creative experiences. He continues to begin most canvases—just as he began *Flossy's Night*—as a tabula rasa, devoid of personal associations.

But he now anticipates that somewhere during the creative process, such allusions will—indeed, must—take hold. At a certain point, this fusion of affective and aesthetic elements must occur, producing a powerful surge which he then transmits to the painting in process. If he fails to experience this surge, he cannot complete the painting. In such cases, he either destroys the work—scraping the canvas down and beginning anew—or he over-paints, producing a penitenti-laden picture. The very rare canvases which Conger has managed to finish since 1972 without evoking such personalized reactions seem to him merely competent, not inspired.

Conger's account of the evolution of *Flossy's Night* left many lacunae which puzzled me. The connections between his vacation and his subsequent creativity problem appeared particularly murky. Why had that interlude at the ocean produced such a disruption in his work, a disruption resolved, moreover, by a change which transformed his canvas into a painted eulogy to his long-dead mother? The artist seemed unable to provide additional data, and he specifically denied that he had ever taken any similar ocean-side vacations with his mother during childhood. The only clue he mentioned was that the "wobbly" forms in the painting symbolized the awkward, unsteady gait which his mother developed during the last months of her life. He also volunteered that, although *Flossy's Night* constituted his first demonstrably autobiographical painting, he must have been working toward this more personalized type of art during the immediately preceding period, when he had begun to give his canvases names associated with places he had known and loved as a child. The painting he had completed just prior to *Flossy's Night* he had named *Hinman*, after the street in Evanston where the family had lived during his early childhood.

Finally, I asked about the shape in the lower right-hand corner, commenting that it reminded me of a flight of stairs. That seemingly innocuous statement stimulated a flood of associations from Conger. He remembered that a few years before his mother's death his father had purchased a family vacation home on a Wisconsin lake. His mother loved the place and spent the last summers of her life there; Conger and his father joined her whenever their work schedules permitted. The front windows of the house all gave on the lake, and one descended from the house proper to the boat house, and thence to the water, via a long, meandering flight of stairs.<sup>12</sup>

The artist spent what proved to be the final weeks of his mother's life with her at this vacation home. Every evening at sunset they went down to the lake for a twilight boat ride. One evening as they started down the stairs to the lake, his mother experienced a bout of dizziness and fell. Conger, who had vaulted ahead to prepare the boat, rushed back and gathered her up in his arms. Horrified, he noted that she seemed virtually weightless; her frail body was the most insubstantial of burdens. The stair shape, Conger now remembered, had been the final form he had added to the painting. When that was in place, he knew the composition was complete, finished—like his mother's life.<sup>13</sup>

This flood of memories permitted Conger to reconstruct the genesis of *Flossy's Night*. The ocean-side vacation with his wife and child had



stimulated images of that earlier, tragic lakeside vacation which the artist had spent with his mother. The window shapes—the first form which he added to his picture following his vacation—proved to refer not only to the windows and vistas visible from the Wisconsin vacation home, but to the remembered windows and vistas of his childhood. (Window imagery and associations play an important, recurring role in Conger's art. See, for example, the discussion of *Lakeview*, to follow.) During Conger's early childhood, the family had lived in a large Evanston home located so close to Lake Michigan that the boy could visit the water virtually daily. When he was about six, they moved to a Chicago apartment.

It was quite a shock to move from the spacious and grassy suburban environment to the crowded, noisy, and concrete-clad city. We moved to a big apartment, but there was no yard, and I think I spent a lot of time looking out windows and missing the open space of the Evanston lakeside. My room was in the back of the apartment, and it had windows all around on three sides. They had a good view of the neighborhood buildings, and at night one could see the lights of taller buildings clustered around Diversey Parkway and, of course, the Lindbergh searchlight [a rotating spotlight mounted atop a downtown skyscraper, since removed] gave a regular rhythm to the whole scene. The night-time view was mysterious and brooding, and sometimes the sky streaked red, reflecting the city lights. It was quite magical.

The dark, red-brown background of *Flossy's Night* seems like a painted recreation of those memories of the nocturnal skyline of the artist's childhood, the period when the night symbolized glowing magic, not dark death.

#### LAKEVIEW and EXILE

Several years later, in September, 1978, Conger began *Lakeview*, another canvas which would fuse memories of lake vistas with recollections of the death of a parent, this time his father. *Lakeview* constituted the third canvas in a series which the artist describes as "simple, structural, and architectural, as opposed to the more organic compositions that derived from *Flossy's Night*." Beginning without any preliminary sketch, Conger determined to create a work "that visually twisted the rectangular format. Thus, all the elements had to relate very carefully to the framing edge...." After he painted the neutral horizontal form in the center of the picture, Conger found himself mired down:

It [the central shape] constituted a kind of ledge and reminded me of the use of the foreground ledge in so many Renaissance portraits. So anything below that shape was by implication (and history) in a different, closer space. I tried to find a simple solution to that problem—the relationship in a non-perspective composition between a close, interior-like foreground and a distant, exterior-like background.

When I finished, the whole work seemed very melancholy and dreamy, and so I repainted the background again to evoke more strongly an ambiguous sort of sky with fog-like wisps. The softness of the shapes con-

trasting with the crispness of everything else increased the sense of limitless depth to the background.

The horizontal ledge and the vertical shape on both sides evoked a window-like quality, reminding Conger of "an utterly benign space. It was architecture, sky, and water."<sup>14</sup> These ideas invariably recalled again those early childhood experiences near the lake in Evanston, and the way the lake had become for him "as it is for the city itself, a symbol of introspection, beauty, and feeling. Because of that, all Chicagoans, and the city, too, inwardly face the lake—it is a spiritual orientation." Conger called the painting *Lakeview* to allude to the "vistas society has always placed before itself as symbolic of some spiritual ideal."

As we discussed this work, another more personalized and painful significance for its title suddenly occurred to the artist, again one he had once been conscious of, but had evidently suppressed after completing the picture. After his father's second marriage, the senior Conger had moved with his new bride to an apartment on Lakeview Avenue. Soon, he began to exhibit symptoms of the fatal malignancy which would cause his death. These sad events were made all the more tragic by the unempathic attitude of the artist's stepmother, who made Conger feel like an intruder in his father's home.

Immediately before painting *Lakeview*, Conger had created a closely-related architectural picture. He called it *Exile* because the foreground shape acts to prevent visual entry to the dark background visible behind it, but seemingly available to the viewer only in fantasy. This painting symbolized to him his own status and role in Chicago art at the time; his work, though abstract, always includes a type of illusionism and ambiguity which separates it from non-representational art of a purely formalist type. But neither do his paintings closely relate to the *oeuvre* of the Chicago imagists. Thus Conger—and his paintings—were "exiled" from the debate then taking place in Chicago between the formalists and the imagists.<sup>15</sup>

These two pictures, *Exile* and *Lakeview*, seem to be related thematically, as well as formally and chronologically. Both pictures review Conger's status as an exile—an exile from the prevailing modes of art then practiced in Chicago and an exile from his father's last years, when the artist seems, literally, to have been on the outside looking into the Lakeview apartment rather than the other way about.

The paintings *Flossy's Nights*, *Lakeview* and *Exile* grew out of Conger's most painful recollections. But his productions often reflect less disturbing and overtly personal experiences. Many of his compositions are inspired by his meditations on the history of past art and culture, especially the history of the American civilization. For example, *Cahokia*, 1977-78, grew out of his reaction to visiting those prehistoric Illinois Indian earthworks on a dreary, rainy day when no other visitors came to the mounds except the Conger family. The elements and colors in *Cahokia* refer quite specifically to features present at the site, constituting the artist's homage to this lost civilization, his realization that "if time were reversed, I would build a mound and they would paint."

*ELECTRA and THAT AUGUST DAY*

Periodically, however, Conger's memories of his mother surface once again, to color a work in progress, as was the case with *Electra*, begun in June, 1980. An amateur painter herself, the artist's mother had actively encouraged her son's artistic interests; some of his happiest childhood recollections concern the trips they made together to study the great collections at the Art Institute. *Electra* deals with the artist's lingering guilt over his real or fantasied role in ending his mother's activity as a painter.

Conger began the painting, the largest he had attempted until then, on the eve of his initial visit to Paris to study the great masterpieces of the Louvre. In this instance, his vacation acted as an impetus, rather than an impediment, to his creativity. Before going abroad, he had proceeded with the canvas slowly and hesitantly. But seeing all the great art in Paris gave him the confidence to go ahead "regardless of doubts and dilemmas about its composition," and he completed the painting within a few weeks of his return to Chicago.

In *Electra*, the artist aspired to show "a life force . . . a sense of something exciting, dynamic, filled with an independent energy, yet at the same time held in reserve, so to speak, to evoke a consciousness of the tragic." Actually, it was Conger's wife who suggested the title for the picture, a responsibility she often undertakes. He thought the sound of the word "Electra" seemed to convey what he wanted the picture to express. He notes that, in the Greek tragedy by the same name, Electra arranges the death of her own mother:

By making art, artists 'assassinate' the art which nurtures them. My mother was an amateur painter and once received a very nice set of oil paints as a gift. I was about nine or ten at the time, and one day I took the paints and made a mess of everything. She then gave me the paints and never painted again. I felt very bad about it for a long time. Electra is in everyone. To some extent, everyone, even society itself, manages the death of its past.

In 1983, Conger completed *That Day in August*, a painting he describes as "a postscript to *Flossy's Night*." (Actually, the canvas simultaneously commemorates twin August anniversaries—both Conger's parents died in August, several years apart.)<sup>16</sup>

Conger began *That August Day* with the notion of making a formal composition which would have a large loop or curling form as its dominant shape. This ambition proved difficult to realize, and he once again left an unfinished canvas behind when he began a family vacation, a car trip to Virginia. The drive through the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountains proved a high point of the tour:

The rugged contours of those mountains, the seemingly perpetual haze that hovers among them and, in the clearing of that haze, the stark contrasts between the dense green of the foliage and the open sky, together with darkened and silent deep ravines with their continuously twisting roads made a great impression on me. I recalled that my parents had made a similar trip through the mountains in the early 1950s, and my mother mentioned afterward the feelings of gloom and joy that were evoked by

the mountain ravines and peaks.

With mountains and memories still rising and falling in me, I came home to see the painting in a different way. That dominant—and restrictive—yellow loop curling in the center became a kind of prophetic summation of the mountain journey—of my new experience and my recollection of my mother's remarks about the mountains. . . . The composition of *That August Day* seems calamitous to me. The shapes and colors, nearly cacophonous, suggest a moment of sudden and enormous change. After our summer trip, these elements became the mountains erupting from the earth, midnight lightning, flame, and smoke; they became the mountains now, with precipitous ledges, spiky growths, and mist-filled skies. They became a reminder of what my mother had said about the mountains and of my own experience in them. *Flossy's Night* reminded me of my mother's illness. This painting reminded me of her death. The title refers to the August day on which the painting was completed, the August day of our mountain trip, the August day of my mother's death.

As a work that evokes associations to landscape, natural forces, artistic experiences, and death, *That August Day* should not seem morbid or depressing. It is an expression of reality, a reflective and romantic acceptance of change, sudden and irrevocable, held for contemplation in the fiction of paint.

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### INTERIOR SEASON

Although the psychological content of Conger's art typically deals with the past—whether personal or cultural—he occasionally utilizes his art to react to and integrate the feeling states that flooded him during the work's creation. Such was the case with *Interior Season*, a composition that reflects his responses during a brief period of extreme stress precipitated by external events beyond his control. Probably significantly, the artist began this composition on December 30, 1984, a gesture suggesting that, from its inception, this painting characterized what Conger later recognized as "my battle for survival during the winter."<sup>17</sup> Although the ostensible artistic problem the artist set himself in *Interior Season* involved integrating a composition composed of disparate pieces, he immediately recognized the analogy between this motif and his own mental state:

This painting has all sorts of pieces in it, and it will not be easy to pull it all together. But I knew that when I began. This is a tough time for me. By doing this painting I'll put myself back together again. Artists can put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Perhaps impelled by his anguished internal state, Conger worked with uncharacteristic speed, completing the painting in less than a month's time—a new record for him. The resulting canvas with its sombre colors, sharp edges and jagged elements, all set against a seemingly infinite dark ground, and covered with heavy layers of glazing emphasizing its ominous atmosphere, is surely the most disturbing production of Conger's career. In retrospect, the artist recognized that the picture seemed almost sinister:

The painting shows an inside place, not an outside one, as most of my other works do—it's a place of extreme danger, the pieces are like flashing blades. By back was against the wall, and it was a fight to the death. In

May, when I titled the work, I could think of all those images and allusions but when I was doing the work, I don't think I could have faced up to its meaning except that I did feel at times like I was in pieces too.

## BROADWAY

Fortunately, the winter of Conger's discontent dissolved into an unusually happy, event-filled springtime. His June, 1985 exhibition at the Roy Boyd Gallery in Chicago was an unqualified success, and the show was reviewed favorably by several national publications. Shortly before the exhibition opened, Conger was notified that he had been appointed full professor and chairman of the art department at Northwestern University. This position holds a special significance for him: he had spent the most memorable years of his early childhood right on the Northwestern campus in a Hinman Avenue home his parents leased from the university. (It now houses the Department of Philosophy.) In a very real sense, then, in allying himself with the Northwestern art department, Conger *did* go home again.

A few weeks before he accepted the chairmanship at Northwestern, the artist began a great summation painting later titled *Broadway* in honor of the vigorous Chicago thoroughfare by that name. Conger began this picture—by far the largest he has attempted thus far—knowing full well that he would have to remove it from its stretcher and roll it up to get it down the narrow stairs leading from his studio. Amazingly, he finished this 68" x 120" picture in precisely four weeks. By contrast, he had labored on the much smaller *Flossy's Night* and *Lakeview* for several months—a pace much closer to his average than the runaway speed he achieved with *Broadway*. As if to underscore the fact that the painting constituted the closing chapter in a phase of his career, Conger executed it entirely with partially-used tubes of paint already on hand; he exhausted this supply at the precise moment he completed the work. His description of this picture suggests that the artist identified kinesthetically with the rapid movements he was portraying on canvas, to achieve the same quick tempo he conceived of as characteristic of that racey Chicago neighborhood.

When I was a kid I lived on Barry Avenue and walked every day along Broadway. I was greatly impressed by the action and movement and noise of the street. It was earthy with its rushing people, shopkeepers yelling into the street, the newspaper vendors, the debris, the traffic, and, of course, most dramatic of all, those wonderful clanging 'red devil' streetcars. It was exciting—so fleshy, so different from the serene and spiritual park and lake.

With *Broadway*, Conger apparently concluded a chapter in his career and life. While painting this picture with finality and ease, he was busy talking about moving on to new artistic concerns. Perhaps his next style will develop out of an extensive group of panel paintings that I have dubbed his "underground pictures." For several years, he has been creating these little panels, works that he treats in a much freer, more experimental and expressionistic vein than his major paintings. Although he has amassed a significant number of these small pictures, he has never shown them in

any of his major exhibitions and has, until now, utilized them as gifts to friends or as donations for special benefits. These underground paintings may very well elicit the same personalized associations as Conger's major canvases, but he did not seem ready to discuss this issue, and I did not try to force it.

### CONCLUSIONS

Whether Conger's next phase flows from his underground panel paintings or from the work that has established his reputation, it seems likely that it will deal with different issues than those discussed in this paper. Pictures like *Flossy's Night* and *Lakeview* explore the disasters of his youth, especially the loss of his family of origin. In a very real sense, his *oeuvre* of the past 15 years might best be described as elegiac. Now Conger's daughters have both reached adolescence and face the same life crises that he portrayed so dramatically in his watershed paintings of the 1970s and early 1980s. On the basis of his past performance, I make this speculative prediction: Conger's work during the next decade should deal, at least in part, with the emotions that overtake him as his daughters become independent adults. This aspect of his art will constitute his future personal iconography. Simultaneously, he will probably clothe these associations in a style that is increasingly painterly and elusive. These latter developments have become increasingly apparent in Conger's work of the past decade and probably represent his responses to the prevailing international emphasis on bold facture, narrative content, and strong expression. But though he is clearly an artist of his own time and culture and responds, to a degree, to such changes in the current artistic climate, Conger is also very much his own man. He has never relaxed his consistent dedication to exemplary craftsmanship, even though current fashions condone so much "bad" painting. Similarly, he has always resisted the Chicago bent for quirky stylization and subject matter. Conger's uniqueness reflects itself above all in the particular formal and thematic characteristics of his art that constitute his personal iconography, and I hope that this essay at least partially reveals the richness and complexity of these private psychological attributes of his production.

Although the extensive research data being published by M. Csikszentmihalyi, J.W. Getzels, and S. Kahn strongly suggests that the *oeuvre* of all contemporary artists probably encodes such private references, these aspects of an individual's production are seldom made explicit and public, as in Conger's case.<sup>18</sup> This demonstration project reveals that the retrieval of such material depends upon the pre-existing relationship between the art historian and her subject: the empathy and trust between Conger and me provide a climate in which he felt comfortable about sharing such private aspects of his creative process. During the past few years, as we have become better acquainted, Conger has been more and more willing to reveal intimate material to me. For example, as I studied his works and writings, I realized that none of his statements really explained the psychological differences that almost certainly underlie the two main divi-

sions of his current abstract style—the types of work that he distinguishes as “architectural” and “floral,” respectively, and I asked him to jot down his thoughts about this issue. He found this experience quite painful, and it is a tribute both to his desire to search out the truth and to our relationship that he persisted in this task, although it proved so disturbing that he still appeared shaken the next day when he delivered his brief typescript to me. In his meditation on this dichotomy in his work, Conger noted:

The more rectilinear, or architectural, paintings don't have much movement; they suggest a sort of force, counter force, so that things really don't go anywhere. It's a form of stasis. I think the architectural pictures were really death paintings, separation paintings. I know I meant that by the titles. . . . Unlike the full movement floral paintings which are life filling, the architectural paintings are probably life denying, anti-material, separate, alone. Perhaps they are the images of death, the disguised corpses which I may examine and experiment upon as an anatomist. For the other works, the floral works, I am the healing physician.

This frank assessment suggests that, for Conger, the architectural works represent his more sensuous, life-giving aspects. To put it another way, one might hypothesize that the analytic and floral pictures represent the yin and yang of his personality, the masculine and feminine aspects of his intellectual and creative life. If my associations to Conger's revelations are accurate, it may also help to explain why references to his tender, supportive mother constantly recur in the floral pictures. (Even the generic name, flora, that Conger supplies for them is but another variation on his mother's name, Florence!) By contrast, the two major works commemorating the artist's father, *Exile* and *Lakeview*, were both painted in his architectural sub-style. In that same note, Conger observed that, although his floral paintings sometimes develop very quickly, the architectural pictures invariably prove difficult and time-consuming. Evidently, the artist experiences the type of severity and rigor that these pictures demand as more draining. This attitude, too, may be a legacy of his youthful crises, which invariably involved more conflict with his father than with his empathic mother.

The material I have just recorded concerning the genesis of Conger's architectural paintings illustrates my method at its speculative extreme; it derives from my associative responses to those of the artist, the two strands interwoven as if I were interpreting a Rorschach protocol.

In this essay about Conger, as in my writings on Picasso and others, I have tried to demonstrate that, within the limitations set by the century and place in which the artist lives, all changes in artistic style reflect concomitant changes in the person's inner world. Just as Goya's life-threatening illness of 1792-93 transformed him from a Rococo artist to a master of expressionist painting, or Picasso's Blue Period—and its denuouement—evolved out of his problems in separating from his family of origin—so must all meaningful changes in art derive from changes in the artist's inner world and external experience. In Conger's case, his increasing success and prominence in the national and Chicago artistic worlds have increased his courage and resolution, and he himself closed his paragraph on the arch-

itectural and floral paintings with a suggestion that he now felt ready to deal artistically with the prospect of his own approaching mortality in a great architectural painting on the scale of *Broadway*:

Little architectural paintings are safe; the real world fills up around them, keeping them buoyant, as it were. But a really big architectural painting would sink through any surface of real stuff and to make it and to see it would require a willingness to sink with it. I can see it as a big vertical painting. When I began this paragraph, I had no idea that it would come to this, but now I realize that I must do that big death painting although I don't know when—maybe soon, maybe not. A few more flowers may build up courage.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>As an example of the first type, see Reinhold Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). For the second approach, see the late Howard Hibbard, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>In addition to my book-length study, *Picasso—Art as Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), I have published a number of essays devoted to individual paintings. The most recent of these, "A Youthful Genius Confronts His Destiny: Picasso's *Old Guitarist*," will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Museum Studies* 12:2 now in press.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Gyula Halas [Brassai], *Picasso and Company*, trans. Francis Price (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>See M.M. Gedo, "Looking at Art from the Empathic Viewpoint," *Empathy*, 2 vols., ed. Joseph Lichtenberg, Melvin Bornstein, and Donald Silver (Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1984) 2:267-301.

<sup>5</sup>Wayne Anderson with the assistance of Barbara Klein, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).

<sup>6</sup>George Moraitis, *Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness*, ed. Samuel H. Baron and Carl Pletsch (Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>Interpretation of the Rorschach requires integration of quantitative data involving the formal character and quality of the subject's responses with qualitative findings derived from their content or thematic character. For information concerning the technical aspects of the test, see: D. Rapaport, M. Gill, and R. Schaefer, *Diagnostic Psychological Testing*, ed. R. Holt (New York: International Universities Press, 1968), pp. 222-30; 272-6. Bruno Klopfer, et al., *Developments in Rorschach Technique*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1954), 1:249-402. Roy Schaefer, *Psychoanalytic Interpretation in Rorschach Testing: Theory and Application* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1954).

<sup>8</sup>In a personal communication made in October, 1982, Francoise Gilot informed me that she considered my interpretations of Picasso's psychology (see n. 2) to be quite accurate; she added that her son, Claude Picasso, who had discovered the book without his mother calling his attention to it, informed her that I was "the only one who got it right."

<sup>9</sup>During this same period, Conger also painted a number of still-life canvases, featuring a single plant placed on a chair, almost as though substituted for a single person.

<sup>10</sup>For Conger's technical procedures, see M.M. Gedo, "Abstraction as Metaphor: The Evocative Imagery of William Conger, Miyoko Ito, Richard Loving, and Frank Piatek," *Arts Magazine*, Oct. 1982, pp. 115-6.



<sup>11</sup>Although Conger stated that he kept the painting because it was "Too complex and too fragile to be regarded as well made," he amended that statement: "For that reason, but mostly because the painting had opened up a great wellspring of feeling and imagery in me, I have kept *Flossy's Night* in my studio, exhibiting it only twice."

<sup>12</sup>Conger showed me photos of the Wisconsin home, boat house and grounds. The appearance of the boat house startled me, because I recognized in its smooth, regular, painted log siding, the prototype for a characteristic shape that appeared in a number of the canvases that Conger completed soon after *Flossy's Night*. He always referred to this form as a "tufted area" and apparently had not recognized its source until I asked about it, although the resemblance between this form and the boathouse siding is unmistakable.

<sup>13</sup>This may seem like an instance in which an unconscious idea becomes conscious, but this was not the case. Conger remembered, when I asked about the point specifically, that he had been quite aware of the significance of the stair imagery at the time he painted it. During the intervening years, he had suppressed this memory until our conversation revived it.

<sup>14</sup>When Conger brought me slides of his earlier representative paintings, we were both surprised to note that not only virtually all the human figures, but most of the still-life arrangements as well, were situated before a mullioned window with a deep ledge and a vista of an enormous lake.

<sup>15</sup>The situation in Chicago has changed markedly in this respect during the past few years, as several New York critics, sent here to study the Chicago art world, have attested in print. For my assessment of the complex interrelationships between the imagists and the abstractionists, see "Interconnections: A Study of Chicago-Style Relationships in Painting," *Arts Magazine*, Sept. 1983, 92-7.

<sup>16</sup>This phenomenon is known in psychoanalysis as an "anniversary reaction." It seems likely that a number of Conger paintings, unidentified as such, may similarly be anniversary reaction works. In his notes about this painting, Conger observed: "Both of my parents died in August a few years apart. They were young: my mother was 48, my father was 53. Because of my youth, my immaturity, but certainly because she had fostered my interest in art, my mother's death was a calamity for me. My father's death was tragic, but hers was a disaster."

<sup>17</sup>In my Picasso book (n. 2), I pointed out numerous instances in which Picasso's New Year's Eve drawings had special significance. See pp. 69, 130, 186, 225 for examples. It seems likely that Conger's December 30th initiation of this painting was not coincidental.

<sup>18</sup>Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi reported these findings from this ongoing research in a paper titled "The Dangers of Originality: Creativity and the Artistic Process," delivered at a symposium titled: *Psychoses, Neuroses, and Art*, held April 20, 1985 at the University of Chicago.

# Adrian Stokes and the Psychoanalytic

By Ron Graziani

*"...our own art lacks emblematic tension. They (the artists) are bound to reflect our lack of corporate emotion by lifting the structure of their art to a feasible distance."*

*Adrian Stokes, Quattro Cento, p. 41*

*"In this barren age it is extremely difficult for us to realize...the vast emotional sources upon which Quattro-Cento men relied."*

*Adrian Stokes, Quattro Cento, p. 51*

*"The true emblems of our age appear over-negative to give the complete reassurance we require of art."*

*Adrian Stokes, Quattro Cento, p. 42*

*"Object and subject are irretrievable in motion, inapprehensible and unapprehending. In the flashes of identity between subject and object lies the nature of genius. Any attempt to codify such flashes is but an academic pastime."*

*Jules Laforgue, "L'Impressionsme," 1883*

From the beginning, Adrian Stokes' description of 15th-century Italian art in *The Quattro Cento: A Different Conception of the Italian Renaissance* (1932) was a determined effort to confront the intellectual attitude of his critical contemporaries. The above quotations pulled from a book ostensibly about the 15th century bespeak this moral commitment.

In his first book *The Thread of Ariadne* (1926) Stokes had roughed out a working hypothesis for approaching the modern predicament. The categories of traditional thought—or what Stokes called the "common heritage"<sup>1</sup>—could no longer be kept separate from each other if he were to adequately deal with the "overly self-conscious" modern era and its contradictory realizations. Stokes proposed that the understanding of meaning through contrast and difference become the new "first essential."<sup>2</sup> And this identity-in-difference—a concept Stokes borrowed from F.H. Bradley—would become animated through the "art of suggestion,"<sup>3</sup> with its oscillation between opposites. This dialectical dance held the "keys of understanding...the suggestion of meaning."

Aware of the book's inadequacies, Stokes nonetheless finished with a

dramatic appeal for artists and authors to use this new tool to become once again “prophets” of meaning rather than “discontented photographers;”<sup>4</sup> that is, prophets no longer rejecting tradition in the name of “pure art.” Through its “self-destructive sense of time,”<sup>5</sup> Stokes felt that modern art had disconnected itself from its own sources. Intellectual activity was in effect avoiding its own emotional aspirations.

In his subsequent book, *Sunrise in the West: A Modern Interpretation of Past and Present* (1926) the “afternoon in the open piazza”<sup>6</sup> became Stoke’s metaphor for describing the only “healthy” attitude toward the modern situation. He regrets that “so insistent are the new demands of a new sensibility that our power of emotions are overwhelmed, no man perhaps is great enough to bare himself to modern existence without losing his strength.”<sup>7</sup>

But because of its self-consciousness, the afternoon was now in need of its “sunrise”—its source of inspiration. Stokes insists that “we continually intend that some epoch should envelop us for we are at a loss to deal with our own.”<sup>8</sup>

A new set of rules for historical understanding—for the process of historical formation itself—was now needed to bridge the schism that seemed to separate the past from the present. Some mechanism of mediation was needed, capable of “mingling” a sense of modernity with a sense of the past—a way of seeing them on the same evolutionary continuum.

In formulating his own schema, Stokes relied on the distinction his contemporary T.S. Eliot drew between tradition and the individual,<sup>9</sup> stating, “When we change, history changes too. There is no priority because the two are interdependent.”<sup>10</sup> Past and present are given meaning by each other. From the “spectatorial side,” that is, the reception side, history is always a “mechanism from the other end.”<sup>11</sup> Stokes insisted throughout his career that the “close of an evolution is tried at the beginning.” Historical change always seemed consistent, since the background of history was always bound up with the foreground of the present. And the present was now in need of its past, a past necessarily reinterpreted.

This is the guiding spirit behind *Quattro Cento: A Different Conception of the Italian Renaissance*. By reconstructing the emotional spirit within this particular past, necessarily reinterpreting the art of the Quattrocento, the result would in turn nourish and change the present situation. And with the method developed in *Sunrise in the West*, what Stokes now called the “mature method” and its sustaining “brotherly element”—defined as the enhancement of opposites rather than “the usual means of balance or equal opposition”<sup>12</sup>—Stokes could concentrate on one aspect of the Quattrocento without denying its counterpart, e.g., Venetian vs. Florentine, or later, carving vs. modeling, or finally, the psychoanalytic vs. the aesthetic. Stokes wrote in *Quattro Cento*, “It is now time again . . . for we have learned the anti-Ruskin lesson well [the exclusively intellectual version of pure aestheticism such as that of Roger Fry] . . . to re-estimate, attempt anew the coordination of the spirit of western man with his art.”<sup>13</sup>

Stokes defined this spirit in the Quattrocento through the concept of

“stone blossom.” Although continually reshaped throughout the book, the image of “stone blossom” comes to represent “constricted energy,” devoid of “melody”—the meter of energy unfolding.<sup>14</sup> The Quattrocento work of art becomes “firm like the wide face of a rose,”<sup>15</sup> immediately intriguing. But energy “which usually emerges like a melody”<sup>16</sup> is nonetheless present. And through contemplation it is this “energy” that keeps the sudden “flash” of the encounter from exhausting itself. In *Quattro Cento*, Stokes described this “energy” through water’s interaction with stone, with the resulting accumulated residue—the “incrustation”—the empirical verification of that interaction. It is water that registers the “time bound” melody in stone, while the instantaneous “stone blossom” effect explodes the “flood of time.”<sup>17</sup>

Stokes confronted the problem facing most critics in the 1920s: despite the fact that a work of art generates an effect that is “time bound” to its historical making, it somehow manages to transcend its determining factors. Stokes’ notion of immediacy through constriction “explains” how the work transcends history: the totality of its tensions survives it. Stokes used a 19th century aesthetic formula, Pater’s dictum about “all art approximating to the condition of music,”<sup>18</sup> but turned it on its head. For Stokes, melody becomes the historical ingredient in art works, the incrustation in Quattrocento works of art, while the “stone blossom” effect becomes the transcendent quality. What is “emblematic,” entrancing, in a Quattrocento work of art is this very stone blossom effect. For Stokes, the emblematic was always the only “fit subject for literature.”<sup>19</sup>

It is characteristic of Stokes’ method that he should reshape the description of the art of the past while still using its traditional tools, recognizing and respecting those tools, their “acquired prestige,”<sup>20</sup> even while redefining them. For example, Stokes reshaped the humanistic attitude attributed to the Renaissance through his own Quattrocento concept. In an earlier article titled “Pisanello” (1929), Stokes described the humanism of the 15th century as the enhancement of the rough by the smooth, and vice versa. It was a humanism that externalized a mode of existence, an activity of the soul in the body and mind. It became a harmony that enhanced without subverting the environment, a nature “humanized yet natural . . . outdoors approximating to indoors.” The “authentic humanism” was more than simply a coherent structure, but a “Form,” an “architectonic embraced by the senses as well as by the mind.”<sup>21</sup>

But Stokes was also a “true child of his age.”<sup>22</sup> His “prejudice of vision,”<sup>23</sup> the “feasible distance” that had occurred between art and life in the modern world, forced Stokes to realize that the redefining of humanism would have to be recognizable in the art medium itself. “Mingling” had to take place between the collective present and a past seen taking the form of individual autonomous objects. Such mingling became the very core of the aesthetic experience for Stokes.

The treatment of this core undergoes a descriptive change from writing *Quattro Cento* (1932) to *Stones of Rimini* (1935). The gears began to shift in a series of reviews on modern art Stokes wrote for *Spectator* late in 1933.

In his first article, "Art Today," Stokes expanded on his concept of beauty, or the quality in Form, originally set forth in his "Pisanello" article. There, in order for beauty to become art—identified as a "trick of imitation, the saying of much in the terms of a very limited medium"—it had to possess a form "so positive a quality that it was complete to itself, the rest of the world shut out."<sup>24</sup> Although the "interrelations of its constituents" would always vary, this quality in Form is what "constricts" expression. The essence in Form became the "inspirer," not the technique or "design." Form was a means of "talking to the senses and through them to the mind."<sup>25</sup> But unlike the Quattrocento artist whose architecture and environment were healthy sources of Form and so enabled artists simply to add to their sense of Form by way of naturalistic representation, the modern artist had to first "discover what art is in order to create it." Because of the contemporary "heterogeneous environment," modern artists were "too largely engrossed with the invention of Form."<sup>26</sup>

Thus Stokes denounced much of then current aesthetic criticism as unnecessarily protective, insisting that "modern abstraction needs no excuse or weighted words."<sup>27</sup> The modern artists had no recourse but to create Form solely "from the matter of their personalities and their intelligence."<sup>28</sup> The "essential emblematic reference" now originated from the artists' "understanding rather than from their imagination."<sup>29</sup> But unlike Roger Fry, who had also developed the idea that the task of the modern artists was "thinking form," Stokes did not believe the aesthetic encounter moved to disinterested thought; it was profoundly tied to life.<sup>30</sup> As a source of Form, "life" is the basis for Stokes' insistent use of the then pejorative term "literary." The more intense the abstraction, the more subliminally pervasive the "literary content." Stokes concluded that the reaction against three dimensional representation in modern art was "entirely necessary."<sup>31</sup>

In Stokes' second review, "Mr. Ben Nicholson's Paintings," a different structure began to unfold. The fine arts are described as a specialized form of "manual labor," separated into two categories, the *modeling* or manufacturing mode, and the *carving* mode, exemplified in the process of agriculture where the "earth is coaxed, made fruitful for man's purpose."<sup>32</sup>

These two "merging yet distinctive processes" are explained in very general terms in the analysis of Ben Nicholson's paintings. It is Nicholson's "understanding of the carving concept" that placed him within what Stokes claims will become "the mainstream of the contemporary movement."<sup>33</sup> But this "mainstream" was still a minority position in the 1920s. It is worth noting that in 1918 Eric Gill's book on *Sculpture* also attempted to unify the arts and crafts by the idealization of labor, and distinguished between modeling/carving techniques in a similar way. Gill describes the distinction as a "moral one," and necessarily tied to the classical—the Renaissance.

Gill regarded the carving aspect of art making as owing part of its "quality to the material of which [art is] made and of which the material inspires the workmen and is freely accepted by him."<sup>34</sup> This idea is reinforced in Stokes' analysis of Nicholson's paintings: "Just as the carver consults the stone for the reinforcement of his idea, so Mr. Nicholson has started to

paint when he prepares his canvases."<sup>35</sup> Stokes reiterated this in *Stones of Rimini*: "Whatever its plastic value, a figure carved in stone is fine carving when one feels that not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure has come to life."<sup>36</sup>

Responding to the then popular practice of having outside foundries do the actual casting of the work, Stokes attempted to further explain the "merging" or interdependence of the modeling and carving poles in his subsequent review of "Mr. Henry Moore's Sculpture." Stokes used Moore's "new, unfamiliar" carved concrete pieces—once set the concrete was carved—as an example of "how intense had been the plastic aim"<sup>37</sup> in contemporary sculpture. Moore's art was a useful example of how carving and modeling were present in every art work. More importantly, it verified how sculptors who concentrated exclusively only on the actual carving had a "less pure carving conception."<sup>38</sup> Despite this awareness that stone was losing its use and importance as a material in the modern world, Stokes still hoped the plastic conception might once again be tied to the "stern demands of materials."<sup>39</sup>

Stokes' final review, "Matisse and Picasso," completed the initial introduction of his new schema. Relegating Matisse to the level of a modeller, Stokes concentrates on the etchings of Picasso. Stokes now defined the carving mode as "not so much from reducing the concrete world to terms of his own personal rhythm [the modeller] but from the depth of his feeling for the concrete world as something unalterable, as fixed in space, a permanence. . . in terms of which all feeling, all rhythm all that is temporal, can be translated by the artist. . . making his fantasies stone."

The Mediterranean mode of contemplation was the source of the carver's ability to "turn this subject into object." It was around the Mediterranean that "the artists evolved this complete and vital power of projection through their art, a power so sure that without loss of resilience it gains for living things the finality of stone." Stokes concludes that "the Mediterranean mode of contemplation alone possesses the sanity and resilience to create a culture out of a machine age."<sup>40</sup>

Having expanded on these themes in *Stones of Rimini* (1936), Stokes developed his second stage solution. Thus the stone blossom and incrustation elements of the Quattrocento are redefined through the carving and modeling modes.

What becomes evident in *Stones of Rimini* is that once the carving/modeling modes are tied to the idea of the "emblematic" expressed in *The Quattro Cento*, they also become something more than a set of techniques. They become innate categories of aesthetic experience. They are not only aesthetically innate to the medium, but articulate the artist's tie to it, which involves both his manipulation of material and its resistance.

But Stokes sensed the inadequacy of *Stones of Rimini* when he posited a further requirement: "If we would understand a visual art, we ourselves must cherish some fantasy of the material that stimulated the artist, and ourselves feel some emotional reason why his [the artist's] imagination chose. . . to employ one material rather than another." He also stated, un-

satisfactorily, that “poets alone are trustworthy interpreters”<sup>41</sup> of the emblematic. The poet might be able to transcend historical or even iconographic analysis but the “emblematic” was supposed to “entrance” any observer. What Stokes needed was not only a way to articulate the aesthetic experience derived from the medium, but to demonstrate how the “emblematic” inherent to all art can survive its own historical determination and become accessible to any person in any time.

From the start, Stokes had realized that an aesthetic that would reveal the inherent potential of any art to communicate universally had to have a psychological basis. In 1945 he finally introduced “a more profound system” in the “Envoi” of *Venice: An Aspect of Art*, a book that completed Stokes’ first trilogy while laying the groundwork for its successor. What he offered was a scheme that could merge aesthetic structure with psychic structure—the psychoanalytic approach.

Stokes had already considered the psychoanalytic scheme in the early 1920s, when he was influenced by Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. By the end of the ’20s he had read much of the psychoanalytic literature. In 1930 he began analysis with Melanie Klein. That Stokes read Freud is apparent, especially in Stokes’ interest in clichés and puns. But in an even more profound way than indicated by his sporadic use of the psychoanalytic lexicon, Stokes’ early aesthetics reveals a Freudian influence.

In “Formulation Regarding the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,” Freud insisted that the artist had “special gifts” which allow him to mould his phantasies into “a new kind of reality.” He maintained that the artist’s “high reality sense” developed from his “relation to his own internal reality and a purely formal, that is, aesthetic pleasure in the presentation of his phantasies.”<sup>42</sup> Art in effect became a dream condensed, made objective, or in Stokes’ words “the saying of much in the terms of a very limited medium.”<sup>43</sup> However, Freud required that the artist distance his work from its “personal note” so as not to “bore us with ordinary daydreams.”<sup>44</sup> Stokes’ own preference for the carving mode, with its reference to the “otherness” of the medium—its distance from the purely personal—parallels these beliefs.

But Stokes translated the artist’s “high reality sense” in a radically different way. For Freud, how the artist achieved this effect was his “innermost secret,” a “mysterious ability.” For Stokes this “uncharted swamp of the mind” (the artist’s innermost secret) is translated through the medium’s emblematic—“the turning outward into definite form an inner ferment.”<sup>45</sup> This becomes the “magic stuff of Form, which coagulates expression.”<sup>46</sup> Freud’s conception of the preconscious between consciousness (“the outside”) and the unconscious (“inside”) of the artist is mirrored in Stokes’ conception of the emblematic between the outside and inside of the medium. What was in the stone was brought to the surface, the “symbol of realized expression, aspects of stone revealing the emblematic spirit of the Quattro Cento externalized.”<sup>47</sup> Stokes made a great effort to expose the emblematic potential of stone in a wonderful biography of limestone.

Stokes’ growing preference for the psychoanalytic also surfaces in his

1933 reviews for *Spectator*. His basic theoretical strategies in "Art Today" were not unrelated to those of Herbert Read, one of the first practicing art critics who tied the psychoanalytic to aesthetic criticism. Stokes' subsequent *Spectator* reviews dealt with artists Read himself had championed. Read stressed the need for a new understanding of what is involved in aesthetic experience in his article "Psychoanalysis and Criticism" (1925). However, despite his conception of "presentational immediacy" and its therapeutic potential, which closely paralleled Stokes' own aesthetics, Read's work within the psychoanalytic framework was very different.

In "Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Aesthetic Value" (1951) Read continued to defend the artist's "mysterious ability." He also linked the Freudian to the Gestalt theories of art. A dialectical synthesis of these opposites developed, but within the Freudian repressive framework, where art became the scene of restitutions, but also of the enactment of repressed destructive impulses. This dialectic was based on the familiar idea that the ego was in constant "competition" with instinctual drives. The interplay between ego and instinct apparent in the "skill of configuration" (the good Gestalt) in the artwork, enabled Read to attribute "a scale of value" without "regard for its possible rational significance."<sup>48</sup> For Freud as well as Read form-elaboration or "symbolic transformation" had a biological purpose. It was evidence of the triumph of life over death.

For Stokes, the coordinating act of the medium imparts "a form to formless phantasy"; this "icon of coordination"<sup>49</sup> posits the emblematic in the medium, and through water and light—the medium's two primary sources of otherness—the stone blossoms. A psychoanalytic sense of unconsciousness is constantly operational in the medium of art. But it was not until the 1940s that Stokes truly attempted to align the aesthetic and psychoanalytic process. Then the shape the alignment took was Kleinian rather than Freudian.

When Stokes began his analysis in 1930 with Melanie Klein, she had recently become established in the English psychoanalytic community. By the 1930s she was of major importance in clinical child development. Stokes relied on her two "positions" to reformulate his analysis of the art object and one's relation to it

The paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions describe how the infant handles its object relations. The paranoid-schizoid position refers to the earliest phase, when the primitive ego's relationships with objects are still fuzzy. It is not yet capable of differentiating objects as separate entities (for example, the breast as part of a whole person).

Structured around its innate life and death instincts, the primitive ego, being weak, tends to fragment or split relations into good ideal part-object and persecuting bad part-object. In this position, the ego's main aim is to inhibit the persecutor's destructive potential (paranoid anxiety) by introjecting the ideal good object, and projecting the persecuting bad object (partly associated with the death instinct). This type of primitive organization in effect splits the ego; projective identification articulates this splitting of the ego.



Gradually objects once split begin to be seen as self-sufficient whole objects (for example, the mother); this whole “mother” is then introjected, becoming the core of the ego. Although now no longer split into part-objects, the whole object is a source of both gratification and frustration. It is at this stage that a fundamental change of “position” occurs.

Under the influence of uncontrollable impulses during periods of frustration and anxiety, this whole object (both in its external and internal form) is continually attacked, in effect destroying the infant’s inner core. The “original” loved object is lost. Several options are available within this position if the self accepts and realizes itself to be the cause and destruction of the original object. But this creates depressive anxiety, resulting in a new set of feelings and mechanisms, necessary for handling this anxiety.

If the good object is felt to be irretrievably destroyed or lost, feelings of persecution overpower the ego. It responds by regressing to violent defense mechanisms or to a partial paranoid-schizoid position, involving splitting, idealization, denial, etc. On the other hand, if the remaining internal objects are adequate enough, memory of the good original objects creates a desire to repair/restore the lost object, the object coherently “other.” Through repeated experience of loss and restoration, a more fully integrated mature ego develops—a more developed picture of the inner self and external world.

Klein was convinced that a loving concern for the object existed even in the more regressive response to depressive anxiety; both types of responses become sources of creativity and sublimation. But even within a more mature response, depressive anxiety is never fully overcome. Thus, experience with real objects in the external world continually modifies and transforms the original internal images. The disappearance of the good objects in one’s external life continually reawakens the depressive position. The loss of the external object threatens the loss of the internal object associated with it, once again exposing the ego to paranoid and depressive fears.<sup>50</sup>

Although she alluded to the roots of the creative impulse in a 1929 article, it was not until 1935 that Klein presents the clinical results establishing the depressive position as the decisive moment recurring throughout life. Klein’s positions implied a reparative nucleus capable of expressing as well as repressing. In 1946 Klein published a full account of the paranoid-schizoid position,<sup>51</sup> establishing the existence of the ego in infantile development at a much earlier period than was believed. Even at this early stage it was the elaborations of the ego in its object-relations that created internal phantasies and put defensive mechanisms into action.

In *Venice, An Aspect of Art*, Stokes began to apply Klein’s findings. Giogione’s paintings become the pivotal source for retranslating Venice—the internal fantasies of nature externalized—into the psychoanalytic terms of the psyche. With Giogione’s *Tempesta* filled with “would-be gods in a godless world,”<sup>52</sup> Stokes introduced, as a substitution for the religious concept of God, the psychoanalytic notion of an original interior good object: “We harbor the idea of a good object (i.e., God) and since without

it we would very soon die, it is a contradiction to conceive this power to be also outside us."<sup>53</sup> This new framework would be dominated by love (the Kleinian reparative apparatus) not by fear and the sense of guilt. God becomes an internal good object, and through substitution, "the constant factor of mental activity,"<sup>54</sup> the artistic creation becomes the epitome of this process. Man becomes "alive twice over in reality and in image."<sup>55</sup>

The "Envoi" of *Venice* was also used to lay out the general groundwork for Stokes' subsequent autobiographical trilogy. Mental life becomes dependent upon the external world, the "laid out instantaneous world of space."<sup>56</sup> With *Inside Out* Stokes finally introduced the Kleinian depressive position and delineated the reparative process of his own internal good object.

Stokes phantasied Italy as the restored good object, a reassembled, repaired image of his original one of a London split into bad Hyde Park and euphoric Kensington Gardens. The Italy of the *Quattro Cento* had played the same role for the arts in Stokes' first trilogy. *Inside Out* is Stokes' subjectivity in pursuit of its own criticality. The potential for rebirth for both Stokes and the arts was Italy. Cézanne is used to conclude the book by becoming the aesthetic surrogate in modern art. His depressive position expressed the interdependence of the "inner flow of the mind and its outer setting."<sup>57</sup>

In "Concerning Art and Metapsychology," Stokes attempted to give a psychoanalytic rationale for the creative/reparative process by supplementing the Freudian schema with post-Kleinian ideas of object relations. The essence of artistic creation becomes "bestowing on pieces of matter the power to communicate a particular set of phantasies. . . through the medium of the external world, in terms of the external world."<sup>58</sup> The power of the internal phantasy projected on the material is still found entirely in the "poignancy of its articulation,"<sup>59</sup> which now mirrored the process of object relations within the human psyche. It is therefore necessarily present in all viewers of art. This externalization through the manipulation of a medium (in the aesthetic art) produces deep pleasure, an inherent response to the "poignancy of articulation."

In the "Envoi" of *Venice*, Stokes asserted that "fantasy cannot be undermined if utter devotion is also paid to truth; . . . aesthetic truth would be defined by contrast to the truth of science."<sup>60</sup> In *Art and Science*, (1949) Stokes attempted to concretize his earliest dichotomy of prose and poetry, developed in *Sunrise in the West*. Piero della Francesca's "sense of color" epitomizes this process, ultimately leading to the quality of Piero's love, associated with sanity.

Stokes closed his autobiographical trilogy with *Smooth and Rough* (1951). Melanie Klein is finally mentioned "officially" and a complete commitment is made to psychoanalysis as the "ultimate basis for the attitudes of Humanism."<sup>61</sup> Stokes translated love, loss, and rebirth psychoanalytically. Rebirth now was not death and spiritual release, but growth through the depressive position. The concept of separation enabled Stokes to intensify the meaning of the phrase, "architecture the mother of the arts." The stone blossom celebration of Quattrocento buildings is now translated

in *Smooth and Rough* as the "celebration of the first triumphant return of the lost object."<sup>62</sup> The reconstruction of this "ego defining object"<sup>63</sup> occurred with special intensity in architecture.

But the Kleinian psychoanalytic approach to art allowed Stokes to accomplish much more than rephrasing what he had stated in *Stones of Rimini*. The modeling/carving schema did not allow Stokes to discuss modeling without muddling carving. Yet both elements were present in every work, and Stokes wanted to express them dialectically, but was inhibited by this dualism. The corresponding Kleinian positions gave him a dialectical method, at last.

Where his earlier traditional method tied him directly to the external medium, producing a metaphorical momentum toward inner consciousness, his new-found psychoanalytic method forced him to reverse that process; he now began in the inner sanctum and moved outward into materialized aesthetic form. "Stone" with its sure objectness, necessarily overwhelming the modeling attempt, is replaced by libido.

In "Concerning Art and Metapsychology," Stokes, using Freud, insisted that instinctual drives (the libido) are "object seeking," and require an experience of the other in order to manifest themselves. Inner phantasies become ever more tied to their externalization; the more intense the phantasy the more complete the object becomes, the more "otherness" it must maintain. In effect, "all knowledge has its origin in external perception," as though the artist were now "able to make of his mind a stone;" and vice versa, the more other and complete the work of art was, the more it could "display and manifest the content of his mind."<sup>64</sup> This "stone" quality no longer inhibits the artist's projections—modeling—but enhances it.

In *Smooth and Rough* the internal sources of the "exquisite arrangement of space"<sup>65</sup> are "the incorporated figures that we rock within us. . . the outside in."<sup>66</sup> With the introduction in *Smooth and Rough* of the paranoid-schizoid position, Stokes accepted the object relations emphasis on the quality of mothering. The machine age (modeling) is seen as a split mind using the weapon of "omnipotent control" (effective totalitarianism)<sup>67</sup> to pillage the mother's body, the environment. "The environment it creates, the problem it poses, the kind of organization it requires have elements that tend to weaken the ego's structure."<sup>68</sup> The ego regresses to the paranoid-schizoid position. Machine age architecture implies a less defined form of self. Stokes' earlier use of empathy theory is given its regressive origin. It becomes the "omnipotent control" behind Melanie Klein's "projective identification," control of an other by putting a part of the self within the other, a part then lost to the self—a culture which lacks a charged emblem. The situation Stokes attempted to explain was not how we suffer in our culture, but how we created it, for man "created it no more from nature than from himself."<sup>69</sup> With the realization that the machine age "flatters the unstable rudimentary ego," Stokes could begin to understand from outside the "ever so genuine underlife of the ego."<sup>70</sup>

In "Form in Art: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation" (1952) he attempted

to outline a theory of attitudes that determine the creation of form in art. The basic problem was how to distinguish the form in art from the form in other kinds of experience. The "genesis of the aesthetic form"<sup>71</sup> lies within the substitutive process of inner phantasies. They become external and physical, "identifying the interchange between an all-embracing and particularized element, with good images."<sup>72</sup> Form is projected phantasies made cohesive. The images—representing the feeling of oneness and the recognition of otherness—become the "universal filter"<sup>73</sup> through which content must pass. The reparative effort becomes the "nucleus of aesthetic form"<sup>74</sup>; both images are essential to it. This nucleus "inhibits or prevents the disturbance in mere ecstasy associated with the blissful merging ego."<sup>75</sup> Sublimated content is aesthetically dealt with, not symbolization alone. Form in art is "content conceived in terms of a medium and a culture that have been profoundly associated by the artist with images [older experiences of ego relationship] or their prime surrogate."<sup>76</sup> Through the reparative act, images of self-sufficiency and enveloping dependence are both reconstituted.

The concept of reparation parallels Stokes' earlier concept of history. To recover a past, one must re-experience it. But lost in time, it cannot be fully recovered; only its introjected image is recovered. This need for history reveals the psyche's need to project a history of its development into its surroundings. Acceptance of the past as "petrified" reflects the weakness of the original internal lost object, and reduces the strength necessary to recover the past. Rituals that attempt to prolong our roots in the past will eventually lose their rationale, but the "ritualistic care" of art remains to encompass us, to "radiate our present with our past. . . immediate yet old."<sup>77</sup>

In *Three Essays on Painting of Our Time* (1961) Stokes translated the his present cultural condition through its paranoid-schizoid elements. With culture becoming the "climate of feeling" and style determining how the two positions are combined—helping us to identify ourselves through "fixed hard objects"<sup>78</sup>—architecture, the mother of the arts (the original destroyed object) provided the original language of "expressiveness of space, volume and texture, equivalent to the impact of phantasies."<sup>79</sup> But architecture was "lacking as a vital source in the 20th century";<sup>80</sup> modern painting had to find a substitute for it. The picture plane became the surrogate architectural wall. According to Stokes, unity is no longer possible in modern life. The split character of our culture "inspired an element of regression."<sup>81</sup>

Art has had to fill the void left by architecture in the modern world. Although good objects are restored on the picture surface, they nonetheless take the shape of part-objects. Both the enveloping boundlessness of homogeneity and the self-sufficient entity become part-objects separate from yet dependent upon each other. These part-objects become the pivotal fiction of the avant-garde artist's contention that his art is autonomous. It is a regressive idea—a paranoid-schizoid position. The modern art appearance is not distorted nor neglected but regressive. Modern art articulates the "merging act that belongs to part objects." We search for coherence yet

the urban environment has no integrating message, hence the “fragmenting and heroic energy of modern art.”<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless there is Cézanne. In *Color and Form* (1937) Stokes described Cézanne as the only artist since Piero della Francesca to have with “equal insistence” plastic strength and respect for nature. In *Inside out* (1947) Stokes still emphasized that “Cézanne-became-a-landscape.”<sup>83</sup> For Stokes, Cézanne articulated “the inevitable control of man’s mind over his environment, while allowing the real world its perfect otherness.”<sup>84</sup> This balance became the modern “classical.” Stokes stated that the “equal insistence” of both Cézanne’s “romantic fire” and “smokeless heat of the detached elements of the external world” could only have been achieved after a “complete caress” with nature,<sup>85</sup> giving Cézanne a stronger will to manipulate nature as well as respect for the way it was. This parallels the way the psyche mitigates anxiety by merging, allowing the good and bad objects to be separated with less dread, creating a less abysmal bad image and a stronger good image, and therefore a stronger ego.

In short, through Cézanne’s sense of logic he was able to create shape—the objectivity of otherness. Cézanne is defined as the modern version of classicism, a classicism of ceaseless doubt. Yet only through the nourishment of nature (the original breast) did Cézanne get the strength to continue his manipulation of nature—repair its image. Stokes could now reveal how Cézanne had “introduced both love and respect into an extraordinary attack upon his apples,” a “noble ego’s integrative activity both in itself and in relation to objects. An act of self-possession fit to measure against the world.”<sup>86</sup>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Adrian Stokes, *The Thread of Ariadne* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1925), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup>Stokes, *Thread*, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>6</sup>Adrian Stokes, *Sunrise in the West; a Modern Interpretation of The Past and Present* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner 1926), p. xii.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>9</sup>T.S. Eliot had worked on this concept of historical change while at Oxford in 1916-17. Although his thesis—which developed some of F.H. Bradley’s ideas—was not published, it was accessible in the Oxford library where Stokes spent his undergraduate years. Since he himself was profoundly influenced by Bradley, Stokes likely would have read Eliot’s paper.

<sup>10</sup>Stokes, *Sunrise*, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup>Stokes, *Thread*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup>*The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, ed. Lawrence Gowing (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1978), II, *Color and Form*, p. 20. (Subsequent references are to CWS).

- <sup>13</sup>CWS, I, Quattro Cento, p. 115.
- <sup>14</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 20.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 17.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 26.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 20.
- <sup>19</sup>CWS, I, Quattro Cento, p. 115.
- <sup>20</sup>Stokes, *Thread*, p. 236.
- <sup>21</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 19.
- <sup>22</sup>CWS, I, *Art Today*, p. 305. In the 1910s, with no way to establish a "truth to life" criterion for abstract art, many theorists and artists resorted to "truth to material" as the new criterion of value.
- <sup>23</sup>CWS, III, *Invitation in Art*, p. 269.
- <sup>24</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 26.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 27.
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- <sup>27</sup>CWS, I, *Art Today*, p. 305.
- <sup>28</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 27.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>The next generation of artists and theorists associated with Unit 1 had already attacked this position by the time Stokes was writing. See Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London: Allen Lane, 1981).
- <sup>31</sup>CWS, I, *Art Today*, p. 308.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 307.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 308.
- <sup>34</sup>Harrison, *English Art*, p. 216.
- <sup>35</sup>CWS, I, *Art Today*, p. 308.
- <sup>36</sup>CWS, I, *Stones of Rimini*, p. 230.
- <sup>37</sup>CWS, I, Henry Moore, p. 311.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 312.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup>CWS, I, Matisse and Picasso, pp. 313-314.
- <sup>41</sup>CWS, I, *Stones*, p. 186.
- <sup>42</sup>Herbert Read, "Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Aesthetic Value," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 32, (1951): 76.
- <sup>43</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 26.
- <sup>44</sup>Read, "Problem," p. 77.
- <sup>45</sup>CWS, I, Pisanello, p. 26.
- <sup>46</sup>CWS, I, Quattro Cento, p. 40.

- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 89.
- <sup>48</sup>Read, "Problem," p. 80.
- <sup>49</sup>CWS, I, Quattro Cento, p. 33.
- <sup>50</sup>CWS, III, Greek Culture, pp. 86-88.
- <sup>51</sup>See, Hanna Segal, *Melanie Klein*, (London: The Harvester Press, 1982).
- <sup>52</sup>CWS, II, Venice, p. 134.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 137.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup>Adrian Stokes, "Concerning Art and Metapsychology," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 26 (1945): 177.
- <sup>59</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>60</sup>CWS, II, Venice, p. 134.
- <sup>61</sup>CWS, II, Smooth and Rough, p. 216.
- <sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 247.
- <sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 240.
- <sup>64</sup>Stokes, "Metapsychology," p. 179.
- <sup>65</sup>CWS, II, Inside Out, p. 162.
- <sup>66</sup>CWS, II, Smooth and Rough, p. 229.
- <sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 256.
- <sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 253.
- <sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 255.
- <sup>70</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup>Adrian Stokes, "Form in Art, A Psychoanalytic Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, 18 (1959): 202.
- <sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 196.
- <sup>73</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>74</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 200.
- <sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 201.
- <sup>77</sup>CWS, III, Invitation in Art, p. 297.
- <sup>78</sup>CWS, III, Painting in Our Time, p. 152.
- <sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 149.
- <sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 145.
- <sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 174.
- <sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>83</sup>CWS, II, Inside Out, p. 171.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>86</sup>CWS, III, Painting in Our Time, p. 181.



# Response to an Empathic Critic

By Mary Webster

For his review of "German Expressionist Sculpture," Donald Kuspit chose the title "An Appeal for Empathy," and said, "The question is why, in Germany, from about 1905 to 1925, there was such a felt need for the psychological, an urgent insistence on the empathic and on pathos in art." (*Art in America*, November 1984, p. 114.) Psychoanalytic criticism is hardly new; but this is not a conventional psychoanalytic critical stance. Kuspit begins to shift the emphasis away from distanced observations of autonomous thinking about an object to the moister ground of being with the objects of his critical concern. The implications of such a position are enormous not only for criticism and for artists, but for the larger culture as well. We are reminded that art is not the superfluous turning in on itself of a leisured narcissistic society, but may be an arena in which the nodal growth points of a culture sprout first in images of emerging paradigms. We are reminded of the primacy of image as the first cohesiveness of energy that now becomes perceivable in form. Actually such a resonant and responsive attitude between observer and object has for some time been the rule in atomic physics, and one can only surmise that the commercialization of art has pre-empted its inherently intuitive sense of

leading culture in favor of appropriatable images that can be recognized by their potential buyers.

What we're considering in German Expressionism is a sculpture of the body—art from the oceanic depth of belly; not an art that lies along the surface of mind and air, not the polite stance of cause and effect observation, nor of mass production, nor of reasonableness; not the polished persona of a commodity of estimable value made to seduce us yet again by its reflective surfaces that stimulate our desire for the mirror instead of the Self. Cooler art stimulates the desire to possess, but refuses penetration (empathy) because, having become so immersed in its packaging, it has misplaced its content. We suspect—even fear—there is nothing inside.

The particular nature of historical return is a crucial element in our current interest (or insistent disinterest) in Expressionism. In order to return home, the prodigal son had first to leave home. There is a journeying that alters the son, and he who returns does not come back as the child he was, but brings the experiences of the world back to his native place. We are not "primitives," but people who have journeyed far from our place of origin (and through the hubris of mind, far from the essential body). We have gained autonomy (and the weapons to keep others out and maintain that autonomy), perspective, control over our innate rawness, and an ego which knows itself as differentiated and separated—and lonely—from the oneness and *participation mystique* of the "primitive" family. Yet collectively and as individuals we long for a reconnection with deeper truths, earthier ground, remembered warmth. We know, usually from having slipped out of our habitual groove and fallen into it, of a deep river winding through the vicissitudes of our separate ego-lives, and in the knowledge of a deeper, unknowable stratum (which somehow seems more reliably true) in the human psyche, we are close to the source of art.

Kuspit points out that

The Expressionists' stylistic synthesis, utilizing more or less every style with which the artists were at home, undermines the conventional notion of style as a sum of conscious effects. Expressionist art presents itself, so to speak, as styleless, because the traits of a variety of styles are recognizable in it. This untoward complexity causes a disturbance in the sense of proper artistic language, out of which "expression" emerges—the sense of an art that speaks more than one language at the same time. (p. 115)

Art exists as surface, but in our act as viewers responding to it we need to be dragged beneath the surface into a totemic universe of correspondences, of unarticulated feeling and associations. The feeling may be uncontained, unadapted to our ego-plane which—in order to enable us to move in our almost unbearably complex lives—is usually able to find a file into which experience falls. So we are able to comprehend or see or hear along the lines and grids of our particular ego structure. When faced with material coming from grids that are unfamiliar (and so perceived as chaotic and unordered) or—more deeply—indicators, signifiers, or emanations from other planes of understanding, we respond in various

ways. Most people simply do not register the real art object or activity at all. The ego may be so rigidly built up for its own survival that its scaffolding is impenetrable and so oblivious to signals that might threaten its cohesion. So people look at art and see nothing and are genuinely puzzled as to what others may see in it. Others, when viewing, for example, primitivist art, are able to fit it into anthropological, religious, historical, art-historical, psychological, materialistic, or economic files and so to understand it in some way through the habitual analytic paths of their particular ego structure. When we are able to file away an art object, it ceases to force open our filing system—it is depotentiated and has not penetrated us.

If one allows *in* a piece of art and feels through one's own flesh "what it is," then one feels empathy. It may be that empathy is the operative focus of all art-viewing, since empathy is not necessarily a function of feeling. When one understands in the sense of arriving in him or herself internally at the cognitive idea of another, that also is an empathic response. The argument against empathy is that it requires a degree of identification with the object that is seen as infringement on the viewer's autonomy, objectivity and—ultimately—freedom, the freedom to walk away from the object without having to alter one's path. The insistence on freedom and autonomy is essentially the longing of ego to assert itself as master in its own house. Any object threatening the authority of the viewer's ego is suspect, because the ego alone is easily (or not so easily, in more rigidly structured people) swamped; it is easily overwhelmed because it is only the manager not the master of its house. The indigenous master is the Self.

It is striking that *primitive* is used in art as well as in psychoanalysis to indicate something regressive and is used often pejoratively to denounce something that lacks polish, adaptedness to collective notions of civilized, highly differentiated behavior, style, look, functioning. In other words, *primitive* seems particularly to challenge the persona level, or the outer, shallow ego-functioning of someone who depends upon that structure for cohesion. *Primitive* is disruptive and sometimes threatening. It is also associated with early, untrained behavior, either historically or in the individual infant. Primitive, in fact, smacks of infantile. *Infantile* brings the image of the child-mother dyad or the primitive tribe-nature dyad, a relationship from which contemporary individuals believe they have separated and differentiated. But, the infant's experience of the mother is one of the Self projected onto mother. And the primitive tribesman's experience of Self is projected onto nature. Kuspit notes the ties between traditional German Gothic art and twentieth-century German Expressionism. Christ, too, has been considered by some, notably C.G. Jung, as a projection of Self. It begins to look more and more as though Expressionist art—which threatens a persona-taste split-off from being—provides us with a re-experience, a refreshment, for the ego at the shores of Self of Self.

It seems important to understand this art on both the personal and collective (social) planes. The artist's social role is not to help make order of and contain possibly conflicting realities, so much as to effect in us as

viewers an insistent experience of multiple realities. The artist in our society is allowed to inflict liminality (awareness of the space between islands of ego, cultural or aesthetic conventions) and, in fact, that may be the social contribution of post-modernist art: at its least threatening, it reminds us of other consciousness. At its most threatening, art challenges the predominate ego-plane or consciousness that we call "reality." Its existence is primarily as religious object in a liturgy of the transformation of consciousness. Whether read as political manifesto, formal aesthetic or psychoanalytic dissection, the purpose of art may be seen as fundamentally religious because it is capable of transformation—of viewer as well as artist. Transformation implies deep change, not a resurfacing. *Transformation*, the "across-making," is the process of a death-rebirth, a movement from somewhere to some place else. If one believes in that process and particularly if one is willing to experience the immense fear of leaving, separation and death, with the realization that transformation is not a willed ego-activity, but something the ego experiences as object, not as subject, then the question becomes: who or what is in charge of the transformation that I am undergoing? If I am the object, where is the subject of this action? Here is the basic religious quest, and we see in Kuspit's explanation of primitivist art the reason for our being sent out of our increasingly uncomfortable materialism into the wilderness, in need of transformation.

Primitivist style is the instrument of . . . revolution, the battering ram with which modern man pushed his way through the restraints of convention towards raw energy. It is a means of liberating him from a bankrupt world and self. (p. 118)

Kuspit points out the distinction made by the late analyst and self psychologist Heinz Kohut

between Guilty Man and Tragic Man, "the man of structural conflict . . . sorely tested by his wishes and desires" and the man originally with a "crumbling, decomposing, fragmenting, enfeebled self. . . and, later, the fragile, vulnerable, empty self." To my mind, the religious aspect of German Expressionist sculpture embraces "both major aspects of man's total psychology: the psychology of Guilty Man (conflict psychology) and the psychology of Tragic Man (self psychology)." But I would suggest that the best of the Expressionist sculpture—using another criterion of quality than has been previously used—is oriented toward the psychology of Tragic Man, toward problems of self-creation and self-identification. . . . The overt constituents of tragic art may have changed, but covertly tragic modern man has not. (pp. 112, 123)

In suggesting that primitivism is the key to Expressionist sculpture, Kuspit notes that "it represents . . . a middle way between a formal and symbolic language." It seems, though, that both Expressionism and primitivism lie along a different road than the formal/symbolic one because the work is about the antithesis of narcissistic formalism whose primary emphasis is to call attention to itself. This extreme mid-twentieth century hubris can only be understood as the baroque stage of the Western image of the Lone

Ranger standing alone (with his horse as appendage) at the top of a mighty hill, before charging off to kill in the name of righteousness. The particularly American hero is a lone male (the image of whom is found in both women and men) who, while he may have the aid and support of helpers like his wife and God, feels himself to be autonomous. He is the embodiment of an ego who goes it alone, like the formalist painting that refers (and defers) to nothing except itself. Kuspit's breaking down of art in the modern period into two tendencies, "style-oriented, autonomous art versus an empathy-evoking art" is very useful. The tension between distanced, observing, boundaried autonomy and empathic, merging, unbounded experiencing seems basic to human experience, and the development of culture certainly seems to require both tendencies. In this particular sculpture, form appears to be used nonformally to refer to something else. Expressionist sculpture is an art formally that makes a point of being unstylish, and unappropriatable; it shifts the wondering viewer's attention to another plane of awareness.

This Expressionist sculpture cannot be appropriated, consumed, or copied by a fashion-conscious viewer because it isn't about style, form, persona, or a look. In its empathy-evoking presence, it penetrates beneath the outer ego of the viewer to stir in us ancient memories radically, or child-mother memories personally, of a less distanced, less autonomous time when we lived in closer harmony with Self. I hesitate to call this "symbolic art," either. It seems to work less as symbol than as trigger. It lacks the tricky subtleness and ambiguity of the symbolic mode, but acts on us directly, without feigning sophistication or irony or coquettishness. It just *is*, and it sets up in us a desire not to *have it* so much as a desire to be who we *are*, to ignore societal power demands for an identifiable (and appropriatable) style that substitutes for essence. In its self-effacing presence, Expressionist sculpture brings the heroic ego back to its proper place, in relation to a Self which it acknowledges as master in its house.

The return to Self is the end of the ego-hero's mythic journey, which began first with the ego's blissful containment in Self in an undifferentiated state, followed by its long arc away from Self in order to establish its identity and coherence in the world. Finally, at the far side of its organic orbit the ego rotates back to the Self. The crucial point is that the returning ego spirals back on a different plane, and when it encounters Self, enters that relationship consciously and with love. I like to think that our current interest in such Self-evoking sculpture is the harbinger of a cultural return.

# Artists on Their Discontents: A Section of Statements

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Philistinism in Front of Art and Art History

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Report from Behind the Screens

Mary Beth Edelson on Saving the World

Criticism and Its Moral Imperative: An Interview with  
Mel Pekarsky

A Letter from Home

Critical Point

On the State of Abstract Painting

Turmoil in the Barracks



# Philistinism in Front of Art and Art History

By Rudolf Baranik

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As philistinism confronts art and art history it reveals itself in two essential impulses: the sclerotic and the infantile. The first coincides with the ideology of conservatism and right-wing political thinking; it has closed itself off to contemporary art even before encountering it at close range; it projects a hostility to art which is generic and without regret. The second is more complex: it is, in fact, a variant of *infantile disorder*, a term Lenin used to describe Left-wing Communism. This fact of philistinism grows out of not understanding and envy of the untamable and unpredictable. This is left-wing philistinism, rampant in the so-called "Art-left" in the U.S. and the subject of this article. I have chosen Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*<sup>1</sup> not because it is a worthwhile book, but because it is an extreme symptom of the disorder.

The detective story title of the book may or may not be of the author's choosing, since publishers often impose titles, but it is written in the spirit of unearthing a *scandale*. Witness the author's "My story ends in 1951, the year in which the New York avant-garde community organized the so-



called Ninth Street Show, the symbol of both the triumph and the decadence of the avant-garde."

So the theft culminated in 1951, which would indicate that for at least a few years prior to that date the process was most intense. These were precisely the years, 1948–1951, which I spent in Paris.<sup>2</sup> It was clear to me and to other young Americans in France that a radical shift was taking place. What was happening? The "Big Four" were still there: Léger doing some of his best work ("Les Constructeurs"); Picasso trying to recapture the strength of "Guernica" with a failed grand opus called "La Corée" ("Korea") which was shown in the Salon de Mai (1950) and quickly forgotten; Matisse living his last years; Braque fading. But even more indicative was what was happening just below these international classics. Pignon was painting semi-abstract fluid figurative compositions of some discernible social content; Fougerson switched to a Soviet type socialist realism and created a scandal<sup>3</sup>; De Stael did rich, textured abstractions; two young artists, Bernard Buffet and Andre Minaux, were held out as the hope of a new, austere, post-war school of Paris, but rapidly degenerated into linear decorativeness; Tal Coat was doing a kind of sensitive French version of Abstract Expressionism, known at that time in Paris as "Tachisme." No doubt there was vitality and excitement, but we all knew, meaning the French as well as the Americans in Paris, that something much more powerful, serious and disturbing was happening in New York.

But let us analyze how Guilbaut justifies his thesis. Guilbaut actually believes that intimate involvement with art is inimical to a truthful analysis. That he states in a circuitous yet obvious way. His introduction to the book starts with a quote from Christian Metz' "Le Signifiant Imaginaire":

Ideally, the film theorist should be someone who both likes and dislikes the cinema. Someone who once loved film but who has stopped loving it in order to approach it from another angle, making cinema the object of the same visual instinct that had once made him a fan.

Nothing could raise the flag of philistinism more clearly. Surely if disliking a subject is conducive to a more truthful analysis, it would have to apply to social theory, science, etc., as well as to art. The philistine mind never makes that comparison, because it sees art as the "temptress," the seducer (the Polish term "sztuka" means both "art" and "trick"). The quotation is actually not so much a credo as a clever insurance, signaling to the reader that whatever the author does not know about abstract expressionism, or art in general, it is not that he is ignorant, but that he has detached himself from it for the sake of impartiality. . . . At the end of the book Guilbaut opens all stops and in an outburst of true emotionalism sums up what he really thinks about abstract expressionism *aesthetically*:

Abstract expressionism established such a hold on the European mind that the rebellious French students used a form of the style to express their alienation and their desire for freedom on the walls of Nanterre in 1968. Painting as ejaculation was the way one poem scrawled in chalk on a wall put it: "The porridge you forced down my throat as a kid: I've come with it all over your wall."

Was this finally 'action painting' in action? Was this the last popular art, the true mural art of Jackson Pollock's dreams?

The above quotation alone is sufficient to annul all 205 pages of text, 40 pages of notes and 14 pages of bibliography. It reveals at the end that the social analysis has been, all along, nothing but a weapon to hit the art with. The philistine argument is at its base an aesthetic argument, a formalist argument, if you will, but slyly masked as social theory. Yet it does not deserve an aesthetic counter-argument: there is no point in telling Guilbaut about the lyrical intricacy of the fastidiously created webs in Pollock's "One" or how De Kooning's "Black Painting" is a rightful heir to Albert Pinkham Ryder's night skies. There is no point because when confronted with aesthetic counter-opinions the philistine usually retreats, takes shelter behind the "social analysis" and even concedes the power of the art—for the moment—only to return to the aesthetic attack. Guilbaut's understanding of how and why abstract expressionism developed is astonishingly simplistic. A neat theory is projected in the concluding chapter:

What mattered to these artists was communication with an audience; they wanted to articulate the disarray and anxiety of the postwar period and thus establish a dialogue with the public. Inspired by their work with the WPA, they tried to mobilize the communicative power of the fresco, but with a difference. To be sure they used very large canvases for their works, eschewing the mural fresco and thus setting their art apart from the propaganda work and decorative art fostered by the WPA. But they also rejected the idea of the easel painting as a precious object, a consumable commodity. They found for their essentially private painting a niche in which it might, so they hoped, become a public statement.

And, as if this is not clear enough, it is reiterated in an even simpler paragraph:

The generation of politicized artists had to adapt to the new climate of distrust and suspicion, and yet they remained fascinated by mural art. They found a way to get around the difficulties raised by the painted message by making the content of the message private and by treating the private material as a public declaration. Though the giant canvases of the abstract expressionists no longer had the social content of mural art, they retained the impact of the mural, its power and visibility.

"Private" is the key word here, the herald of the philistine par excellence. So the former radicals, faint hearted (they had to "adapt to the new climate of distrust and suspicion") eschewed muralism and something of social content and, while keeping the large format, substituted something "private." And what is this "private"? Since Guilbaut is polite, he does not want to intrude and remains content in his ignorance. Neither is he bothered about the inevitable question which must be asked: how does a decision to eschew something automatically open the possibility for a substitute? Can anyone believe that in creating art a mere practical decision is enough to give birth to what amounts to a new powerful style? And how can anyone who knows anything about art speak about "private" as being specific to this or that tendency in art? Does Guilbaut believe that

the Sacco and Vanzetti series by Ben Shahn, "Lily and the Sparrows" by Philip Evergood and other of the best social realist works, done before and during the abstract expressionist era, are less personal, less private?

It is important to look closer at the way Serge Guilbaut "hauls abstract expressionism into court"<sup>4</sup> not just for being complicit with American imperialism but for being guilty of having, as a movement in art, abandoned the moral front lines. Abstract expressionism deserted the front lines, we are told, by cleverly managing to create the illusion that it wages the battle still.

The ground for Guilbaut was laid by others, but the intention was different. Max Kozloff's "American Painting during the Cold War," published in May 1973 in *Artforum* elaborated on how the cultural authorities of the U.S. used abstract expressionism as a weapon in their anti-Soviet campaign abroad and anti-Communist campaign at home. There was essential truth in Kozloff's analysis, though it had to deal with a very complicated diagnostic profile. The U.S. does not have official cultural authorities, certainly not a ministry of culture. The cultural institutions which are empowered in each case to execute what amounts to official government policy do it often by coincidence of interests. These institutions have never represented the center of U.S. governmental conviction—they have, as they do even now, represented the most liberal useful wing to the U.S. government. Yet it is true that after abstract expressionism gained hegemony in American art it became a weapon in the cold war. (It may be important to notice that in today's cold war the government of the Soviet Union uses a similar tactic: it engages as cultural patina in its skirmishes with the U.S. such poets as Voznosensky and Yevtushenko precisely because their creative ethos is in opposition to official policy. The works of these two poets should not be tainted because more enlightened Soviet cultural officials, the counterparts of the Museum of Modern Art's people, who sent AE to Europe, send Voznosensky and Yevtushenko to New York to recite at Carnegie Hall.<sup>5</sup>)

Kozloff's article did make the distinction, though by putting the stress on the uses instead of the art it laid the groundwork for later vulgarizations, of which I consider Guilbaut's book to be an extreme example. The convictions which underlie all his reasoning that art reflects both ideology and the artist's reaction to the art world were answered more than a decade ago by the British Marxist T.J. Clark, who wrote:<sup>6</sup>

When one writes the social history of art, it is easier to define what methods to avoid than propose a set of methods for systematic use, like a carpenter presenting his bag of tools, or a philosopher his premises. So I begin by naming some taboos. I am not interested in the notion of works of art "reflecting" ideologies, social relations or history. Equally, I do not want to talk about history as a "background" to the work of art—as something which is essentially absent from the work of art and its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance. (The intrusion of history discovered, it seems, by "common sense": there is a special category of historical references which can be identified in this way.) I want also to reject the idea that the artist's point of reference as a social being is, a

*priori*, the artistic community. On this view, history is transmitted to the artist by some fixed route, through some invariable system of mediations: the artist responds to the values and ideas of the artistic community (in our period that means, for the best artists, the ideology of the *avant-garde*), which in turn are altered by changes in the general values and ideas of society, which in turn are determined by historical conditions. For example, Courbet is influenced by Realism which is influenced by Positivism which is the product of Capitalist Materialism. One can sprinkle as much detail on the nouns in that sentence as one likes; it is the verbs which are the matter.

Of course, Clark, a Marxist, knows that these warnings, the “taboos” as he calls them, against simplification must not preclude engaging in the social analysis of art. But the key word here is *reflection*. Simplifiers such as Guilbaut do not understand that “history” and “conditions” are not something on which art grows as a mushroom. What this simplification overlooks is that history is a composite of skirmishes within human existence of which art is one impulse—not autonomous but neither just a symptom—the history of dreams, “unreal” reachings and illusive images influence as well as are being influenced by the other terrains of human history with which it is not only in constant touch but also in blurry merging. In the absence of this understanding the social analysis collapses not being in touch with the subject it tries to encompass.

**But also, even more. . .**

Guilbaut’s *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* is on the surface a scholarly book, awash with research, dates, quotations, facts. Yet it is really a masterpiece of *acrobatics*, meanings are blurred, slid carefully from one into another, disclaimers are injected and quickly contradicted in an innocent manner. Here is how the author describes his effort:

My central thesis is that the unprecedented national and international success of an American *avant-garde* was due not solely to aesthetic and stylistic considerations, as both European and American commentators frequently still maintain, but also, even more, to the movement’s ideological resonance.

It would be normal to say “even more” only, since that is what he believes. Yet he says “also” as if to buy credence of broadmindedness. Very well, if “also,” then the aesthetic stylistic considerations, to use his own terms, did play a role. But this is the last time, going through the whole book, one hears from Guilbaut’s own mouth about it, though he finds time for ridicule as in his remarks about the graffiti in Nanterre.

It is on the point of ridicule that right-wing and left-wing philistinism converge. Guilbaut’s book is the counterpart to Tom Wolfe’s “The Painted Word.” Actually, during the Cold War years the two philistinisms had a secret united front. The populist/philistine camp from where Tom Wolfe comes was in real power in our country during that period as it is today. From the presidents (Truman, Eisenhower) to the cabinet, to the corporate board-rooms and the country clubs and the military establishment, the taste

and the commitment remained on the level of motel-art. It was not their doing that in order to compete with both Europe and communism on a cultural level they had to call upon more educated people whom, at the bottom, they distrusted: the liberals/academics working in the State department, the cultural agencies, the museum hierarchies. What was their role? This was not a homogeneous group. It is true that there were museum trustees who had close links with intelligence agencies and the government's propaganda arm. In most cases they themselves were, in their taste, philistines, but erudite enough to listen to the museum hierarchies, the directors and chief curators who, in turn, listened to the more active young curators and critics. The work of the abstract expressionists convinced such critics as Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Schapiro; it is not that, as Guilbaut seems to think, these critics "recruited" artists for an avant-garde. It is mechanistic to believe that disillusionment in Stalinist communism can, quickly, lead to the poetry of Rothko, that Trotskyist theories can result in the black paintings of Reinhardt and that the fear of repression can wipe off an artist's canvas images of social protest and substitute abstraction. One can read all the archives, study all the manifestoes, look at all the old catalogues and conjure up all the theories in the world and still be dead wrong if the subject around which it all evolves—the art—is not understood.

Serge Guilbaut ends his search in 1951, and like a good detective who has solved the case, he knows who committed the crime. But it was afterwards that things became clearer: nobody stole anything from anybody, not even from Guilbaut's Paris, which, after nearly two centuries, had taken a historic rest. Nobody suppressed Byron Browne, Carl Holty, Karl Knaths, Balcomb Greene and Charles Seliger<sup>7</sup>: these sensitive painters are remembered as such and AE has not harmed them, and the same applied to the stronger social realists of the Thirties and the Forties. I lived after 1951 in New York, having friends among artists in both "camps" if there was such a thing: I showed, uncomfortably<sup>8</sup> at the ACA Gallery but also went to meetings of the AE Club and became friends with Ad Reinhardt. Abstract expressionism was clearly dominant but nobody thought that we lived under the reign of a thief. As a matter of fact, the best of the artists who showed at the ACA, such as Philip Evergood and Robert Gwathmey, who maintained, understandably, their antipathy toward what they considered "complacent" art, had a grudging respect for abstract expressionism. Evergood continued to speak against those who "paint still-lives while the world is burning" but watched abstract expressionism with some admiration.<sup>9</sup> While I dislike the title of Irving Sandler's book "The Triumph of American Painting"<sup>10</sup> because it implies a triumph over somebody, it is indeed true that something extraordinary happened in American art in that period, and it happened not at the behest of ideological conspiracies but due to a complex mesh of hope within adversity, romantic expectations and individual talents. Neither the abstract American artist who preceded the era nor the social realists had the language for which the abstract expressionists reached: that of the heroic and the tragic. They grasped that

language, to various degrees, and that is a triumph and it happened in the artists' studios.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>*How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, by Serge Guilbaut, translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Published in 1983 by the University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup>During those years I worked in the atelier of Fernand Léger, but also exhibited independently in an American cooperative gallery in Paris called "Galerie Huit," and my work was reviewed by a wide range of Parisian newspapers and weekly publications. I closely knew the Parisian art-world and when I returned to New York I wrote reviews, on the new American art, for the Paris publication "Actualité Artistique Internationale." I now detect in those reports from New York some resentment against the art I described, a resentment growing out from my attachment to Paris. I take it for granted that Guilbaut's views of abstract expressionism are to some extent modulated by his being French.

<sup>3</sup>Fougeron painted for many years in a post-cubist semi-abstract style, but emerged in 1950 as a socialist realist according to the precepts of the Soviet "art-ideologue" Andrei Zhdanov. A one-person show of his work in that year contained a large work called "La Défense Nationale" which showed armed gendarmes and police dogs attacking striking miners. The police removed the painting on the evening of the opening as an "insult to the state."

<sup>4</sup>An expression attributed to Linda Nochlin.

<sup>5</sup>I want to make a distinction between these two poets: I believe that Voznosensky's opposition to the repressive cultural policies of the Soviet Union is more consistent than that of his colleague, though Yevtushenko has created from time to time works which have become banners for the cultural resistance, such as his poem "Babi Yar."

<sup>6</sup>From *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* Thames and Hudson, London, 1973. Reprinted as "On the Social History of Art," in *Modern Art and Modernism*, a *Critical Anthology* edited by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, Harper & Row, New York, 1982.

<sup>7</sup>Guilbaut, writing about the domination of the abstract expressionists, makes an emotional appeal on behalf of those artists who, he believes, have been unjustly eclipsed: "What has become of all the Byron Brownes, the Carl Holtys, the Karl Knaths, the Balcomb Greens, the Charles Seligers?" The choice of these artists, largely abstract, would indicate that the author's opposition to abstract expressionism stems from his aesthetic dislike of the specific tendency of abstraction it was, and not because it replaced socially conscious art, as he argues.

<sup>8</sup>When I joined the ACA Gallery in 1952 my work shared some aspects with abstract expressionism and differed greatly from the work of the other artists: Philip Evergood, Anton Refregier, Robert Gwathmey, William Gropper, Joseph Solman and others. I left the ACA after two one-person exhibitions.

<sup>9</sup>Evergood expressed these views during meetings of the artists at the ACA and in a conversation with me and May Stevens at his home in Bridgewater, Connecticut in 1955 or 1956, but I know of no written record of these opinions.

<sup>10</sup>Sandler has stated repeatedly that he wrote the book under a different title and that the present title was imposed, against his desire, by the publishers.

# Report from Behind the Screens

By Terry Berkowitz

Video Art—brat child of the sixties—on the leading edge and, yet, never appearing on the very media it attempted to imitate or satirize (at least some of the time). Video Art—always out of step with the current art fashion. No one knew where to put it or how to sell it; many wanted to ignore it. Accustomed to being sloughed away in the backrooms and closets of alternative spaces and shoved into corners in museums, it finally rose above its non-existent artform status in the seventies to become 'ready-for-primetime' TV. A quick take performance-oriented comedy style of video art seemed to be perfect for the TV shows that had nothing to lose by taking a risk. Suddenly it became chic to have an artist to the studio to see what could be done.

Some artists crossed over. Why not become a writer for a popular comedy show or do video shorts to entertain the viewing audience in between the commercials? It paid well, you could hang out with real stars, maybe even become one yourself (the dream of every artist, regardless of discipline).

Of course, it was all short-lived. Everyone wants to have an artist to dinner—artists can be entertaining if they don't drink too much or talk

politics—but no one wants to have an artist take up residence in the neighborhood (it's okay to move into an artist's neighborhood, however; artists will leave after they've softened up the area for the developers and the rents go sky high).

A second wave of salvation came as public TV began offering some artists access to state-of-the-art technology. Video art began to move into the computer age. Image processing and/or colorization became *de rigueur* for any work to be considered 'serious.' Those artists who supported themselves and their artwork by working in production studios also began to use the state-of-the-future computer technology. The work began to look "slick and professional." In many cases the work began to be determined by the electronic special effects with one major disadvantage—it sometimes became difficult to discern one artist's work from another's (there are only so many things that can be done with the same special effect). Some of the work looked like segments from Sesame Street, The Electric Company or the TV ads that glue the broadcast world together.

Then came MTV! Music was mated to image. TV ad directors were hired to do concepts. Their experiences with the necessity of quickly grabbing attention in a thirty-second spot and the Sesame Street generation's demand for quick-fix entertainment in small doses with nothing to strain the brain was a marriage made in TV heaven. MTV supplied the music and the vapid sensibility to a new target market whose attention span at three years old had been catered to rather than expanded.

Having learned good marketing skills in art school (use what you can, try to keep one step ahead, but, failing that, steal something), artists quickly took to the music TV bandwagon. A large proportion of art videos have begun to look like MTV, a little less polished perhaps, due to the lower budgets and inability to gain more than fleeting moments at the top of the line control board. This lack of commercial slickness makes the video art of this type more insipid than MTV—if kitsch is based on a glitzy slickness and you fall short, it simply becomes bad kitsch.

What is happening in video art only parallels what is going on in other areas of art. With art becoming big business and the artwork being seen by both seller and maker as a clearcut and valuable commodity, the marketplace has begun to dictate aesthetics. In the traditional artforms, artists are producing to satisfy the needs of the dealer and clientele; in video they are dancing to the MTV beat.

Recently, we have seen curators legitimizing this form of video (of course, once it's in the important museum collections, it becomes more valuable to the private collector). Obviously, we are not getting enough exposure to MTV because rock videos and art rock videos are now receiving extended play at some of our most prestigious institutions and art performance houses.

Video installation is less constrained by the commodification of art on one level and yet more constrained on another. Installation cannot be produced without funding of some sort (public, corporate or private). Generally, artists have not created installations with an eye toward the private collec-



tor, therefore, sometimes, more risks have been taken. With the shift of funding from the public sector to the corporate, however, the works which don't challenge the status quo are materializing more quickly than those with a socially concerned bent. Have museums become only the extension of the corporate structure (both metaphorically and literally, as can be seen by all the corporate museum branches springing up)? Corporate sponsorship promulgates self-censorship by curators and directors.

In a situation where art supports a huge economic structure, artists should be able to live off their work or should become paid workers. Art should be available to and understood by a mass audience. But does accessing that mass audience necessitate kowtowing to and reiterating the position of the culture in power? Should art become an advertisement for the acceptable mores of conservative America? Should art cease to be a voice of exploration and/or dissent in the void?

The potential for art to support more artists provides a new twist. In the sixties and seventies artists talked about the idea of the art worker. Perhaps that is beginning to occur but with a perverse angle. Are we beginning to see the emergence of a new academy, a new discipline similar to art decoratif, industrial design or graphic design? Is fine art becoming an applied art?

Of course, there are many artists who have not been seduced by the current trend. Some of them continue to deal with historic art concerns, others maintain an elitist art-for-art's-sake stance, yet others attempt to integrate their social or political concerns in their work. The most disturbing aspect of the current beat, however, is the manner in which this reduction of idea and aesthetics alters the intellectual and analytical ability of the viewers. When people are spoonfed vacuous data in unconnected bits and pieces masquerading as important life-altering information, they become incapable of thinking for themselves. The audience is rendered comatose. It becomes impossible to process other forms of information. Any other views, moral or aesthetic, become difficult to hear and impossible to digest, and we move closer to a world where dissent is not tolerated, change is impossible and conformity becomes an acceptable way of life.

# Mary Beth Edelson on Saving the World

By Mary Beth Edelson © 1986

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## *Wish List*

I Wish:

1. That artists would wildly stampede to their studios in order to make art that is sincere, honest, risky, thoughtful, profound, and not dictated by voices in the head (I'm not talking about the Son of Sam type voices, but the kind of voices that remind you what is politically correct, what is acceptable by your group, what will sell, who will be pleased, who will not be pleased, etc.).
2. That art dealers would encourage and exhibit art that does more than simply follow the marketing credo of clone and repeat. Also, that art dealers would have more confidence in the collectors.
3. That collectors would come to understand the effect they have on the art world and begin to take responsibility for that effect.
4. That museum directors would support their curators' efforts to show "difficult art."

5. That the membership of museum boards would change in order to more accurately represent the art community.
6. That art magazines would pay art writers appropriately for their work.
7. That small support groups would form around various interests, and that the members would sit in a circle, talk hard, and listen hard.
8. That people would see that the art created by black artists, women artists, and third-world artists is as various and different as the art created by white men. That these artists would no longer be seen as members of stereotyped groups, but as the individuals that they are.
9. That people would learn to tell the difference between old gripes that are no longer relevant (because things have changed), and old, yet valid, problems that persist, only newly disguised in sheep's clothing.

### *Difficult Work and the "If Only" Syndrome*

I define "difficult art" as art that is not easily marketed, art by black or third world people and art by women, art that says what people are not ready to hear, and art that doesn't support the patriarchal system.

There is a double bind in the artworld when it comes to "difficult art." I call this double bind the "if only" syndrome. It is used to rationalize why "difficult art" isn't shown, and it goes like this: If only they weren't so trendy OR if only they didn't make the same old thing. If only the work wasn't so modest and accommodating OR if only it wasn't so large and heroic. If only they weren't so careerist OR if only they would get out and help themselves. If only the work were more consistent OR if only they would take more risks. If only they would let the work speak for itself OR if only the work had an intellectual, theoretical base. If only they were more in touch with their roots OR if only the work were not so ethnic looking.

Who keeps saying "if only"? women dealers? men dealers? critics? curators? collectors? museum trustees? Who rejects "difficult art"? Certainly not Paula Cooper or Ronald Feldman or Totah-Stelling or P.P.O.W. or Barbara Gladstone or Rhona Hoffman—all have supported "difficult art" and all are doing very well, very well indeed. Certainly not Marcia Tucker or Ed Leffingwell or Linda Wientraub or Lasse Antonsen or Mary Jane Jacobs or Dominique Nahas, and bright curatorial stars they are! And how well Kay Larson is doing, and also John Russell, Donald Kuspit, John Perreault and Ellen Lubell—such golden pens in unintimidated hands!

### *About Women in Particular*

When you factor in the Queen Bee syndrome which seems to afflict a number of women art dealers, then add the ambivalent feelings some gay men in the artworld seem to have about seeing women in the spotlight, and think about how heterosexual men often feel their old boy system threatened by women—it is a wonder that you get to see any women ar-

tists' work at all. Additionally, the women artists who best penetrate these old boy systems are those who minimize the threat by denying their association or identification with other women. And finally, many men seem to be congenitally threatened by women's very presence. I think the following statement by Rivolta Femminile written in Milan in 1971, describes the order of the day during the recent neo-expressionist period:

. . . in the patriarchal world, that is in the world made by men for men, even creativity, insofar as it is a liberating practice, is acted out by men for men . . . *for Woman no liberation is foreseen*. Male creativity . . . maintains Woman as client, as spectator, in a service status that excludes competition. Woman is conditioned into a category which *a priori* guarantees to the protagonist of creativity the appreciation of his worth. Man's creativity is articulated in the competition with a partner, yet another man, and in the contemplation demanded from women.

Man, the artist himself, feels forsaken by Woman in the very moment she abandons the archetypal role of spectator; the solidarity between them rested upon the conviction that, as a spectator gratified by creativity, Woman reaches the (highest) purpose . . . allowed to her kind." (Translation by Susana Torre.)

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The winds of change are upon us again, however. People talk of shake-downs, of re-evaluations. They seem ready to look at work that has slowly developed and matured into a statement with integrity and staying power. Some people even say that the long night may be over for women artists, that their day is coming.

But before I get too carried away on the positive side, I'd like to talk about *originality*. Some of the most inverted, perverse examples of double talk and double standards to come out of the artworld in recent memory concerns this issue. Didn't you used to think that museums collect original art by the original artists because these artists are inventors and their art has a special energy and intensity which gets lost when imitators wax and polish their versions? And that these originals were celebrated because they broke new ground? Well, that's what I thought! Then what happened with pattern painting, expressionist, personal and autobiographical art, body art and ritual/spiritual art when it came to giving the originators their due?

Let's take them one by one, as they were first introduced:

*Pattern painting* was considered too decorative and not to be taken seriously when first produced by women artists, but that all changed when white men began making pattern paintings. Major museum shows followed, as did the collectors, as did the critics, as did the fact that the originators were often left out altogether.

*Body Art*, especially if it was sexual in nature, and particularly if it was done from the woman's point of view without reference to a male viewer, was considered unsaleable and unshowable when it was first introduced. Because *Flash Art* was fond of reproducing both American and European women's body art in the 70s, these art works received international exposure. Americans too saw these works in exhibitions at alternative spaces. After a time, body art was appropriated and surfaced in the paintings of

some men artists who were big sellers. Of course, artists do influence each other and thereby build upon the collective human experience. But if the artist you are building off of hasn't been acknowledged, then this building is experienced as a rip-off instead of flattery. Also, the influenced artist appears to be more original than he actually is. The most important point is that the original artists are robbed of their historical status as "influential artists." But it's not too late! We still have our work, and would be delighted if the museums renewed their old spirit of collecting originals.

*Expressionist, personal and autobiographical art* was considered too personal, too emotional, too privately revealing, and not universal enough. This one gets me hopping because "universal" is assumed to be the white male experience. A whole case could be made that women's experience is THE universal experience. But it is really not useful for either sex to claim that its experience is THE experience. It is especially pernicious to view women's experience as "the other" experience.

### *Ritual, Metaphysical, Spiritual, Ecological Art*

Most dear to me personally is *ritual, metaphysical, spiritual, ecological art* or whatever you wish to label it. This art is emerging again, but this time in the mainstream. It has been around for the past decade and a half in alternative spaces. It has been developed slowly and profoundly by some women and some third world and some black and white men. I feel uneasy about how these original artists will fare now that this kind of art is entering the mainstream.

When the Museum of Modern Art held their recent primitive exhibition, for example, the curators defined the exhibition in such a way as to emphasize contemporary work that was as close to the modernist tradition as possible. In fact, it seemed that the exhibition's main purpose was to academically legitimize the modernist use of primitive art.

The ancient primitive work in the exhibition was so powerfully convincing largely because it was based on pervasive, deeply-felt, group belief systems. Now there are some third world artists and women artists who create art based on deeply-felt personal or group belief systems, art which in many ways parallels the ancient, primitive work. Yet, by definition, the exhibition excluded these artists' work. Intensity and belief are messier than art about art and harder to categorize than art that directly imitates the look of ancient primitive art. If a primitive exhibition was curated to include the groups above, the curators would have to take risks: they would have to process their information differently; they would have to understand the intention behind the art as well as its formal properties; and they would have to let go of absolute control. A great opportunity was lost.

This new movement, this new art of the spirit, is no giddy affair and should not be manipulated for artworld conveniences. It is tied in with a profound shift currently taking place in our world view, along with immense global and personal changes. Some call it the new paradigm and talk of quantum leaps, life forces, primordial illuminations, psychosynthesis, etc. (I love these terms).<sup>1</sup>

I have so many questions for us in relationship to the above:

1. How do we as artists respond to this, what do we have to offer that is unique?<sup>2</sup>
2. Are we sufficiently in touch with our own creative intuitions so that we can present art that facilitates and illuminates these new experiences?
3. Are we sensitive to the emerging symbols, archetypes, and myths in our own culture? What are they?
4. Can we tell the difference between archetypes that emerge in our consciousness because they are meaningful forerunners of the new paradigm and those that emerge because they are wanting and have come up for a last gasp of breath?

Perhaps the recent spate of cross imagery fits into the last question above. I suspect that the re-emergence of crosses and other symbols of Christian religions is a product of the Neo-Expressionist inclination to play with images from art history and popular culture. Granted, it is easier to scavenge for pre-digested images than to create and form your own, but my question is: "What are these artists saying by presenting religious symbols that are associated with an organized religion which they don't identify with?" Are they exorcising the personal power, conscious or unconscious, that these symbols hold over their individual psyches by using them so irreverently? Or are they going for the shock value, throwing away an opportunity to make a more significant and memorable statement? Perhaps they are so overwhelmed by our world that all they can manage is to represent what they see—unedited and without insights. (I think I am talking about appropriation in general here.) Suspending judgment can be useful, but is going so far as to even suspend speculation useful?

In trying to answer my own questions, I would have to guess that the global resurgence of religion as an aggressive political force (Middle East, American Fundamentalist, South African White Christians, etc.) and the general rise of conservatism that brings back traditional religious values might be in the back of their minds. Contemporary scavengers of religious symbolism may be unknowingly affected by these forces—but how much more powerful their work could be if they acknowledged and explored rising global forces!

I wish to emphasize that the current conservative push to re-establish values from previous generations is very different from our current generation's spiritual movements. These movements include: The Greens, Human Potential, Wholistic Health, Greenpeace, New Age, Gay Movement, Sufi, Anti-Apartheid, World Hunger, Zen, Feminism, etc. (My interpretation of spirituality is very broad.)

To digest, assimilate, and intelligently interpret these emerging spiritual movements is, for sure, a life-long quest. Perhaps examining the previous generation's symbols is a first step for some. Yet that could just be kidding ourselves into thinking we have internalized the subject, and this misapprehension could keep us from looking deeper.

On the other hand, this curious rise of traditional religious symbols in

contemporary art, without the religion, might call for a different interpretation altogether. Perhaps we have neglected our spiritual side to such an extent that these primal symbols are pushing themselves up through our psyches in ways that we neither understand nor control. What is easy to see, however, is that this is the raw stuff of possibility.

I am imagining a series of major exhibitions, accompanied by catalog essays written by people in the art field as well as by people in other fields. The exhibitions would survey our contemporary experience with sacred communications: in ourselves, collectively, and then, how we experience them through art. Wow! Goose bumps! The exciting thing is that this automatically connects the artworld to a much broader community of people of good will. The possibility of in depth changes in how we relate to each other in the artworld and in the world in general is tied with our understanding of ecological wisdom and with what we have learned from therapy, activism, and spirituality. Ultimately we must understand that all of this is profoundly and urgently connected to the future of our planet.

Let's see, how did I get from art shows to saving the world? Never mind—it does follow. So, perhaps this current mainstream wave of interest in art made from the spirit should not come as a surprise. It has been steadily mounting outside of the mainstream, in spite of the fact that, until now, the mainstream has largely rejected it. Perhaps this current wave signals a flow in the artworld from our little stream to the ocean.

Could it be that a genuine desire for journeying has sprung from the artworld's boredom with superficial, insincere art? Too much to hope for? Just suppose that those small groups of self-selected supportive people who have been meeting now for some time have learned to listen to one another, to share, and that their process is so good that they really care for one another. And that that caring has made them brave and true and individually and collectively strong. And then, suppose they go back into their studios and make wonderful art that reflects all this. I'm not serious?—If I am not, may the Goddess of Pollyanna break all my paint brushes and make my art easy.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Some possible readings on this topic: *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*. Fritjof Capra. Simon and Schuster, 1982. *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays on the Rise of Spiritual Power Within The Feminist Movement*. Charlene Spretnak. Anchor Doubleday Press, 1982. *Beyond Power*. Marilyn French. Summit Books, 1985.

<sup>2</sup>In the artworld, Lucy R. Lippard's book *Overlay Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Pantheon Books, 1983, is the only creative discussion on some of these issues, that I know about.

# Criticism and Its Moral Imperative: An Interview with Mel Pekarsky

By David Luljak

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DL: *Why are you, as a painter, so concerned with today's art criticism and its attitudes?*

MP: Postmodern pluralism represents a very important, almost diametrically opposed, change in the situation for the making of art from the traditional situation—for example, compared to the Renaissance guild system when a need was felt and then a commission was given. Now I have a blank canvas in front of me, and nobody's asking me to do a thing with it: I can do whatever I want. So if I can paint whatever I want, the first choice I have to make is of what to paint, which because it involves choosing from a vast array of possibilities is a moral choice. It is necessary before I start painting—not to select my technical approach to a common iconography—but to choose something, anything, to paint. And if the first concern of the artist is what to paint, then surely that should be a concern of art



criticism.

I do see art criticism becoming more and more important to art. There's no sense in denying it; artists are more involved with art criticism than they ever have been. As a relevant aside here, I remember an SVA panel where Tim Rollins was intensely worried about these things . . . listen to this statement from 1981:

Artists must hang on to controlling the meaning of their work for as long as possible. If artists cannot state what the meaning of their work is, then they have that much more rapidly lost control of it. For if they cannot say what this meaning is, someone else surely will. Artists must exercise vigilance with regard to this statement so as to forestall meaning from inevitably being misrepresented in weak, sentimental, or just plain wrong terms. In a capitalist bourgeois world painting is inevitably reduced to its decorative common denominator, which after all may not be so terrible as all that. The forestalling of this inevitability can only be achieved through the artist's control over meaning.<sup>1</sup>

I was struck by this summary of the artist's worries about the meaning of his work—about control over meanings: he doesn't have a *modus operandi*, a status quo, a commonly shared symbolism. So he has to start worrying about meaning; and at the same time, he's inevitably going to be misunderstood. He has no confidence that anything is going to work, that *anything* he meant will be communicated.

The common phrase that we were supposed to hear from the sullen, inarticulate artist was that the work should speak for itself, right? Now nobody had better *let* it speak for itself! When there was a demand, a "need," a commission before the fact of the art, there was really no need for criticism—maybe history, description and stories out of school, like Vasari. There was a common language which the patron provided—criticism in advance! But the situation that we've now had growing since the nineteenth century and earlier has come to ripen, and criticism has indeed become more important as a bridge between the social structure and the artist, insofar as he and his art remain outside that social structure's common understanding, common iconography.

DL: *How is art criticism responding to the situation?*

MP: I think a lot of critics are aware of it, a couple of critics and historians in the last number of *Art Criticism*, as a matter of fact. But what they are or aren't doing about it is a problem to me. It seems that criticism, too, must have a moral imperative to examine the moral imperative requisite and preliminary to art-making. But I see it examining its own entrails for omens rather than looking at the relationship of art, art criticism and society. I feel that the artist and the critic are like two guys shooting it out and not noticing that meanwhile they've been surrounded by Injuns.

DL: *It seems we could go two ways. One is to focus on where the critic fits in this space between artist and public—is the critic supposed to be a messenger between the artist and the public?—or just to go right to the*

*idea of criticism and its moral imperative.*

MP: The contemporary situation with respect to the relationship of art and non-art people demands that critic and artist think about new relationships between themselves. Traditionally the artist has thought of the critic as a parasite and the critic has thought of the artist—and even his art—as unfortunately required in order to practice the higher intellectual art of making criticism.

But this sort of final purity that is a result of increasingly refined self-examination is something that has to be set aside. A fresh view has to be taken of what both artist and critic have to say to each other and to society. This “society” is certainly as powerful as it ever was, but seems to have given up, not its power or its authority over art, but its rights of language-making, commission and selection (of criticism!). The irony is that if the artist can tell himself what to do rather than the Medici telling him, and then become a diner at the high table after success in marketing his product, that creates a situation in which—I’m truly almost afraid to say it—the artist and critic could exercise power they haven’t known before. (Whether this is somewhat the case now or not has more to do with potency on the part of particular individuals and ideas than with the general situation.)

DL: *What do you suggest?*

MP: I think that there is too much concern with values and not enough with standards. That has to do with the inability of the artist or the critic—let’s talk about the critic—to get a handle on what he does. If there’s a structure to be examined, it’s not the metaphysic or logic or structure of a critical method looking at itself in the mirror, but rather the relationship of the realities—the practice of art criticism, the practice of art, and their relationship to the rest of the world, and, corny as it may sound, ideals. While that may sound simplistic, it’s likely to, because it addresses itself to very simple, and I think very important, things. If there is any validity left in making art, which I obviously believe, there had better be more validity to art criticism than there has been in the immediate past.

DL: *What do you mean by standards and values and what role do they play?*

MP: Again this relates to this strange “moral imperative” that I’ve employed. Anybody can and does have “values,” but when you have standards you are implying that they are an umbrella over more than the individual—there are standards which apply and with which you must comply. There was no hesitation in earlier, pre-modern epochs to apply standards of craftsmanship and skill, for example, to painting or to any other art form, whereas we tremble in our boots today to apply standards. Rather, we try to seek the individual’s values from within the individual’s works or even a single work, instead of saying, “That stinky painting.”

The difference between internal and external evaluative forms constitutes for me the difference between values and standards. It’s difficult for me

to say to another artist whose work I really think stinks that his work stinks. It's not any of my business that his work stinks. First of all, without standards, I can't know if it does. Secondly, not having standards isn't really *his* fault. They have to come from society, from outside, from a need that is felt for art from others than those making art or ensconced in the art world. Since society has opted out of making those choices and allows us to make them for ourselves, that's where that power comes in that I was talking about a while ago. That, of course, is something that is a little scary. I wonder if an artist should be able to—should be allowed to—enjoy postmodern pluralism. (Keep those letters comin' in, folks!)

DL: *To take formalist criticism of the fifties and sixties as an example, how does that attempt to apply standards fit in with what you're talking about?*

MP: There are of course many types of criticism—impressionist, structuralist, formalist, some of each the most horrid I've read. And on the other hand I've read great stuff by each sort of critic and admire some who live at opposite poles; so, in a way, I'm denying examining it in terms of methodology, but rather in terms of what it ends up saying. I'm insisting on, whatever the method, honesty, sensitivity, enough guts not to worry about who's going to invite you to dinner if you say something, and enough examination of the individual work and artist—rather than a commitment to a particular style, market or nation. Above all, though, a commitment to art and its serious definition, and an application of standards that the critic is not afraid to reveal. I guess that does address formalism.

DL: *Do you see the standards coming from the critic's truth to self, or is there a broader social standard?*

MP: Both. I have a few responses to that. One that will sound sort of Talmudic, maybe. A long time ago, before Serra was putting sculpture in the public domain, I had written to an editor of an art magazine who's a pretty well-known critic himself—still—about the problems of public art. I received an amused response at my worrying about problems that didn't exist yet, because "public art" was a term that was just being coined. Well, the problems are here now, as witness the downtown Serra brouhaha. Buckminster Fuller said Nature won't allow you to do anything unnatural. In the same sense, it's impossible to worry about problems that don't yet exist.

I'm worrying now about redefining the critic's relationship to the artist and to non-artsy society. I hate to say it, but what is art? What's it doing in these times? What *could* it be doing? Not only what art has done in the past and what it is doing now, but, most of all, what art *ought* to be, what criticism ought to be. I think that "ought" has been greatly avoided. A lot of "ought" was in early criticism and has seeped out. And that is significant. Of course, "ought" is risky, risking, among other things, dogmatism and vulnerability.

DL: *To open this up more to the larger field, how do you see the recent developments of both the artist and critic in relation to the larger public, taking into account the mass media and the possibility or impossibility for vanguardism?*

MP: As the gap between public and artist has widened, that has seemed a natural place for the critic to enter; the critic's turf has widened as that gap has widened. I think criticism *has* expanded—it's *had* to expand. Whether it's expanded in the right or wrong way is a technical discussion, some of which we've touched on here. I'm obviously expressing a malaise about some of the things that have happened. It's an old ploy now that there are more great scientists living at this one time than altogether in the previous history of the earth. That might be true of great artists, too, *potentially*, but you can't know until you call upon art to do the Big Thing. I don't think it's been called on; maybe the critic should be doing the calling. We both now have to call upon ourselves, which was the original point of departure for this discussion.

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DL: *Relating the artist and critic to the mass media, and the possibility of making an impact. . .*

MP: It is certainly possible. It's happening! But I think the old denominators still apply. You have to put blinders on to the great possibilities that the media and the immense capitalization of the art world have brought, and be a little bit more—forgive me—conservative and traditional in terms of the standards by which you approach criticism and the making of art. But I think the art world can be as or even more important than ever for society. And I'm not talking about how many people go to the Met on Saturday, though we need to understand that that counts. I think we see in all these things we disdain—the hype of the media, the power of the marketplace and so forth—the possibility of making art more significant than ever, and, if done right, a more positive element and force than ever within the social fabric.

DL: *Do you think it's possible to reach a large public without diluting your product? This might apply more to criticism, but you can see it, for example, in your own experience in public art.*

MP: Ouch! I don't think you can allow yourself to dilute for the sake of wider consumption. But I think you have to approach that question with great care and from lots of different points of view—for example, the effect of social conditions on the way a work is looked at. One thing that had an extremely powerful effect on me while working with City Walls projects—an endeavor of limited potential, I'll admit—was that people would come up to us and say things like “thank you,” or “that's beautiful.” Or, “I don't know what that's supposed to be but it makes this place look better.” (I don't know what it is but I like it!)

These were comments that were being elicited from the same people who would say in the Museum of Modern Art about the same sort of work,

“My three-year-old daughter could do that with a blindfold and her right hand tied behind her back.” (I know what I like when I see it!) So I became sensitive to the attitude toward art having to do with the social enclosure of the person looking at the art, and, not only that, but the context—the physical and societal environment—placing the work. Who was doing it for whom and why. When we say “art world” we are talking about a relatively few people.

DL: *How do we work standards in now?*

MP: I don’t think standards can be “worked in.” Back to the idea of the avant-garde: maybe not being able to talk about the avant-garde is the same thing as not being able to talk about standards. You need standards to break down before you can have an avant-garde and if we don’t have an avant-garde we have no standards! That’s too bad—we seem to need icons to smash.

DL: *I realize I asked my question in the wrong way about standards, because in your public art example there had been no difference in the styles, just the fact of their environments changed their reception.*

MP: Think about the inundation for a while of ghetto areas with social-comment-directed public art, usually done by non-professional artists. There were groups in New York and in Chicago and L.A. that did many ethnically or socially-oriented things—Black Power or Chinese Power or Woman Power—and they were, in terms of values, unimpeachable; in terms of standards, horrendous pieces of painting. Sorry. It could and would be argued with me, I’m sure, that these are good paintings.

But the thing is, where were they allowed to be put? Uptown, on Park Avenue? Of course not. They were foisted on people in ghetto neighborhoods who were not asked to begin with what sort of art they wanted, or if they wanted any. And as it turned out, when we asked them about it, in some New York areas they preferred the abstract, no-social-commentary stuff. Frankly, we found in a number of interviews that people living in a poor neighborhood do not exactly feel happy about having downtrodden people raising their fists in murals to look at when they look out the window, wait for the bus, or go to the playground.

Again, social context. Why do we feel we can go downtown to poor neighborhoods and throw this crap on walls? You may well ask, “What is crap?” which is exactly what I’m asking that we ask. And it is not so far from considering those factors to considering Richard Serra’s difficulties. I’m not discussing that here, except to argue for more thoughtfulness on all sides before the commission was given.

DL: *A thorough attempt to understand the specific situation?*

MP: Yes, and the general. When the issue of public art first began to become something that was both discussed and made, I thought that criticism abdicated a great deal of responsibility by not discussing it as much as it should

have, nor in ways that it should have been discussed, maybe because—after all—it wasn't owned by anyone, it couldn't be bought or sold (or, rephrased, it belonged to everyone). So outside that power to make and break a social-money connection, it was something that was not worth seriously discussing. And, of course, many serious critics have talked about why serious discussion is related to serious money, and there is now serious money in public art: Big Career, Big Art.

DL: *Is it worth comparing earthworks to public art? To put it bluntly, do you think earthworks were written about as opposed to public art because, even though nobody could own them, there was still a possibility for money there through various forms of patronage and artists getting grants, or do you think it was a matter of standards, that there was art that met certain standards so it was worth writing about, whereas public art didn't meet those standards?*

MP: I think you have phrased that question so well that I needn't answer it.

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DL: *Because some people would certainly argue that it's standards, it's not just money.*

MP: Well, then, as a critic why not develop standards when and where they're needed? It may be more important to talk about significant failures than stylish successes; critics were spending thousands to fly over the Spiral Jetty while avoiding the important failures that were beginning to appear in our cities. What about the *idea* of public art? Even the term, "public art" implies an urban environment, and, as a matter of fact, when earthworks move to town, they become "public art"—and not incidentally, they become harder to bring off. If you have an urban setting, you have a public, and you have a public place. Much of the controversy in public art occurs because it is not at all with the people who are to see it in mind that the artist sets out to make it. Lawrence Alloway wrote perhaps the definitive article on that, "The Public Sculpture Problem."<sup>2</sup> He cited immense chunks of hubris on the parts of various sculptors, saying in effect, "What do I care about the public, they have to care about me."

DL: *We've stuck on this issue of public art, but it comes back to the beginning comment you made about trying to realize what the situation is between artist, critic and public.*

MP: One of the things that nudged me into coming here to discuss this today is that I find that I have come, as a painter, to believe more and more in the importance of art criticism, and a lot of criticism I read today is just awful, or stifling, or off-putting, or, worse, totally unrelated to art. I'm reminded of a critic's review of a painter, who shall go nameless; the critic said that the painter takes more out of him than he gives. And that's what I feel about most contemporary criticism; it takes so much more out of me than it gives, and it just shouldn't be that way.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Robert Pincus-Witten, "Entries: Snatch and Snatching," *Arts* 56:1 (September 1981), 88.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Alloway, *Topics in American Art Since 1945* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975), 245-250.

# Letter from Home

By Peter Plagens

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Hi there, buckaroos,  
Scamp Walker time again.  
Time to try and slide one by you  
Once more.

—*Jerry Jeff Walker*

“Tell me quick,” said ol’ McPhee,  
“What’s this all have to do with me?  
I’ve spent all my time at sea  
A loner.”

—*Bob Seger*

A hundred thousand souls, about right; Durham’s just a little short, filled with hills, shade trees, lazy intersections, abandoned mills, Liggett & Myers plant (“Quality products from quality people”), and most fulfilling amusement this side of The New Museum: Durham Bulls (Class A; up to AA at Columbia, SC, to AAA at Richmond, to the big club in Atlanta), opening night against vaunted Peninsula Pilots, great old park 5,000 capacity, billboards jewelning the outfield, glowing brick warehouses beyond, short foul lines, lotsa homers, big dollar beers in official club cups, anything funny you yell heard in the cheap seats. And: gospel music, plethora of preachers, local news with plywood grain visible in the set. “How do you know when you’ve done a good piece?” someone asked the Texas sculptor. “Whin ah’m drahvin’ home in mah pickup truck with a bottle o’ beer between mah legs an’ ah feel real good, ah know the sculpture ah jus’ put up is real good, too.” The trouble with modernism in the outback: doesn’t take much to feel good, among the hundred thou.

Last days in converted Jehovah’s Witnesses church. Can’t make up my mind whether to go ahead, keep feet planted, or live on the lam. Trying



to settle in with bed book, wonder if I'll finish between these same sheets; tell myself to pretend I've just checked into a resort for two weeks, the eternity of a vacation before me. Studio has been struck, killed, lost; can't putter with art, but no pressure to. Like being sick home from school: not my fault must spend the day eating Cream O' Wheat, watching cartoons. My adult equivalent is playing basketball every morning, reading about murders: Kate Millet's *The Basement*, about the midwest torture of an adolescent girl, *The Life and Murder of Sir Henry Morsehead*, about the sudden demise of an insufferable Brit somewhere east of the Raj, *The Dominci Affair*, about an old French peasant taking out a whole English family, *Three Sisters in Black*, about a spinsters' plot to disinherit by death the daughter of one, and *The Hunting of Cain*, about the doing in of a vulgar Ohio businessman by his more vulgar brother. Real murders disturb my sleep, but can't read made-up thrillers, where nothing really happened, save in the author's mind.

*Friday: pick up Jartran; load household; grades.*

Three cars parked outside: Jartran van with 15' box, battered VW bus, Honda Accord. Worldly goods in Jartran, including paintings, flat files emptied, disassembled, reassembled, filled. Bus stuffed with winter clothes in mothballs; Honda will have to accept Phoebe's crib. I was a terrible sculpture student, but I pack like a gun runner.

Not sentimental about leaving. Mamie and Gervis, old white couple next door drying some clothes for us; Laurie touched. I can put 'em behind me. When I came to North Carolina, older professor, holding rolled-up copy of *Artforum* with "Stealing Time" in it, said, "You certainly don't sound like a man who wants to run an art department." Last week, another white-haired teacher said, "Well, you've been here, and now you're gone."

Law of the Run says if start out feeling bad, finish feeling good, but if start out feeling like sub-four, barely wheeze to the finish. Did I start life feeling good or bad? I ask in middle of mortal forties. No health crisis: heredity good and shape passable; never really smoked, occasionally drunk on wine, sometimes binge on Mother's Taffy Cremes or peanut butter. Seeing life nevertheless as a condemned man: what I see will stay behind. No longer in the tide of change, a kid on way to Utopia or apocalypse. With Mikasa competition birthday ball, naked in the park. Can't go to the hoop up the gut anymore; Black high-schoolers kill me. Best hoped for is steady defense and no disgraces. Need eight ounces of chablis to recuperate and feet hurt all night.

Rather go early, do it by myself. Fantasy game: five freethrows warmup, long jumper determines Lakers or Celts ball out, two first-to-thirty halves—twenty-footers count three, follow shots require one-hand tip or in-air move, missed shots one bounce to defenders, on fly or two bounces to shooters, rebs bounding overhead must be taken to opposite goal flat-out fast break. In plastic jacket, sweat up a storm. Getting grey and getting hard. Laurie says I'll tear up an ankle and that'll be it, ignominiously.

*Saturday: Jartran, bus to New Jersey.*

*Sunday: Jartran, bus to Connecticut; store household.*

Got to get away from students—seekers, bloodsuckers, airheads, incipient geniuses, future gallery fodder, tomorrow's wizened, philatelic art historians, next century's insurance salesmen. ("You can't teach art," says every boozy, unself-sufficient artist who makes a living doing just that, trying to.) Know the types—earnest worker, snide game-player, coquette, rebel, inner traveller, friend of the oppressed, custodian of lost craft—am weary. Invigoration by students a myth, except as acolytes or cheap studio assistants. Gigs now dangerous: tempted to hang out with faculty, hearing complaints about students, instead of vice-versa—kiss of death.

*Monday: Bus in Connecticut; Jartran to NYC drop-off; to Newark; fly to Athens, OH.*

*Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday: Gig at Ohio University.*

Khaki trousers, plain shirt, bargain-basement sweater, can feel with backs of legs how I'm different from them. Little handles on my waist, protective pursing of lips, no earring or synthetic leather jacket with lotsa zippers. Worse, can't thump the table with ideologue's idealism; don't think arms race curable solely through enlightenment/protest in West, don't think Central American revolutionaries only harmless agrarian reformers, suspect thinking of people who drive gas-burning BMWs hundred miles to shut-down-the-nuke-plant rally heard about over a watt-sucking stereo. Let's not be naive: great and sinister forces grappling for control of the world; cast a jaundiced eye toward everyone who assumes cultural hegemony of the polite Left.

Don't know why they want me—not a Feminist or Marxist, the two hot tickets in the art world. I do know why: scattered clever things in print lifted out of context. Want me to answer The Question of the Boonies: does a young artist have to go to New York? Don't know, don't care. Do you have to live in Kansas City to be a meat packer?

Measured is the word; try not to talk so much. Terminal logorrhoeic; film coats dry tongue, mouth disengages from brain, runs by itself. Getting paid, have to fill the gaps. Meet a young filmmaker, MFA in pocket, heading again to Nicaragua; rapidfire paean to its Film Institute: 8 mm cameras in hands of peasants to make documentaries about improvements on banana plantations, collage newsreel, anti-Reagan works of art. Just for the hell of it want to ask if thought about documentary on Miskito Indians—not because Sandinistas villains (Somozas worse), but because guy so predictable: bright-eyed bushy-tailed young American not realizing is arm of regime, sounding in funny way like Republican congressman back from official tour of South Korea. Instead, measured, I ask friendly questions. Am I cynical or realistic?

What to haunt me this time? Whom betrayed? What out-of-school tales escaped in one public lecture, one radio interview, ten half-hours with grad students, six bar and dinner conversations? Talked about my father, retired commercial artist, my son, rock musician: nothing vengeful or sordid, but

probably committing misdemeanor Karmic battery. Bad dream, real cold-sweater: son bleeding to death, former wife says coolly nothing I can do. Wake up puffing, thinking of calling in middle of night, to see if something's happened.

*Thursday: Fly to Durham; turn in grades.*

"The Road" mined out as theme; nothing left after *The Grapes of Wrath*, *On the Road*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Blue Highways*, parody of *The Road Warrior*. Nothing left, really, after Lewis & Clark.

Love Laurie and don't want to leave, but not as sad as she. Something in male likes road and phony freedom, mechanical shoptalk, bad heavy food, ersatz physical labor. Any fool can drive eight hundred miles on American interstates before sleeping; only an idiot thinks he's accomplished something. I'm that idiot.

*Friday: Clothes into Honda; to Nashville (leave Durham 12:45 p.m. EST; arrive Nashville 10:05 p.m. CST: 547.2 miles).*

Put car on I-40 and point west. First 50 miles hardest; how I'll get through boredom? Soon 100, then hundred doubles, redoubles, end in sight. Pray for radio-induced trance. Good preacher, and I can wake up 90 miles later. Highway calculus: never believe how long 600 miles at 50 m.p.h. (including stops) twelve hours, but figure and re-figure, sometimes 40 miles ahead, sometimes fifteen miles behind. Late afternoon euphoria with setting sun, think I'm a couple hours in the black, plus timezone perks. Finally pull in, ETA off but a couple of minutes; sliding numbers phantoms of mood. Six hundred miles: moved brain in skull that far, or did soul stay still while world flowed through head?

Two irritating commercials, mindless of state lines. Guy comes to door to sell "health insurance" to housewife. She demurs, he explains it's "health insurance you eat," i.e., Campbell's soup. After announcer's vitamin spiel, she says, "You'll have to excuse me. I've got some health insurance on the table and some of it's getting cold." Probably big agency meeting over "some of it"; without qualifier sounds like heat loss inherent flaw of product. Other: guy wanting to buy twelve Gillette Good News razors, druggist says can't sell him twelve, only ten, but add two free. Customer reveals unawareness razor has twin blades. "You don't know much, do you?" says druggist nastily without provocation. "I know enough to get my two free Good Newses," answers customer, untruthfully. Pox on both chins; pox on Willie Nelson for most unavoidable bad song, sung from the bottom of a well with Julio Iglesias. In spite of hype, commercial country awful, worse because more electronic, crossover, re-hash of 25-year-old rock n' roll recycled the day the copyright runs out. Even remake Conway Twitty's *It's Only Make Believe*; Twitty, now C&W institution, made it before reformed callow rock n' roll youth. Postmodernism (the referential metalanguage of pop music) in Nashville.

No highwaymen or Comanches on road west, so get tingle of danger when radio informs tornado watch. Dry, windy, cloudy, weirdly opaque. Lessee: what do I do? Get out, lie down in ditch, to hell with the car, right?

Why should I worry when the other drivers don't seem worried? Think same thing on plane in clear-air turbulence and stewardesses go right on serving vodka. Other hand, maybe hidden poetic destiny: "You know, the guy was meant to go that way, somehow. Hit by a tornado on the road, a million-to-one shot. Bam! Threw the car four hundred feet. At least the sucker never knew what hit him. The work never really caught on till he died."

Ritual aloud after each stop: "Keys, wallet, camera, tape recorder, buck knife, shades," and tap one wrist for watch, other for bracelet. If haven't lost anything by California, just stupid superstition, if have, will redouble incantation.

Rhythm to going bad. Tape recorder needs batteries, no stores open early; go into McDonald's for coffee (vow no burgers, red meat, this trip), trainee at counter, practically counts on fingers. Takes order, starts new pot without giving me cup from last batch. While perks, head for restroom, one-holer with little kid on john, K-Mart sneakers dangling a foot off the ground. Comes out, can't reach faucets to wash hands, I do it for him. No towels, drier out of order, my wet hands can't turn the faucet handles off. Delivers coffee, but has to make separate trip back for cream, another for stirrer. Twenty-five minutes for take-out coffee, still no batteries.

Heat quantum leap after Oklahoma City, into Texas, probably Permian Basin, a ridge, boom! There it is: the West. Dead animals on highway change more gradually: squirrels, possum in east and midwest, before first armadillo, finally jackrabbits and lizards. Bluegrass into gospel into Spanish, transmitters across the border, can pick up signal with molar fillings.

East of Amarillo, cloud cover burnt off, shut down wipers. Twenty yards ahead dark truck, tall box, smaller than semi, no lettering visible. What the hell is it, black whale of highway, *momento mori*? Pull alongside in passing lane: discreet graphics, "The Black Truck," knight of the road for art, celebrity and old friend (I've sent stuff on that truck). Wish I had CB or my vanity North Carolina plate, "ABSTRACT" bigger. Follow for a while, figuring pull over when truck diesels up, but have to pee, bad. If pull into gas station cost a couple of minutes. To make up two miles on truck doing 65 means doing five faster half an hour on heavily patrolled stretch. Instead pull on ramp shoulder just past Groom, put up hood so for all anybody knows car, not bladder, trouble. Then pursuit of Black Truck; measure interval of overpass shadow on next proximate car (can't see on Black Truck): mile, three-quarters, quarter, tenth. Takes twenty miles, weaving in and out with highballing trucks to avoid detection. Highway games.

Seven a.m. rising sun at back, in shorts, T-shirt, Durham Bulls cap; station attendant says I'll freeze, but this is high of trip, dawn after darkest hour. Always resolve to rise earlier after seeing sunrise, but revenge with neon clock of urban life. Night sucks: anybody who likes night sold bill of goods about sophistication, entertainment, fame. Night is cultural deceit, morning is revelation.

Pump jockey asks for plate; when spell, I tell him it's short for "abstract art." "Yeah," he says, wearied, "I saw the sticker (Art Center decal) and

figured it had something to do with art." Never underestimate the audience, never over-explain.

Everyone's an artist now; can come within flea's moustache of artist's experience without being one. Take a couple of hits, right cassette, slip down highway under star canopy, entertain elementary romanticisms about Earth just small dirt ball in lap of University. Feel like a genius without lifting a finger. Last 25 years art fled full-speed from worked-on obdurate object to barely manifested casual fleeting thoughts. Can suppose high in speeding car making unrecorded art in head; only lack of political connections in conspiratorial art world keeps these gems locked between your ears, not unleashed on world by battalions of hired engineers.

*Saturday: To Oklahoma City (leave Nashville 11:08 a.m.; arrive Oklahoma City 10:55 p.m.: 684.1 miles).*

Shouting at radio preachers as car hurtles down highway; ecclesiastical *Meet the Press*, five blow-dried ministers (see some on tube, one a fatuous favorite) frothing at mouth about alleged First Amendment assault on little unlicensed fundamentalist Nebraska church school. Feds implied villains under sway of Secular Humanism, proof offered in quotes from *Humanist Manifesto*. Say card-carrying Humanists Hollywood, New York types making movies, news programs, "offer them up to their god, the Devil." In a couple of steps, the Governor of Nebraska, poor church-going bastard just trying to enforce certification statutes, becomes a devil-worshipper. I'd like to hear what preachers say if school was atheist hothouse or Black Muslim academy. Jews are the tricky part for these guys. Suspect they're anti-Semites, but they like "Judeo-" front for Christianity to give prophecy Old Testament cache, to imply historical legitimacy, tolerance, ecumenicism; conveniently ignore all those liberal, secular, devil-worshipping Jews at Universal Studies, CBS News.

FM station interviewing "space music" composer, "Larkin" (no first name, please, like Rasputin): blissed-out high-tech Westerner with pancake syrup voice OD'd on eastern philosophy. Says things like, "... penny-whistles dance over the tapestry so beautifully laid down by Michael on his synthesizer," "I consider myself an emissary for planetary consciousness." Says his music is equivalent of doctor's prescription for rest for globe brought to ecological nervous breakdown, for private meditation and not for groups or dancing, a health food dose counteracting junk food force-fed by Top 40 stations. Turns around and brags about concert audiences and plays taped sounds—whistling winds gliding into one another on wings of echo-chamber flute—as formula'd as supermarket incense. Says toying with concocting video images to augment sounds (There's an idea!); says planted seed in ground, starting to bear fruit, with possible harvest of millions of souls. Flip side of warmonger Jesusism: ex-hippies anorexic on sprouts and proud of it, think superior to fat fundamentalist living lumps of overweight gravy clotted with flour and proud of it. And standard preacher disclaimer: "Money doesn't mean anything to me except as a measurement of the growing number of people I can communicate with."

Radio—

CALLER: What does Gary see ahead for me, familywise, jobwise?

PSYCHIC: Well, I'll say this. As far as a job goes, you will probably make a change and be in more of a management position, or position of authority, by 27 August 1984. The job will take a lot of your time in 1984. I see meetings, I see notes. I see you recording stuff. I feel that you will throw in ideas.

CALLER: Wonderful! How about family life?

PSYCHIC: We're only answering one question to a customer.

"Psychic" to lecture at local motel, ten bucks a throw; attendee gets one question like that. Carnival hustler can do same, read people, not astral vibes. First, sets up exemption, says never 100% accurate on the details ("27 August 1984" a throwaway); next, scopes out Phoenix, the station market, who's home afternoons nipping at the sherry (all callers, unfortunately, women, mostly homemakers, half with three-pack-a-day voices). Skilled at reading hitches in voices. She asks if she'll be happy, husband transferred to Missouri; he reads inevitability and says yes (why hurt somebody's feelings with the truth?). She asks should get job or enjoy home; he can tell she doesn't want to leave the house, is embarrassed by family financial plight, says she wants job to meet people, not make money, tells her stay home make new friends. "Boy, that hits the nail right on the head," hangs up happy. Old mind-reader in circus tent: let me hold your wallet, I'll decode your life. Clairvoyant? No, just clever. Like the guy who says anybody against zealot elementary school is devil-worshipper like guy who looks sincerely into TV camera and says he knows there's a woman out there with a pain in her leg, like the who's discovered a synthesizer sound for cosmic consciousness: doesn't buck the odds.

Ought to issue a catalogue of preacher scams, first that worst sinner makes most impressive Christian. Radio rife with testimonials—drug dealers, wife beaters, leading clean lives. Preacher tells tale of man on death row now miraculously working for Lord. Of course, otherwise electrocuted. Porn producer now makes films for Lord; of course, just switched markets. Big Christian market out there: cellulite whitebread in the suburbs, alienated by Atari and punk rock, wanting something to get into. Delivered by failed actors and eighth-rate nightclub singers looking for work. Marriage made in heaven. Showbiz tradition: honorable to do anything to keep wolf from door, selling toilet paper, selling salvation. Audience welcomes with presupposition about religion: can't be for profit, just like samaritan hospitals. But hospitals owned by conglomerates because great on balance sheet (don't want to shop around for cancer cures, pay the going rate), and churches likewise in business. Polyester gospel quartets don't work for free; as many deals cut in Garden Grove as in Beverly Hills. Only difference is religion doesn't have advertising, *is* advertising: if you like this stuff, send in money ("love offering," "support for this work," "keeping this ministry on the air") direct, no middleman refineries or breweries. Eliminating middleman is the foundation of Protestantism.

California something new to sell every year. This year it's Christianity; revarnishing everything with Jesus and re-hawking it; I'm waiting for "Marantha Activewear," stitched fish on left breast. *Talk from the Heart*

over Orange County AM outlet, sounds like radio therapist save for “blesses” and token acknowledgment that it’s all in the hands of the Lord anyway. Smooth host, probably did sports and weather in Barstow until saw opportunity. Biggest problem with self-help is predestination and intervening God. Psychobabble inclination (yea, duty) tell people suck it up pull themselves up by bootstraps. Puzzlement: Lord doesn’t step in unless you’re down and out, but if so far down and out don’t believe, he ain’t gonna help. God has plan, but it’s all your fault; cure yourself and the Lord will intervene. Commercials the best: chiropractors, plumbers, florists, all announced Christians looking for Christian customers. The Samaritan chiropractor says he’ll accept “whatever your insurance will pay” as payment in full (who’s to say won’t jack up charge so half is whole?); accounting firm alludes to biblical command to be steward over resources, says, “where they take stewardship into account”; even an “In His Service” exterminator! Every other ad for counseling, big new California business, servicing great damaged legions for whom dream in the sun soured: alkie, cokeheads, beaten women, child abusers, child abusees, depressed, and, specifically mentioned, facing Original Sin, the unduly guilty. After martial arts, transactional analysis, health foods, Jane Fonda workouts, we have “Christian counseling.” The hustlers retool for the Eighties.

Learned again to hate Americans. Popular when I was in college, grew to the biggest religion on earth during Vietnam war, now firmly lodged in freshman curriculum as Remedial Flagellation. Gave it up for a while, too many mistook revulsion at mom’s Spiegel dresses and dad’s beer-n-ballgame for poetic insight and daring politics. Now hard again not to. Americans defecate in own *chien-lits*: gas station restroom war zones, roadside rests dung heaps, every meadow a motocross course. (In Baja race, always root Baja to pick off petroleum perverts; any better form of poetic justice than guy who just dug up acre of delicate desert crust sitting inside muscle truck with broken axle dying of thirst?) These aren’t young rebels leaving wake through countryside: double-knit mismatched gargoyles in golf caps piloting listing Winnebagos, watering yapping little dogs by roadside. Not oppressed, just bored, all belly-first pride and no dignity. Only way country can withstand them is to coat everything, *everything*, in ceramic nosecone tiles.

Why this country, why Western society need so much entertainment: channels and stations, eighteen or 24 hours, blasting away songs, jingles, stories, interviewed singers, jinglers, storytellers? Something else—Spanish lessons, how to plant better corn, descriptions wanted criminals—instead of sucking up useless song and sport? Thought hits hard on road, away from raucous popular culture densely packed into the city; sights and sounds of showbiz vanished (save for my masochism with AM), ground blank, figure appears *ex nihilo*, seems naked, silly. (In Bulgaria, hard to defend capitalism; in Groom, Texas, hard to jimmy up case for collectivizing cattle ranches; opinion is geography.) By same token, philistine moviegoer/album-buyer asks, all these useless galleries, museums, symphony orchestras, dance companies? Talk about waste! But need these

things, to keep heart, soul, brain of culture going; other stuff body fat, health hazard. OK, philistine concedes, but modern fine art requires backdrop of low art; lives by irony, needs a savings and loan of absurdity from which to make withdrawals. Still, such a stupefying amount of energy, resources diverted to popular music and theatre, to the most numbingly self-absorbed, self-congratulatory group of preening prancers ever to walk face of the earth. When not singing, speaking trash, telling us how succinctly trash means to modern life, giving each other shiny phallic statuettes in honor of the net gross. American philosophy: Barbara Mandrell on Not Giving Up, Tom Selleck on Perfecting One's Craft. Need award shows for mechanics, farmers, day-care managers ("And now, for the best performance by a latch-key child in the inner city...."), not musings by soap opera doctors and bass guitarists. Don't need half *Morning News* devoted to sycophantic conversation with director whose main achievement is fusion of two meanings for word "gross." Will not watch a minute of *Entertainment Tonight*; would prefer living in country where government channel, only channel, features continuous reruns assistant commissar for agriculture reciting Upper Farkelstan wheat quotas.

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We capitalists (sure, everyone a Marxist now, but Marxists all capitalists) define ourselves not by what do, but by what consume: enough money for specificity, hardly a fortune, required. Polo instead of Izod, Schweppes in preference to Canada Dry, Canadian Club over George Dickel, Style Council in lieu of The Pretenders, Keith Haring over David Salle, New York rather than San Francisco. What's he like? oh, drives a Fiero and wears nothing but Tiger hi-top volleyballs; you'll love him. Next? SWM, 36, likes Truffaut and Woody Allen films, white wine, long walks on beach, Stones oldies, L.L. Bean parkas; non-smoker, but permits Merit Lights; reply with photo and color of cordless phone. Definitely an 87, sub-type C. Next? Move along. Summer psyche clearance must end Friday.

Eagleton's *Literary Theory*—through Arnold, Eliot, New Criticism, Structuralism, post-Structuralism, Deconstructivism, couple of dips into Freud, Feminism, Marx (Eagleton a no-bones-about-it Marxist)—my underpinnings sliding around in dialectical sand. Eagleton fairer than most Marxists, except 1) after concisely summarize, snidely trash every preceding theory, answer reader's anticipation of revelatory Marxist-Feminist answer with a) proved that no such thing as "literature" after all, so theory of it redundant, b) theory would invite unwashed reader into "mistake of category," i.e., that Marxism something less than total indissoluble scientific answer to everything (how convenient!); 2) all examples of language corruption Western—TV ads, political slogans, Exxon boardroom minutes—nothing from Eastern bloc, as if *Pravda* editorial, wall banner "We are alert to the trickery of imperialist lackeys" from untainted minds. He's right about Doyle, Dane & Bernbach, Walter Mondale, and Burger King, but only swings from left. Token mention socialist flaw indirect in liberal humanist (ever the whipping boys!) belief that more "free speech" answer to repression in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary; says answer should be "workers' revolt." Hey, that's how they got in that pickle, Ace! Wasn't real workers'



revolt, just Russian imperialism? OK, but the imperialism of regime began with workers' revolt, *ne c'est pas*? Oh, I get it, Terry, capitalism responsible for evil in everything, even Communism. Red Scare in reverse.

*Sunday: To Gallup (leave Oklahoma City 6:47 a.m. CDT; arrive Gallup 8:22 p.m. MDT: 694 miles).*

Every day real life pinned on prow of history, open unknown sea ahead, known land behind, no guarantee arrival by nightfall. In literature, in art, days play again and again. Don't know outcome of narrative, know at least will survive it. Main character, her point of view, may end, we won't. Can go back pick her up still in good health, bail out before demise. No matter how good writing, difference between putting ourselves in mind of soldier in foxhole and being soldier in foxhole. Worst can happen book will end; for soldier, time itself can end. Writing date on a check, get frisson: no one has ever been this far forward into history before.

Motel cable HBO documentary on serial murderers: Edward Kemper, killed several women in Northern California before finally offing his mother, Ted Bundy, massacred, among others, two women in Florida sorority house. Disturbing: 1) acted-out sequences with voiceover of culprit—Kemper picking up actresses/hitchhikers, Bundy (actor look like game show host) depositing bodies (recumbent actresses resembling lingerie models) in woods; 2) Kemper sitting safely and talking at length about crime, like hulking Joyce Brothers. First is tasteless, second manifestation of liberal humanist (I whip 'em, too) myth better to know than not to know. Knowing, we will be better able to "understand," understanding will raise Kempers of future so don't rape and murder. But what if bluestockings are right, what if somebody watching not made to understand, but titillated, goes on rampage? I'd bet greater possibility somebody encouraged by seeing only punishment mass murder having to sit still for camera, fussed over by interviewer. Heinousness of the media: while Kemper emotes, victim rots in ground; while Bundy winks, smiles, evades, mother of coed haunted by bloody sheets. Grisly deeds the TV equal of Victoria Principal's diets, third quarter score of Laker game, evening news at worst. All okay, just matter of talking heads on tube; some you like, some you don't. No matter weeping giant butchered five women before beheading and performing necrophiliac rape on own mother; just a few rating points down from Dan Rather. If somebody suggest to HBO whole subject morally inappropriate, get naive humanist cry of censorship, dangers of bottling things up. Liberals don't realize impulse to compensation for death rooted deeper than court's wimpy sociology. No one at HBO, or their customers with cables jacked to brains realize, either. Forces of progress, enlightenment, forgiveness proceed at great peril. Ayatollah struck a cord, a nerve vulnerable in us to the preachers; if not attended, fester surrounds it, body demands purge, and there's hell to pay. For paradox of Kemper alive and still talking: supposed to accept as insight (locker room interview with one of the players) allegedly rational judgment on himself man who acted beyond bounds of reason. Teary tale of sitting drunk on concrete berm outside sheriff's station, trying to screw up courage to turn himself in; says

saga “all about how a mother raises her son,” as if he never decided anything, lays sin at feet of mutilated victim. Kemper has no right to speak unless from other side of the grave; Kemper, the reformer’s prize goat, drones on while I, electronically greased in his guilt, cannot turn the set off.

God used to be immortality. No matter how wretched earthly existence, we’d go on in heaven, or in hell. Now nobody believes in God anymore; nobody with any urbanity believes in God anymore; those say they do either buying a spiritual La-Z-Boy or selling one. Immortality is in culture, in a record for posterity. No matter how wretched earthly existence, might be a book in it, might sell the book for a movie, as source of movie might get written up in *People*, ashes spread to a thousand supermarkets. Book bowdlerizes death, pasteurizes fear. That’s what’s wrong with Holocaust literature: Holocaust becomes part of orderly middle-class life, book on shelf, like compost from feces, all the bacteria of horror dried out. We don’t read books to learn what we don’t know. We read books to avoid what left as legend might bother us to death.

*Monday: To Vista (leave Gallup 6:10 a.m.; arrive Vista 7:24 p.m. PDT, 682.2 miles; total 2607 miles Durham-Vista @ 34.7 m.p.g. @ \$1.24.4 a.p.p.g., unleaded).*

Ten miles from California border, first L.A. vibe: weak signal KFI. Brawley Safeway—big, clean, cool, California-class cruiser of a supermarket where can get enough grapefruit juice to get to Vista; beautiful, graceful Chicano children; cash registers boast synthesized speech. Defeatedly conscious of body for first time since Ohio; don’t want checker to know there’s chunky demi-southerner beneath the T-shirt.

Vista in cold fog after day above one hundred, coming to parents’ house, coming full circle; evening is exactly that when, thirteen, I would go out under streetlight on hill above Sunset and Alvarado, throw make-believe touchdown passes into cypress tree with real leather football won on TV contest. Anywhere parents are, old dishes set out, your old home, do battle with quicksand of familiar. Forewarned: in Los Angeles, do not fall thickly in with white men over forty talk basketball, abstract art, what it was like ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s. Keep to little sleeping palette in corner of Linden’s loft, keep notes, stats in the tax notebook, chronicle disturbing dreams.

Radio—

Yes, you may have what it takes to be a professional writer. But did you know that professional writers are everyday people just like yourself? You don’t have to be a well-known name to write professionally, full-time or part-time. Write for the facts, then you decide what to do after you receive the results. Writers Institute has no sales people. Nobody will call on you. You’re under absolutely no obligation. So, for your free copy of the Writers Institute Aptitude Test, drop a card to: Writers, P.O. Box 3840, Grand Central Station, New York, New York 10163.

Gentle Reader, you’ve put up with a lot; know you’re tired of hearing middle-aged whine by middle-aged whiner, artist or critic? boogie or rad? old order or new wave? solution or problem? culprit or judge? Bear with. Consider: can’t keep up with my thoughts. Neither herb nor alcohol helps;

just get behind. Wish I had a reverse Walkman through which thoughts magically transferred to page. Every mediocre pretender wishes that. Perhaps writing is really all craft; everybody/anybody thinks these things, problem is getting from head to hand to surface without the aid of surgical implants. Writing is physical, gotta make fingers move, even if isn't bullfighting or Hemingway's beard. Limberness required, workouts (finger-tip pushups) advisable. Still comes out herky-jerky, badly in need of subheads, wide margins, Yangtze separations between type blocks. Writing ought to be smooth; begin as Finnegan and end as Dear Abby; any prudent reader ought to make heads and tails. At moments think making intelligible is selling out, sugar coating, patronizing. At others, know reluctance is laziness; let reader/viewer do the work is battle cry of modern art.

We (we middle-class mostly white folks) have erroneous idea old language, 18th, 19th century, stilted, mannered, false. Think "a gentleman of quality," "Nature's perfect order," and "my most affectionate regards" gateways to perfumed veranda, not real world. Think we speak, write more secularly, accurately, concretely. Wrong. Simply replaced rhetorical doilies with semiconductors like "needs," "programs," "responses," "alternatives." "Process" is worst by ubiquity: election become "election process," whatever goes on in Middle East waterpipe-filled rooms is "peace process." Word was supposed to blanket particulars when needed, e.g., "We'll process your application." Now is gratuitous abstraction, needlessly added to particular like "election" because sounds caring, profound. Therapeutic abstraction, not the Colt .45, is the great equalizer.

*Tuesday: To Los Angeles, 109 miles.*

LA intimidates: variety, intensity, noise, crime, derelicts, too much in print. Never pick up *Reader* or *Weekly* first day in town. Never read at length after week on road. Never read article mother, salacious like most women of seventy, gives you about twenty-year-old porn queen's suicide. (Oddly, NY bothers me less these days; I'm always a tourist, I'm never responsible.) Secret of the big city: none of it matters. Parvenues don't know this, think it all counts; whirl themselves dizzy in acceptance, not realizing path of enlightenment is indifference, getting on with business as though the assayer in a ghost town.

Dream: am taken to house in San Fernando Valley belonging to famous woman artist on vacation in New York—two hours in a Jeep over rough dirt roads to mountaintop mansion. Others from "the complex" sitting in bleachers, looking down at valley floor. Amazed at steepness, I say, "That's Van Nuys Boulevard." Everyone disputes it until point out city hall annex. My host, now a male, says he'll lend me bicycle to get to the party, supposed to meet Laurie. Raining hard as I ride off, downpour cause miss correct turn at traffic circle; pedal seven miles wrong way end up back at mountaintop. Host fixes me drink, start out again. At party, Laurie, another woman named "Lori" are both taller than I, the latter a seven-footer. Laurie says it's because she's wearing her heels, asks why I don't wear mine. I notice both women are pregnant.

First Sunday morning in town, drive to Santa Monica High, looking for

usual game, no one there. Muscular guy, early twenties, says he's alcoholic just had argument with roomie, walks on to court, shoot around, says let's play "21." Good bullish move to basket, layups with either hand, outjumps me by a foot. But my shot's on and we split four games on heated asphalt. Legs dead driving downtown, car moves slowly on freeway, as if everything not nailed down in Mencken's metaphor caught in bumper, drug to LA with me, to wait as ever at ozoned transit station marked "Pacific Rim" for next spectre train into the sun. Behind me are Kansas and Connecticut: all that green, all those real seasons.

*(Previous installments: "Peter and the Pressure Cooker," Artforum, June, 1974; "Subway Orbit," Tracks, No. 3, 1975; "Chicago Gig: The Artist Itinerant," Art in America, May, 1978; "The Visiting Artist" (fiction), LAICA Journal, October, 1977; "Stealing Time: An Ontological Odyssey," Artforum, September, 1979.)*

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# Critical Point

By Lucio Pozzi

Some of the circumstances under which the new thinking might happen are beginning to reveal themselves. It is still obscure—its outlines still undefined—yet the pressure it bears upon our minds is felt everywhere. The new thinking engages critics and artists alike, as it does the whole culture at large.

Processes of thought which had been fine-tuned for societies structured around values of sequential definition are dry in the context of the portentous changes our epoch presents us with.

Never before were all humans aware of the possibility of global nuclear annihilation nor were the politics of the sexes ever revolutionized as much as they are now by contraception, while biology and electronics are subverting all traditional scales of expectation. The new thinking is born with the new dimensions such changes are bringing about.

The Modern Movement cast its skeptical and utopian eye upon that which it inherited from recent millennia and it proceeded to disarticulate it into discrete components. It is now in the process of listing the inventory of its assessments by means of corollaries, some of which have been named Post-Modern.

The new thinking is brewing from inside the Modern negations and projections, but it differs radically from them. Many minds are experiencing a sense of plain, simple yet profound change. This is not caused by naive optimism but it is a mere acknowledgement that many current forms of thought are a skin about to be shed and that another skin is already conceived even though it is not yet understood.

If we want to dwell upon the relationship between criticism and art, we cannot avoid consideration of their wider cultural context. We must indeed try to bypass all questions that are not relevant to the mutation our minds are undergoing and attempt to discover or at least to approximate some of the conditions the new thinking entails. When seen in this light, most of the concerns we are currently engaged in are quite meaningless. Our artists and writers, not to speak of museums and collectors, focused as they are on novelty, formal clichés and fashion, are involved in the equivalent of esthetic gossip, if compared to the scope of the history we are living.

A natural atrophy is pervading most cultural sectors of the industrialized world. This is more than understandable in view of the fact that the thinking modes which were creative in societies of the past cannot be creative within the terms of our present living experience.

The opportunity might have now come for us to lay the foundation of a humanism that stems from the Renaissance movement of that name even though it bears little resemblance to it—a humanism carrying with it implications far greater in scope and magnitude than its forerunner.

Contrary to a popular misconception, the humanist movement especially in its Neoplatonic strands, was not one of certainty but one of doubt and research. It was a shortlived flexible tool of inquiry, burned quickly in the fire of Reformation and Counterreformation realpolitik. Even though it was an elitist movement, all who were willing had access to it, because it sought the excellence of the mind rather than political or economic dominance.

Now, our culture has reached a point at which the exploration and the understanding of the mind might be the only avenue left for us to deal with the creation of new social and emotional patterns. This links us to the old humanism, even though our conditions of experience are extremely different.

In the field of art it becomes imperative to attempt a criticism of the methodological approaches followed by both artists and critics and to try to develop creative alternatives to them.

To enable us to do so, a few preliminary steps could be taken. We could drop some inoperative dichotomies that are binding us in futile debates and we could transform their poles into regenerative sources, all worthy of attention.

The apparent truism that art makes and criticism follows, with either alternately being attributed authority over the other, could be changed into 'art is criticism and criticism is art.' The distinction between realism and abstraction could become a merely descriptive one as opposed to the qualifying

one it is currently thought to be. The tension between new and old might be understood as a store of alternative possibilities for actions capable of transcending and combining both. Specificity of signification might be seen as one more facet of the same range of information in which decorative neutrality is also included. Sense and nonsense cease to be opposites but become merely different levels of the pulsing organism of thought, each coming of use on different occasions. In the same way as Euclidian geometry is not any more thought of as the one and only geometry, linear logic becomes one instrument among many, applicable to certain fields of operation but not to all; other logics are available to operate outside its realm.

Another step could be to abandon the premise—almost a prejudice—that art and thought develop in a progressive manner. The happenings in our minds are of a jumping nature; they often are unaccountable by the standards established before they take place. The evolution of a thought should never be conceived in a linear manner.

Once conceptual changes of this kind are performed, not only are cultural standards broken down in their parts, but, because no binding hierarchies are imposed on them anymore, the parts become fertile sources for the growth of new integrated processes of cognition.

Many will fear such approach to dilute the importance of critical choice and of esthetic criteria. Wouldn't a kind of muddy undefinition develop in our culture?

I feel strategic uncertainty to be necessary. Without question mark, no culture. There is a tactical certainty in the assessment of one's observations, but only an unclear outlook can lead to creative moments, each of which will in turn be highly focused. Eventually, when the habit of relying on binding standards will have been overcome, intuitive reasoning will replace them.

The new thinking will grow out of a challenge to the concept of normalcy. In the arts, the idea of mainstream is relegated to the moneymaking goal-oriented productions which our bureaucratic institutions cherish so much, while probing thought moves elsewhere. But the scope of new thinking transcends the limited planet of the arts; it reaches into the universe of communication.

Among those, for instance, who study learning disabilities, increasingly stronger evidence is developing that points at the possibility of there being plural and often contradictory learning capacities in different people, none of which are more normal than the others. This is a challenge to a whole range of theories which go from Freud's positivism to Lacan's structuralism—not to speak of the totalitarian standard aptitudinal tests we are still subjecting ourselves to in education and business.

As an artist(critic), my critical alertness is directed toward a concern about how my social context might either control or nurture by individual growth, and how I might establish a creative intercourse with society and with myself. But, more than that, my criticism is especially exercised in detecting the ways of my mind. The shifts of my mind are the actual subject matter of my art; they are the emblem of all the complex network of in-

dividual and collective forces which my existence is made of. The same I would want to say of a critic(artist).

An inner censorship is always eager to prevent me from allowing certain experiences to happen. For instance, I feel that sometimes esthetic rules surface in me which try to impose restrictions upon the exploration of my desires. To put it simply, in all creative people there is often a subliminal force that attempts to discourage their surrendering to certain drives or urges which the working process might lead them into but which they feel too foreign to engage in. Personal discovery rarely meets my approval when I stumble upon it and only a committed critical alertness allows me to let it happen.

The creative act is bred in contradiction and uncertainty, and yet it happens within specific historical and topological environments. The task of both the artist and the critic is to understand these, and yet to prevent such understanding from hampering the intuitive leaps necessary to creation.

The critic is faced with difficult strategic alternatives. He or she does not want to be a mere commentator, wishes to avoid becoming only a promoter and would do well to beware of definitions. (Definitions must refer to established conventions and thus pull the creative act back into the realm it attempts to leap away from).

It might occur to some, therefore, that if the critic wants to be creative, his or her texts might appear in need of being separated from the art they discuss! But this would lead the critic into a specialized ghetto and it would contradict the integrated approach of exchange so necessary for a regenerative culture to survive.

Conversely, an opposite solution could be conceived, calling for the critic to become an integral part of the studio process. A delicate matter this, in view of the prescriptive disaster many of us consider to have resulted from Clement Greenberg's or Andre Breton's binding advice to the artists they supported. On the other hand, what better collaborator could an artist who doesn't believe in the myth of individual genius have than a critic?

The dilemmas exemplified above might however be false ones. They might be unnecessarily bound by the polarizing premises of the kind of categorical thinking which is fading from our cultural horizon. To entertain such dilemmas could lead us into quibbling forever in a vicious circle of triviality.

The creative critic and the creative artist are attracted by those ways which bypass such dilemmas. In order to seek out the new ways of thinking, they go so far as to doubt the relevance of many of the concepts which until now have been pillars of artistic inquiry—even concepts such as quality and judgment.

There must be a way for the critic to escape relying on mere description as his or her method and at the same time to avoid the pitfalls of prescription. I feel the critic ought not to judge as I feel that the artist shouldn't. They should propose and submit while searching endlessly for circumstantial evidence of actual happenings in and around them. An exchange of feelings might be the best rapport between the artists and the critics and



other partners in the creative field. If Modernity can be seen retroactively as having been an exciting yet limited exercise in cognition, now the impact of a concrete, knowable, detectable emotion might be taking its place next to it.

It has so far been an intractable puzzle for me to understand how much control is actually taking place in the creative act. I found, for instance, that even when I bring myself into an altered state I still can pilot my mind here and there.

There might be a way to test this question by dismissing first of all—as many are already doing—those clichés which see the unconscious as primal, basic or primitive only. The unconscious is a cultured dimension; its range is immense; creative activity within its realm ranges from contemplation to concrete productions.<sup>1</sup>

By bringing some of the decision-making process into the unconscious one finds oneself dealing with ideas that are in sharper focus, and one can process alternatives much faster than when one stays within the preparations and safeguards of surface-culture.

Even though psychoanalysis has aimed at demystifying the lesser known levels of the mind, there is still an esoteric mystique attached to their exploration. I think it would be good for us to complement the analytical groundwork, without which no exploration can start, with the study of all modern and ancestral techniques capable of transporting us into the realities of inner mind.

These notes are far too short to enter properly into the details of such operations, and I, myself, don't feel ready to engage in a discussion of them, but I suspect that creative research entered that way might contribute to unlock us from certain methodological polarizations that are still binding us.

For example, we are still torn between negative and positive dialectics—the former, in its gritty lack of illusions, always seeming to be more realistic or rigorous than the utopian latter. (It often hilariously comes down to plain and simple seeing the bottle half empty or half full).

Negative dialectics has become classical modern self-indulgence, it has exhausted its usefulness and offers now only predictable repetitions. By the same token, we do not seem to engage in positive dialectics or idealism with any but escapist results. When we try to refer to higher orders, we fall into wishful thinking.

The self-possession (as opposed to self-control) which might grow out of explorations of the deep psyche, could maybe overcome the impasse we have been led to by the positive and the negative academies.

This is the area I hint at when I talk of knowable emotions.

I am aware that to talk of emotions and the mind out of specific contexts might seem a particularly vague approach to follow. Yet, I am not the only one who is convinced that humanity is at an evolutionary threshold whereby the exploration of the workings of the mind is leading us to unforeseen metamorphoses of the individual and collective self.<sup>2</sup>

The exercise of art—and of any other research as well—centers no more on imagery than on psycho-physical processes. Some artists and critics are

involved, together with many others of various disciplines, in nothing less than the complete overhauling of our conceptual instruments.

We cast our attention upon the way we make decisions, upon inner memory and the power of speculating about the future. We reflect upon those parts of our emotional network that we can detect as much if not more than upon the representations which have so far occupied art. We, thus, are focusing on creativity itself as our source of regeneration and exchange, rather than on what creativity is applied to.

It is fashionable nowadays to dismiss the concept of creativity as a naive concern of people who blind themselves to the fact that we are all bound by determinate laws of behavior we cannot escape. Such laws, once understood, supposedly reveal that the individual is totally conditioned by our perverse environment and that since this environment is tending toward the reduction of individual and collective creativity to its rigid rules, we had better surrender to this reality and work from within it instead of seeking alternatives to it.

Such linear fatalism ignores the richness of the sources of regeneration innate to every individual. These are not solipsistic entities indulged by a minority that can afford them, but they are shared among the people. They actually represent the common force from which spring all creative actions, from the arts to the struggle for social justice.

Finally, in concrete terms, what could be the expectations of artists and critics from one another under the circumstances of our current culture? Those who possess a probing mind demand a collaborative tension toward the new thinking, with a sense of urgency stemming from a liminal feeling born of the speed and scope of the mutation humanity is undergoing. In other words, let's get moving while there is time.

The critic and artist both, together and separately, seek to symbolize and create the spiritual flux of their epoch. But both art and criticism will not achieve this if bound by definitions, because definitions in their predictability will drag them back to that which they wish to leave. If, instead, art and criticism and all creative endeavors engage in methodologies leading toward a new, generally undefined, yet topically precise, way of conceiving our thoughts, then self-evident creations will happen.

It is extremely difficult for us to engage in such research, bound as we are by obsolete languages, in a bureaucratic epoch in which, while superficial novelty is fomented, unfamiliar alternatives of thought are substantially discouraged. It is furthermore premature to approach the research in less than vague terms, yet it might be the only effort really worth making now.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Maurizio Bonicatti, one of the founders of the Associazione Per Le Ricerche Sulla Esperienza Prelogica (Association for the Research on Prelogical Experience) of Rome, Italy, points out how occidental culture tends to conceive of creativity in productive and communicative terms only, at the exclusion of static contemplation. (See *L'Equivoco della Creatività Artistica*, Rome, circa 1976—The Misunderstanding about Artistic Creativity.)

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance: Jonas Salk, *Anatomy Of Reality—Merging of Intuition and Reason*, (New York: Praeger, 1985) and Felix Guattari, *1980-1985—Les Années D'Hiver*, (Paris: Barrault, 1986).

# On the State of Abstract Painting

By Rodney Ripps

Abstract painting is not dead. I'll admit though, it's clinging to life, having been unwittingly stabbed and betrayed by its own present day practitioners. This *should* be a time of great achievement, but it's not. At this point in the twentieth century, abstract artists can look back, arm themselves with a vast knowledge of its accomplishments, taking what is crucial for the present and stake out a new territory in art. Instead, it is a time when most movements of abstract art are, for the most part, disguised repetitions of the past.

Going through countless galleries, countless times, by and large, it's clear there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of individuals who are either ignorant or are naive about the past achievements of the non-objective artists of this century. It seems they happily slop down paint oblivious to artists or movements preceding them. Their work is done in a "neo" context, according to critics and dealers, excusing it for the direct visual quotes they employ.

There is nothing wrong with being inspired by the work of past masters. That continuum is at the core of the history of all art. It is crucial though, for artists to realize their responsibility to a modernist tradition that strives

to push art and knowledge forward based upon the accomplishments of the past. What other reason can there be to paint if not this and the passion to fulfill an inner creative need?

The problem for artists who paint abstract art is compounded by the general resistance of the public and the dealers who, of course, find it a whole lot easier to relate to and sell art that has a "picture." This problem is not new, having been around for more than a hundred years. In the past five to ten years, though, it seems to have peaked. I think that a lot of the blame must go to abstract artists whose vision has been largely vacant. If a great movement were in the process of being put forth, I doubt very much the art world could have ignored it despite the huge quantity of readily accessible art.

What should be the point of painting in the latter part of the twentieth century? In the beginning, it made sense for non-objective art to arise in a world that was increasingly more modern and streamlined. Also during that time, art kept pace with technological achievements and reflected a more complex relationship of modern man to his environment and political situations. Even if there was resistance to the work, at first, by the public or even within the artistic community, there were enough reasons for the work to exist and enough individuals who were resolved to persevere, en masse, for their revolutionary beliefs. They had the righteous mission of defining the role of the abstract artist in the modern age. The problem today for abstract artists is that they sense no mission. They paint solely for the pleasure of being an artist and not much more. They have no movement, they have no statement about the time they live in. They resign themselves to the philosophy that "painting is dead" and that "everything has been done." It is sad and in the end they deserve what they get.

When I am in my studio, I think of many things. Most important, I try to figure out how to translate my vision of art into a physical state; one that fulfills my passions to make a powerful personal statement and one that has aesthetic relevance to other artists and non-artist viewers. Not only that, I am concerned with making a non-objective work that hopefully provides some new possibilities as to what could be. If I had a craving to do a series of works that I thought beautiful but did not go forward stylistically, I would not do them. It's a burden, but for me, being an artist has great responsibility and not just to abstract painting. It's to a host of things besides the tradition of art. It's to the spirit of discovery in science, philosophy, architecture, literature, etc. It's a sense of indebtedness to the passions of artists before me and to those to come. It just so happens that I live in a century whose greatest visual achievement has been the destruction of the classical notions of art. I have an obligation to pursue further this direction if only for the reason that an artist must reflect the time he has lived in. What else is the point of being an artist? Being one, cannot be a selfish endeavor. Great artists throughout time have left something behind. Whether the work I do will remain is not the point; it is living close to a philosophy that nurtures a lifestyle that gives hope to making works of significance that is important.

Artists of the time, who still believe in the modernist tradition, must evaluate their roles and judge whether the work they are doing is truly original and not selfish. They must ask if they are broadening the possibilities of a style of art that is increasingly being put down. A tradition of modernism is under attack and it is up to those who still believe in it, to resolve privately first and then later as a group, that there is still a *raison d'être* for abstract painting and that as a matter of fact, there always was.

# Turmoil in the Barracks

By Francesc Torres

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I was watching the TV news tonight and during one commercial interruption saw an ad for Coronet® , manufacturer of paper products (*papier au cul*, etc.), in which a grandmother, Rosemary Cloonie, lectures her grandson about the fact that in certain parts of the world people have no choice as to the appropriate paper products for their bodily functions. She asks the kid what he thinks of that and he answers that he would not mind visiting such a place, but he certainly would not want to live there. This ad seems to me the perfect exemplification of what Western societies, specifically the U.S., are coming to celebrate as Utopia: material abundance accompanied in equal part by lack of political ideology and social consciousness. (Yes, I turned twenty in 1968).

The moral bankruptcy of the historical Left has forced dialectical materialism to seek sanctuary in academic ghettos, creating an ideological vacuum that is supported by many people's conviction, conscious or otherwise, that Utopia ends where political gaming begins. In Europe, the Left has become parliamentary, acknowledging, *de facto*, that its original proposition of radical social change is not possible. By the same token, the regionalization and domestication of the labor movement has

decaffeinated its original revolutionary, internationalist character. We seem to be slipping into a world situation strangely similar to that of the 50 years preceding the first World War, when the energy of the people's discontent fueled either a Bakunin or a Bismarck, anarchy or nationalism. In our world, anarchy becomes terrorism, much of which (Irish Republican Army, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Al Fatah, and others) is nationalism, too, of the most self-righteous and vindictive kind. Toward the end of mobilizing social forces, nationalism offers quicker rewards than broader ideological humanism, for belief in revolutionary change is variable and cannot survive long without tangible results or the certainty of obtaining them in a foreseeable future. Thus, during World War I, an entire generation of men slaughtered one another for their countries with no clear idea of why. Stalin, too, thought it wiser to invoke "Mother Russia" and "The Great Patriotic War" instead of "Revolution" or "Proletarian Internationalism"—the better to prepare his countrymen to fight the invaders.

The tremendous impetus of the early revolutionary movement became a paradigm of change for many experimental artists of this century. The basis of Modernism was a changing world and nothing was changing it more rapidly than the worker's revolutionary movement. ("*Avant-garde*" is after all a military term, first appropriated by the Bolsheviks and later adopted by the Italian Futurists). I want to stress that I am talking about a referential model and don't mean to imply that all Modernist artists were either dialectical materialists or card-carrying Communists. The paradigm of revolution has since been shattered, not only by the gruesome and repressive excesses of Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao, but also by the metamorphosis of a vision of Utopia into one of State Capitalism, this necessitated by the strategies of the opposing block more than by its own ideological premises. The residue of the century we are now preparing to abandon is still too great for us to be able to perceive possible alternatives to its political legacy. In any case, a viable alternative must transcend the oppositional polarization of East and West, their respective 18th-century ideologies, and their mutual dependence upon the ultimate nuclear arsenals that function as artificial respirators keeping them alive.

Within a context of ideological vacuum and political expediency it is easy to perceive art as the last redoubt of intellectual freedom and experimentation. But an important qualitative shift has taken place within the general discourse on art. The talk these days goes more along the lines of being part of reflecting the dominant culture than of changing it. When change does occur, it is generally in formal or superstructural terms: drawing graffiti on the side of a building, painting on a wall, filling a space with an installation, in other words, *occupying* (and I use the word in its strategic, military sense) portions of the most valuable commodity of our large, urban centers, that is real estate, and deriving power by association from it, even if it is only a temporary power. This is one approach to being part of and reflecting the culture of the time; another extends to the culture's economic infrastructure. Until very recently, the Western *avant-garde* worked against this. Whatever has no place in the marketplace, however, is disregarded

and denied cultural relevance on the basis of its lack of economic leverage. Therefore, it falls on the shoulders of the artist who works with this end in mind, to create a viable economic context for his or her own work, as well as a system of distribution for it.

Illustrative of these two approaches is video art in its two major manifestations: single-channel video and video installation. The former is suffering, at present, from having failed in its frontal attack on the Winter Palace of mass-media communications, television. An art form that depends on a non-artistic, commercial distribution system is bound to collide with the grim fact that money talks and that the vast majority of its potential audience would not care about art if it knew what art was. Even a video artist's takeover of TV would not guarantee video a massive audience. The bottom line is not accessibility to the medium by either producer or audience; the bottom line is the cultural soup in which the audience at large is swimming and which permeates its ways of articulating what we could call creative leisure. That we see video art in very small doses on PBS is only the proverbial exception that proves the rule. Also, and not surprisingly, the illusion of intercourse between high and pop cultures has been promoted since the advent of music video, in the parameters of which form, gadgetry stands for art, hot air for content and massive success as the ultimate proof of righteousness.

Video installations, on the other hand, because the museum is their natural environment, in spite of the resilient horror electricitas of many institutions and the convenient misconception that video installations carry astronomical price, have fared slightly better, commanding gallery space and museum time and, as a result, have inherited a certain patina of artistic normalcy. The emergence of video installation, or, in broader terms, multi-media installation, as a viable and independent field, eloquently illustrates to what extent a completely new economic support system (comprising production funds and resources, artist's fees, grants, spaces, etc.) had to be created along with the form, the initiative for which came, by and large, from the installation artists themselves. Only time will tell whether this has more to do with the exigencies of setting up shop than with a critical questioning of inherited artistic and cultural values, expectations and norms.

If the dark suspicion of some is true—if radical change is not possible and if the inability (with the surrender of will that this implies) of creating socially relevant propositions has left the door open for the winds of a rejuvenated *laissez-faire* capitalism to sweep clean the art world and transform artists from visionary militants of Utopia into diligent citizens out to make a buck, there has never been so appropriate a time to realize it.

The current defusing of art's innate power by turning it into thoughtless spectacle sends a very important message to artists who think (regardless of whether their art has explicit political content) that a critical reading of reality is an intrinsic and necessary aspect of being active members of their community. For the first time the impact of art as an economic phenomenon—in a society moving from an industrial economy to a service economy—has been exposed in broad daylight. In this context, artists are



no longer only producers of highly desired artifacts for which there is great demand, but spearheads for urban colonization and real-estate development—actually carving out the marketable features of a city such as New York, for instance. Simultaneously, the numbers of jobs and institutions created around art (i.e., museum staffs, specialized press and writers, art educators, government agencies and alternative spaces) grow and solidify themselves in direct proportion to the health of the market. The infrastructural transparency of the art world gives artists the grounds to approach their own activity with more realistic and efficient analytical tools. This is important because historically (and paradoxically) the Left has always approached art in terms of purity and principle, while consistently neglecting its economic base (real or potential), thus denying art privileges that were attributed automatically to other areas of human endeavor in which labor, production and power relations were involved.

Finally, art is surfacing as an economic phenomenon as well as a cultural one, ultimately giving it more potential political muscle than it has ever before had. Art and Politics, after all, are closer travelling companions than they might at first appear. Both start out from intangible propositions that can only prevail by consensus or by imposition.

# Prometheus Ascending: Homoerotic Imagery of the Northwest School

By Matthew Kangas

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Recent research and the re-examination of much of the art of Mark Tobey (1890-1976), Morris Graves (1910- ), Guy Irving Anderson (1906- ), and Leo Kenney (1925- ), members of the so-called Northwest School<sup>1</sup> or Ecole du Pacifique,<sup>2</sup> have led me to propose that homosexuality is the hidden key to understanding the art of these four senior American artists. As discussed below, their art became a visual encoding system for a collective sequence of erotic symbols. Homosexuality not only explains Tobey's arrival in Seattle in 1923 in the first place—fleeing a failed marriage in New York—but also may explain his earlier 1918 conversion to the Baha'i World Faith, his subsequent male imagery for the next 30 years, and his eventual decision to go against his own promise to his Seattle patrons, Mr. and Mrs. John Hauberg, to leave his entire estate to the Seattle Art Museum (Hauberg was President) in return for the Haubergs' monthly cheques averaging \$1,000 over a period of roughly ten years. Love,

apparently, was a stronger force to the aging expatriate artist (he moved to Basel, Switzerland in 1967) and it was not until the death of his secretary Mark Ritter two years after Tobey's own 1976 death that the matter was resolved between the art museum, Ritter's heirs, and Tobey's sole surviving distant cousins.

The more one examines the art of Tobey, Graves, Anderson, and Kenney, the clearer it becomes that they were (and are) artists who variously expressed, repressed, and transmuted a homosexual sensibility into their paintings. The more one examines the critical literature surrounding these artists, the more it becomes evident that by and large this aspect has been completely ignored or suppressed in commentaries on their work by critics and assiduously concealed by themselves. This essay is an attempt to suggest the background for the hidden development of a gay iconography within Northwest art of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, to provide a hermeneutical template for viewing these works in this vein, and, finally, to determine why such an interpretation could add anything at all to the heritage of exhibitions and commentary about these artists. Since three of the artists are still living (Graves, Anderson, Kenney) and have refused to discuss these issues with the author, information is based on research, speculation, and conversations with other involved parties who agreed to be identified.

My goal here is not so much biographical as critical; nevertheless, there is a large untapped fund of anecdote and lore about these four that is a part of the history of the Northwest School and I have drawn upon parts of this where appropriate. It has been difficult if not impossible to determine what the precise relationships between them were but it is correct to say that Tobey was at least a decade older than the others and that the effects of his life and loves on his art is somewhat more clear-cut than for the others.

A case may be constructed that the presence of symbolic homosexual male figuration informed his art right up to his early acclaim in New York in 1943. As for Graves, Anderson, and Kenney, a comparable, if less precisely conclusive, case can be made by careful examination of iconographies within their *oeuvres*. What they all share is a submission to varying degrees of modernist abstraction directly in ratio to the rate of commercial success they enjoyed. That is to say, the more they were accepted in the mainstream art world both of New York and Seattle (not to mention San Francisco, Zurich, and Paris for Tobey), the faster their residual male figuration themes disappeared. Only Guy Irving Anderson, the least well-known of all, a recluse who retired to a small fishing village north of Seattle in 1925, has continued and strengthened an art of exclusively male-homoerotic imagery and today, at the age of 81, is the only remaining member of the group who could be said to have averted the pitfalls of success which caused the others to abandon an erotics of painting in favor of a decorative abstraction soundly based in the milieu of mid-century modernism—and postwar hospitality to sexual non-conformity.

It was a 1953 article, "Mystic Painters of the Pacific Northwest," appearing anonymously in *LIFE* magazine, that first grouped Tobey with Graves, Anderson, and Kenneth Callahan, the only non-gay member of the group.<sup>3</sup> Leo Kenney was already known to the group by the late 1940s but his long detour to San Francisco (1952-1959) cut him off until his return. By then, he had ceased most male-figurative work and was approaching modest success with gouche paintings of discs or "mandalas," though he detests the latter term. The *LIFE* article came over ten years after Graves' first New York solo show at the Willard Gallery. Tobey had first shown at Knoedler in 1917, and returned to New York with a show at Willard's in 1944. Much of their greatest work had already been painted by then and the author of the article chose to treat them as eccentrics of the Far West, gentlemen aesthetes immersed in Asian culture who were fusing, contrary to Kipling, the "twain" of East and West.

I would like to propose they were doing even more. They were using Asian art traditions and techniques as a palimpsest for building a gay erotics of painting. Asian art or the "look" of Asian art was the veil to pull over the pain of being homosexual in an alien unsympathetic culture. Their extensive travels as merchant seamen throughout the 1930s offered them more than exposure to art masterpieces and antiquities; it offered them more cosmopolitan and anonymous settings to express their sexuality. It is possible that Tobey had an affair in Seattle with the Chinese exchange student Teng Kuei in 1923 and that this friendship was largely responsible for his introduction to calligraphy (which he studied with Teng) and his subsequent stay in China with Teng's family in 1934.

Graves was a flamboyantly eccentric youth according to high school classmate and sculptor George Tsutakawa though Graves attended but never graduated from Broadway High.<sup>4</sup> He later shared a cabin at Deception Pass north of Seattle with a Japanese lover. Both created a Zen garden, spending weeks hauling huge boulders back and forth across the land until they had achieved the appropriate configuration. Tobey's and Graves' relationships with Asian-Americans or Asian visitors reinforced a muted, subtle eroticism in their work before 1941.

Whether Tobey's myriad sketches of truckfarmers and fishmongers in Seattle's Pike Place Market or Graves' self-portraits and first vulnerable animal pictures, both attained a delicate male figuration which disappeared almost entirely, shortly after their earliest New York acclaim. For Tobey, the crowded scenes of his New York paintings commented upon by historian Frederick Hoffman,<sup>5</sup> and the vast series of Pike Place Market sketches, gradually disappeared into masses of white tempera "calligraphy," the outlines of the bodies becoming the quick gestural strokes of the all-over fields so admired by critic Clement Greenberg at the time. For Graves, who freely adapted Tobey's tempera calligraphy as rock-covering in his early *Blind Bird* (1940), his gay sensibility made itself felt in the animal portraits which I choose to read as symbolic self-portraits of the "wounded," sensitive gay artist Graves.

The enthusiasm these artists felt for Asian art was not only fueled by their

travels and liaisons. Richard E. Fuller (1897-1976) was the owner, founder, and life-long director of the Seattle Art Museum. A descendant of Margaret Fuller and distant cousin of R. Buckminster Fuller, Dr. Fuller (as he was referred to since he had a Ph.D. in Geology) was also one of the top five Asian art collectors in the U.S. His annual trips to China, Korea, and Japan with his mother, the redoubtable Margaret M. Fuller (1860-1953), went on for many years, and continued after her death. Their generous offer of a \$2 million building housing their collection to the City of Seattle in 1932 set in motion the city's visual arts culture direction for many years to come—and also offered considerable employment to Callahan and Graves as curators, as well as an open-door policy to the Museum's collections for those artists whose work interested Dr. Fuller.

Richard Fuller did not marry until the age of 54 and though it would be heresy in Seattle to suggest he was homosexual, it is undeniable that he enjoyed or preferred male company, especially that of Tobey and Graves, and later Kenney. They were given *carte blanche*, had their work collected by him and his friends (Seattle's wealthiest families), entertained lavishly by their first and earliest patron, and given frequent exposure to the many masterpieces of erotic Hindu sculpture in Dr. Fuller's collection.

Fuller's sympathetic patronage antedated any New York acclaim and it seems clear he was completely at home with the male-figurative, pre-New York success work of Tobey though to be fair he remained a great supporter of the artist's later masterpieces as well. One cannot overestimate the effect his support had on his proteges either creatively or economically. The cohesive strong leadership with which he ran the Seattle Art Museum has yet to be equalled, as well as the copious concern and programming support he showed for local artists.

What constituted Tobey's erotic works and why might they be seen today as a suppressed or transferred stream of male or homoerotic images? First, Tobey's conversion to the Baha'i World Faith in 1918 set him on a track of universal spirituality, brotherhood of man, and utopian ideals perfectly suited to the ambience of international modernism being practiced and articulated elsewhere in the world at that time. The Baha'is, founded in Haifa, Israel by the prophet Baha'u'llah in 1863 have no priesthood, or rather they believe, to the recent consternation of Ayatollah Khomeini, in a universal priesthood holding that the divine resides within each individual. It may have been that the young Tobey was seeking a religion that could encompass his shifting sexual preference (within four years of his conversion his New York marriage began and ended in disaster).

Second, Tobey's so-called "priesthood" series of paintings of the late 1930s (*Rising Orb*), might be read as manifestations of an idealized world of male camaraderie and divine guidance. The flowing robes, the sumptuous use of gold paint, the crowds of muscled worshippers, and the purples and greens, combine with an intimate, Persian-miniature size to reveal a world of tense expectation, enigmatic rituals, and perhaps an idealized world of shared male leadership.

Other American artists of the period dealt less obliquely with homosex-

ual figuration, or male and female figuration, as seen by homosexual artists. Historian and curator Elizabeth Armstrong has pointed out how Paul Cadmus' work, for example, satirized U.S. army and navy recruits home on leave.<sup>6</sup> Their rippling biceps and bulging crotches represent the extreme opposite of the gay erotics of the Northwest School where everything was hushed, blurred, and colored with dour grays and browns. Similarly, as critic John Perreault has demonstrated, Marsden Hartley's late-period portraits of Prince Edward Island fishermen constitute an Expressionist handling of male desire and longing for the male.<sup>7</sup> And we know from his posthumously published novel *Cleophas* that several of the paintings were based on men Hartley had formed attachments to within the members of the family with whom he lodged. Some were lost at sea and Hartley created memorial portraits.

More to the point perhaps are the Neo-Romantic works of Pavel Tchelichev (1898-1957), and Eugene Berman (1899-1972). Tobey's pastel self-portraits show his hair streaming in green and purple, his face fully made-up with pink and blue eyeshadow, and his eyes large and provocative. Evoking the Neo-Romantic dream world even more acutely, however, Leo Kenney has spoken of his admiration for Tchelichev and Berman. In his own work he captured their qualities of quasi-Surrealist settings, raked stages, formal gardens, and dark nighttime grottoes (Kenney, *The Priestess*, 1942). Ambiguity of gender is a strain that runs throughout Kenney's and Graves' work and acts as another code or sign that the non-macho and perhaps male or female figure is actually a male homosexual, or analogue for the artist himself.

Guy Irving Anderson treats this differently in that his figures are not of uncertain gender at all—genitalia are always evident though flaccid, passive, and meant to be observed. Rather than walking through Kenney's dream world of surrealistic theatre, his nighttime stage for the actor in women's clothing, Anderson's figures are asleep, dreaming a Jungian world of circular shapes, meditation signs, and cosmological origins. As such they constitute one of the more remarkable but little remarked-upon bodies of 20th-century American art. For forty years, Anderson's sleeping male figures have accumulated into one of the most sustained exercises in voyeurism in American art. Resting, sleeping, dreaming, or stretching, his models—mostly friends from his fishing village of La Conner, Washington—are the vehicles for the artist's purported search for universal mythic symbols of origins, evolution, and tragedy. On another level, though, they are focuses of admiration, reverence, desire, and control. As with the other artists under discussion, Anderson's sexual orientation made itself felt in ways that are not readily or immediately apparent. Once one examines their art along these interpretive lines, however, chains of imagery are revealed which reinforce a view of homosexual culture as a forum for the exotic, the divine, and the occult. By quirk of historical circumstance, geographical isolation, and enlightened institutional patronage, what would have been shunted to the side as off-beat or bizarre in more highly developed visual arts population centers became mainstream in Seattle. Indeed, the qualities of Ander-

son's art—pancultural, exotic, divine, occult, and erotic—as well as that of Tobey's, Graves', and Kenney's, became the chief elements of the Northwest School style. Yet it has never been commented upon or noticed that Northwest School painters evolved their "mystic" sensibilities in tandem with their evolution as gay artists. Put another way, it has never been recognized that the mainstream style of one branch of regional American art was essentially a gay style, created by gays, and operating on a symbolic level of meaning in addition to the more open and popular interpretations of mock-Asian stylistics and cozy ecological awareness.

Tobey's English hiatus (1930-38) at Dartington School, a progressive arts institution in Devonshire, England with long-standing ties to Seattle's Cornish Institute where Tobey occasionally taught, produced hundreds of male figure drawings, lithographs and paintings. He was a frequent observer of dance and life-drawings classes. The anatomy of these exclusively male figures is often exaggerated: massive thighs, huge biceps, Greek-like curly hair. Tobey's homoerotic idealization of the male figure is confirmed by an examination of the artist's library, part of the posthumous estate settlement left to the Seattle Art Museum and disposed of by Donnally Hayes Books of Seattle. There were several volumes of elaborately illustrated Swiss, Italian, and German-published books such as Ernst Buschor's *Plastik der Griechen* (Piper, 1958), Nevio Degrassi's *La Scultura Greca* (Novara: Atheneum) and Wegner's 1955 *Meisterwerke der Griechen* (Basel: Holbein).

Examining the contents of Tobey's library also reveals publications associated, sometimes amusingly, with gay sub-culture reading. For instance one finds Benjamin Morris' *The Sexually Promiscuous Male* (Monarch, 1963), Marcel Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (inscribed to Tobey by his lover Pehr Hallsten, 1897-1965), and a pulp paperback cookbook published in 1937 by G.P. Putnam's Sons, *For Men Only* by Achmed Abdullah and John Kenny. As the dustjacket states, "*For Men Only* will appeal to all men who cruise and camp or who simply feel an urge to express themselves in this most ancient of arts."

Tobey's sustained series on the male figures fall into two or three rough categories: his commissioned portraits of Seattle scions of the 1930s and 1940s like *Paul McCool* and *David Stimson*; his drawings from Dartington; his "priesthood" series; and his drawings of denizens of Seattle's Pike Place Market which number in the hundreds, mostly clothed figures of the working class. To this one may add his several self-portraits done over 60 years. As suggested above, several of these are very unusual and suggest Tobey tried on different identities (and genders) through the self-portraits recalling his own self-description as a "reformed fashion illustrator."

While it may be that, seen as a modernist continuum, all Tobey's figurative and representational work was preparatory to his abstract or tempera calligraphy period, it is crucial to remember that, as William C. Seitz<sup>7</sup> among others pointed out, residual representational elements remained a constant in Tobey's art throughout his life. Gradually, though the bodies and faces may have disappeared, the white lines remained and

eventually predominate the images themselves. It is as if Tobey, the devout Baha'i, spent his early years (1920-1940) depicting various aspects of male figuration—nudes, portraits, self-portraits, figure groups—in a way that emulated or paralleled the Baha'i teachings about the interconnectedness of humanity regardless of beliefs, race, religion—and sexual preference. By 1940, this achievement gave way to a more purely spiritual quest using abstract linear elements to imply rather than literally embody this unity of mankind. The success of Tobey's white tempera calligraphy was superseded by Graves' New York success using it representationally in such well-known works as *Blind Bird* (1940) where the tangled calligraphic lines are used as a lichen or moss-covering for the rock under the animal.

Graves' blind birds—images of extreme vulnerability—carried forth the shift among the loose-knit group away from human figuration toward a sublimated or symbolic figuration. Tobey's "priesthood" paintings had presented a paradigm of spiritual camaraderie among men—robes, rites, and rippling muscles. Graves turned inward toward the alienated individual (himself?) and the natural world as a metaphor for humanity. He used hedgehogs, birds, fish, and pine trees as analogues for the non-rational instinctive self expressing both his sincere interest in ecology and as a vehicle for his view of a world at war which was inherently hostile to innocent beings. His own internment as a conscientious objector at Camp Roberts, California reinforced these views made clear in the paintings shortly to follow. One may posit at the same time his sense of vulnerability as a gay male given his awareness of the general social and cultural disapprobation of homosexuality in most American cities.

Nevertheless, some evidence of more explicit homoerotic overtones exist, as with Tobey, in Graves' self-portraits. *Self-Portrait* (1933) (Seattle Art Museum, gift of Mrs. Max Weinstein) is a particularly revealing work. With arrogant chin uplifted and hooded eyes, young Graves stares at the viewer in front of a sumptuous pink background spread onto a rough burlap ground. There is a mixture of strength and delicacy, of *provocateur* and tastemaker, that perfectly captures an enigmatic artist so frequently described later in his career as "reclusive" or "lone." Graves, like Kenney, has been associated by critics (including Greenberg)<sup>8</sup> with Neo-Romantic artists of the period and both he and Tobey were classed as "surrealists" in one of the earliest books to comment on their work, Fernando Puma's *Modern Art Looks Ahead* (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1947). Using this matrix, coupled with Leo Kenney's admission of his affinity to Tchelichev and Berman, one can argue that Graves, too, subordinated an explicit male figuration to a dream-like nocturnal imagery of wounded birds, pine trees in storms, and seemingly animate rocks. Though recent efforts by critics Theodore Wolff and Ray Kass<sup>9</sup> praising Graves as an artist in tune with the natural world to an extraordinary degree, I still care to argue that an entirely additional level of meaning exists in Graves' iconography, that of the symbolically veiled or transmuted "innocent" male being, either as an analogue to the artist's self, or as a symbolic code for the "wounded" ego of the male homosexual lover.



As early as 1933 Graves' commitment to male figuration was apparent. *Morning* (ca. 1933) could be a nude self-portrait, more likely a portrait of a male companion the "morning after." The figure is stretched out, deeply asleep (foretelling Kenney's and Anderson's sleeping figures 20 years later) with a muscled arm thrust between the sleeper's legs. It is even possible the figure is Guy Anderson himself for, as Graves told Frederick S. Wight in 1956:

I threw in my lot with the painter Guy Anderson and we improvised on life . . . In the spring (of 1934) Guy Anderson and I got a twenty-five dollar truck which served as a camp and a studio—and a life of drift and adventure began. We took six months going to L.A. in the truck . . . We lived by occasional hay harvesting or berry-picking. At that time we were deep in the Depression—many buildings were abandoned, with much or little of their furnishings left behind, and we collected antiques.

Within five years, though, Graves was painting animals almost exclusively. The shift away from the painful personal realities use of the human figure implied toward the suppressive symbolic use of vulnerable flora and fauna had begun. As Graves told Wight, "the bird is a symbol of solitude, the shore, of the environment of childhood." Nevertheless, an examination of Graves' *oeuvre* suggests that pairs and multiple animal groups or vegetal images continued to offer examples of possible homoerotic subject matter. For example, *Each Time You Carry Me This Way* (1953) is an especially tender image of cross-species companionship with a walking bird carrying a minnow in its beak. The implications are not only of the natural world but of a world where the strong assist the weak or vulnerable and the title has an amusingly romantic tang. Other pictures of "young" forests, "young" pine trees (e.g., *Joyous Young Pine*, 1943) have unmistakable similarities to clusters of erect phalluses and the pinecones themselves are literal repositories of seeds to be scattered to the wind for regeneration and reforestation. The pictures' exuberant colors, by comparison, and their many bulging vertical forms suggest that Graves was still pursuing a private subject matter even more than was commented upon at the time. *Young Forest in Bloom* (ca. 1950) is another example of this transmuted sexual symbolism. For Graves, who, as a Zen Buddhist, saw little separation between the animal and plant world, such a transference would have come easily, perhaps unconsciously but apparent all the same.

Though it may very well be that the initial impetus for the "wounded" series was the conflict of World War II, it is also likely that the works symbolize the artist's own "wounded" psychological state. *Wounded Gull* (1943), *Wounded Scoter*, *Wounded Ibis*, and *Bird Maddened By The Long Winter* may all be seen as alternative manifestations of the artist's mental state. Though Graves was never literally wounded in World War II, he was forcibly inducted into the U.S. Army at his parents' Richmond Highlands, Washington home and detained at Camp Roberts, California until honorably discharged for mental reasons (he verbally rejected the "honorable discharge" at the time). His letters of the period to dealer Marion Willard are extremely pessimistic and are clear indications of the artist's disillusion.

sionment with the world, threats to stop painting altogether, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The death of Sherrill Van Cott in 1943 must also have been a blow since he and Graves may have been lovers. As he told Wight, "He (Van Cott) saw my paintings in Seattle and sent me a note. We took to each other. He saw things the way I saw things." Though a "heart condition" is given by Wight as the cause of Van Cott's death, other sources who would not agree to be identified have suggested a suicide. His art, which deserves a full study of its own, either owes much to Graves or was a little-known influence upon the slightly older artist.

Graves' work of the past 10 years has been mostly floral in subject matter and though Ray Kass has compared the still lifes to Zurbaran, there is little of the muted psychological despair or urgency that characterizes the best of Graves' earlier period. The only residual sexuality or figuration may reside in the so-called *Tantra Yantra* paintings (1982) in which a single vertical row of white and faintly colored discs parallels the anatomy of the human body. It is as if the artist has attained a purity of purpose in old age even with regard to a subject he has always tended to treat obliquely, the male figure.

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Another artist's work—two or three paintings in particular—provides an illuminating footnote or addendum to any analysis of Morris Graves. Leo Kenney is the third artist under examination here who began using the male figure early in his career and who, as modest success arrived, completely subverted or supplanted it with modernist abstraction. Utterly self-taught and shy of a high school diploma, Leo Kenney is barely known outside the Pacific Northwest. His art had close parallels to Surrealism and the gay Neo-Romantics of the late 1930s, Berman and Tchelichev. In one of his first interviews, he sidestepped a question about influences with "I hardly know. A painting may start out with a very simple idea then grow before it is finished." Nevertheless, both Graves' early impastoed oil male portraits and his later circular-disc tempera abstractions seem two paradigms for much of Kenney's own style. Besides his widely popular disc paintings which began after 1962, Kenney's work tended toward a figurative, nocturnal Surrealism or, as he told critic Tom Robbins, "I am compelled to restate and celebrate the mysteries."

Writing in the 1968 catalog for Kenney's only New York exhibition<sup>12</sup> (at Graves' dealer, Marion Willard), Robbins (who also wrote a definitive monograph on Anderson) pointed out that the "nature (of Kenney's) drama cannot be specifically identified." I wish to propose here that a more specific meaning to Kenney's "dramas" may indeed be identified. *Seeker: To David Stacton* (1968) is a highly abstracted frontal view of a male figure. Two approximate rectangles enclose disc-shapes where heart, navel, and phallus could be schematically located and a vertical form at the base anchors the composition. According to Robbins again, the picture is "the human figure—the solar plexus, that hungry ghost that feeds the heart—allowing consciousness." This is in keeping with Kenney's and Robbin's preference for a Jungian or archetypal analysis of Kenney's art and yet upon further examination several of the artist's tempera paintings evince a more direct

representation of male sexuality and form.

*Sleeping Seed* (1966) is an evocation of human sperm, for example. It is delicately and decoratively painted in order to conform with the artist's statement that in his art "the message is about beauty and harmony." And, as mentioned above, the nocturnal tableaux of the late 1930s and 1940s depict ambiguously gendered individuals, either sibylline women or possibly, as with Tobey's priesthood series, men in women's clothing.

Another painting, *Voyage For Two* (1953), makes more explicit Kenney's erotics of ambiguous gender. Two heads are seen in profile touching lips. The overlay of white tempera traces an intricate nerve pattern in and around their skulls suggesting mental and spiritual "activity." When questioned about the specific sex of the figures in 1985, Kenney's response was that "I used to think they were male but now I think it's a male and female."<sup>13</sup> Regardless of such divagation, the work has an etiolated eroticism that borders on the morbid.

Finally, moving backward from the suppressive modernism of his late years to the most forthright figurative statement of his young manhood, *Dreamer Reclining* (1949) links Kenney to his colleagues Graves and Anderson and makes explicit once again how a gay erotics of painting was sacrificed to the external pressures for the growing prestige of the Northwest School. Reproduced with the 1949 Seattle newspaper interview,<sup>14</sup> *Dreamer Reclining* is neither reclining nor necessarily a "dreamer." A tall male nude is lying prone with well-formed buttocks raised, almost in presentation to the viewer. Manet's *Olympia* (1863) seems a more apt analogy, a distant antecedent though, because one cannot see the nude's entire face, the provocative stare of Olympia is replaced by the unembarrassed position of the posterior. In one painting, Kenney has captured the mid-point in the history of the Northwest School. Coming respectively twenty and thirty years after Graves' and Tobey's male-figurative periods and roughly 10 years before Anderson's own long sleeper series, Kenney's painting represents the final phase of his own male-figurative period. The erotic charge of the sleeping figure has much of the voyeuristic quality inherent in the other artists' work but one must especially recall Graves' sleeping figure in *Morning* (ca. 1933) as a specific forerunner. Both artists' paintings surely became inspirations for the only member of the Northwest School who did not forsake male figuration in favor of modernist abstraction and ensuing success, Guy Irving Anderson.

Anderson's art deserves a full study of its own. For our purposes it may be seen as a long succession of "reclining dreamers" positioned above, on, or around large white discs, or floating in a womb-like heaven. The artist's determinedly pancultural statements alluding to the Chinese, Mayan, and Northwest Native Art sources for formal elements belie the continuously erotic nature of his treatment of the male figure. In addition, many of Anderson's vaunted pancultural formal devices may be seen as fragments of erect or rising phalluses. Together, the lambent male figure surrounded by rising phallic forms comprise a series of oil-on-tarpaper paintings remarkable in their muted but unmistakable eroticism. He, alone, of the

artists under discussion here has maintained, developed, and constructed a gay erotics of painting over a lifetime. That there are spiritual or ecological references in Anderson's work, too, is true. And an examination of Anderson criticism reveals only a few writers sensitive to the additional levels of meaning underlying his art. David Berger, for example, writing about three gay artists exhibiting in Seattle, Galen Garwood, Wayne Douglas Quinn, and Guy Irving Anderson, commented that the latter's "male nudes express a kind of mythic oneness with nature, but also, in a much quieter way, they evoke the human intellect. For example, *Reading in the Rocks* shows a male nude with a book, an entity of thought surrounded by the swirling abstract forces of impersonal nature."<sup>15</sup>

Regina Hackett, reviewing a 1984 exhibition, observed how "in these (magnetic, tactile fields) generative humanoid figures freed from the laws of gravity, pivot and turn, attracting or repelling each other according to the vitality of their bodies."<sup>16</sup> She also commented on how unconvincing Anderson's female forms are, rather "like Michelangelo, they often look like men with breasts."<sup>17</sup>

*Whither Now, Angel?* (1944) is the consummate early Anderson. Locked in a foreshortened Cubist space, the writhing muscled figure occupies the upper third of the oil-on-canvas. There is a sense of sexual anxiety present with the figure covering his eyes with his forearm and a large "diaper" partially covering what seems to be a huge phallus roughly dead-center on the canvas. It could be that Anderson over the ensuing forty years answered the question the title asks. His "angels" ascended toward states of transcendent ecstasy, caught floating in a circumscribed universe of darkness and intermittent light.

A double-museum retrospective in 1977 at Seattle Art Museum and the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery<sup>18</sup> assembled over fifty of the artist's works and three themes clearly emerged: the presence of the male figure as an erotic symbol, a participant in some mythic-generative scene, or a focus for voyeuristic activity; the gradual transformation of the male body into an abstracted curving phallus which often surrounds other full figures in a kind of erotic wrap (*Escaping the Pendulum*, 1969-70); and the development of the white disc as a multi-purposes symbol above which the reclining figures stretch or sleep (*Floating Figure with Mask*, 1975). This could be a moon or sun, a womb or underground tomb, or in keeping with an erotic analysis of Anderson, a monumental anal orifice. It becomes the area of some of Anderson's most loving paint application and has freed him, in old age, to subordinate the figure to a more cosmic aim, the indeterminacy of the circle, the transfixing of the viewer's gaze onto a hole of nothingness, the perpetuation of a shape that harks back to the search for the sublime Tobey instigated as early as 1920 and which he passed on to Graves, Kenney, and Anderson. Just as Tobey, Graves, and Kenney all seem to ultimately revert to or arrive at the circular shape, so Anderson developed his own roseate orifice. Though some may see this as the triumph of formalism over figuration—and I have held here that for the most part, this was true—Anderson's use of the circle seems to forestall

such a charge. It emerges gradually out of his geological landscapes of the 1950s and 1960s and it operates always in tandem with the single or multiple male figure residing above it. Indeed, it may be the subject of the figure's dream: white, rosy, spiral, centered, and large enough to contain many interpretations.

For the Northwest School, sex was an integrated part of life, one of its insensate mysteries, because of their immersion in Buddhist and Tantric lore. As with the Hindu and Tibetan painters, sex was expressed through an elaborate system of geometric symbols, chiefly the circle placed over the outline of the human body. As Western artists, they also had at their disposal the entire tradition of European figure painting. It is at the concurrence of these traditions that their art occurs.

One painting, *Prometheus* (1982), sums up the tradition of gay erotics within the Northwest School and suggests what a close synthesis of the others Anderson's art has been, all the while evolving into his own individual style. The dreamer figure—by now a code for the voyeuristic male model dating back to Tobey—rests atop the "world," or the disc, the other element shared by all four. Covered with white paint, it harks back to Tobey's white tempera calligraphy, and the covering of the rock under Graves' blind bird. Here, for *Prometheus*, according to the Greek myth, it is a rock, too, a plinth for the act of suffering he must endure over and over. It comprises three-quarters of the tall, nine-foot oil-on-tarpaper. The curves surrounding the head create reverberation patterns similar to *Whither Now, Angel?* The body is abbreviated into head, limbs, and genitalia. The animated brushwork, however, ignites the picture as a whole and gives the figure almost a sense of weightlessness or motion. It is *Prometheus* at his moment of deliverance, about to ascend to the gods. Painted when Anderson was 76, it is indicative of a state of exultation and release that one rarely finds in the art of the others.

Guy Irving Anderson, the sole survivor of the gay "mystics" to retain the figure, has painted works which will unravel their meanings more clearly when seen in the context of the preceding discussion. To root his art in a heretofore unrecognized tradition of homosexual imagery within a branch of American regional art is to connect it at the same time, however, to not only the art of his colleagues but to a rarely commented upon strain of gay European art—Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Beardsley, Salome, Lucian Freud, and Francis Bacon. It is also a way of suggesting how oblivious mainstream modernist criticism of their work has been to this issue. The fact that they all—except Anderson—dropped the male figure in favor of formalism or animal imagery has not made the task of resurrectionist criticism any easier. And there remain the other, more minor figures of homosexual imagery within Northwest art whose achievements also deserve consideration and re-examination: Sherrill Van Cott, Malcolm Roberts, and Howard Kottler, for example.

For the time being, I have tried to begin such a project with what may seem to some a radical re-reading of the Northwest School but one which I am convinced is firmly based upon historical background, the works

themselves, and the hermeneutical imperative from which all interpretive criticism must proceed.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The first recorded use of this term is in Harris K. Prior, *Ten Painters of the Pacific Northwest*. (Utica, NY, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1947). The most recent use is in William Cumming's *Sketchbook: A Memoir of the 30s & The Northwest School* (Seattle, Wa., University of Washington Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>"L'ecole du Pacifique," *Cimaise*, no. 7 (June, 1954).

<sup>3</sup>"Mystic Painters of the Northwest," *LIFE*, 35 (September 28, 1953): 88.

<sup>4</sup>Graves later finished high school in 1932 in Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick Hoffman, "Mark Tobey's Paintings of New York," *Artforum*, 19 (April, 1979): 24.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Armstrong, "American Scene as Satire: The Art of Paul Cadmus in the 1930s," *Arts Magazine*, 68 (March, 1982).

<sup>7</sup>William C. Seitz, *Mark Tobey* (New York; The Museum of Modern Art, 1962).

<sup>8</sup>Clement Greenberg, "Morris Graves," *The Nation*, 155, (November 21, 1942).

<sup>9</sup>Ray Kass and Theodore Wolff, *Morris Graves/Vision of the Inner Eye* (New York, Braziller 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Frederick S. Wight, *Morris Graves* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1956).

<sup>11</sup>Kass and Wolff, p. 36-37.

<sup>12</sup>Tom Robbins, *Leo Kenney* (New York, Willard Gallery, 1968).

<sup>13</sup>Conversation with author, June, 1985, Seattle, Washington.

<sup>14</sup>Suzanne Martin, "Counterpoint," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 8, 1949.

<sup>15</sup>David Berger, "Male nudes present a special problem," *The Seattle Times*, November 28, 1984.

<sup>16</sup>Regina Hackett, review of Guy Irving Anderson at Francine Seders Gallery, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 15, 1984.

<sup>17</sup>Conversation with author, February 21, 1986.

<sup>18</sup>*Guy Anderson*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum and Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington, 1977. With essays by William Ivey, Tom Robbins, and Wallace S. Baldinger.

Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

By David Craven and Colleen Kattau

In the last decade, a number of authors have sought to reclaim the historically extensive yet consistently overlooked relationship of women to the arts. Since Linda Nochlin's ground-breaking essay in 1971 "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" considerable attention has been given to the gender-based values linked to art, as well as to the accepted notion of artistic "greatness." A significant new contribution to the current assault on historical amnesia is the anthology titled *Feminism and Art History*. Like feminism itself, however, the collection of 17 articles contains conflicting viewpoints concerning what a feminist critique should address. Some of the writers merely insert rediscovered women artists into a liberalized version of the mainstream approach to art history—an approach which is based on positivism. Other authors mount a systematic theoretical critique of the mainstream view in order to demonstrate why the issue of women as artists (like those of class conflict and access to political power) cannot be adequately addressed by means of this conventional framework for history, whether liberalized or not. To understand both the gains of feminism in leftist art criticism, and also the reason for the present cleavage within feminist art criticism itself, we need to locate *Feminism and Art History* within the larger issue of feminism proper.

It is hardly by chance that the terms "féminisme" and "socialisme" were invented about the same time by the same group of people.<sup>1</sup> From the late 18th century until the latter half of the 19th century, equality between men and women was almost exclusively a political aim of the left. Indeed, as has been noted by Germaine Greer about the position of French artist Jacques Louis David in the French Revolution, "The artistic training of women became a revolutionary cause."<sup>2</sup> Starting with the writings of *philosophes* like Condorcet<sup>3</sup> and continuing through the first feminist manifesto by Olympe de Gouges in 1791 on up to the nineteenth-century tracts by utopian socialists like Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier, feminism—or complete equality for women—was a concept that indicted the established social order.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, with the writings of Marx and Engels the call for an egalitarian society for *all* people gained greater theoretical force and more political urgency. They realized that there can be no *general* liberation of humanity without independence for women and equality between the sexes. When he transformed Fourier's moral injunctions on behalf of feminism into a category for his own rigorous critique of history, Marx wrote: "From this relationship (between men and women) one can therefore judge man's whole level of development."<sup>5</sup>

Only during the late 19th century did feminism break up into two major trends embracing a number of different tendencies: liberal reformist feminism, on the one hand, and socialist feminism, on the other. The split

which developed within feminism around the turn of the century was often vigorously emphasized. Coalescing around the issue of suffrage then (and E.R.A. now), the reformists advanced only piecemeal changes that adapted feminism to capitalist society even as they sought to make the system more fair. Concerned with political rights rather than economic freedom, and equal pay instead of equitable control over the means of production, the liberal reformists have treated sexual oppression as little connected to class exploitation. Yet, as Alexandra Kollantai once noted, "The world of women is divided, just as is the world of men."<sup>6</sup> As such, one obvious contradiction has undermined the liberal reformists. They have advocated equality for all women without first addressing the existing inequality among women.

It was precisely the middle class orientation and separatist tendencies of liberal feminists that caused socialist feminists like Helen Keller, Alexandra Kollantai, and Emma Goldman to criticize the rise of reformist feminism in the second half of the nineteenth century. With characteristic candor, Emma Goldman noted how most suffragists hardly affiliated with working class women: "The American suffrage movement has been, until very recently, altogether a parlor affair, absolutely detached from the economic needs of the people."<sup>7</sup> According to the socialist feminists, what the reformist feminists desired was not so much wrong as inadequate, because their desire for voting rights was naively divorced from an understanding that the locus of political power was also within the economic formations of society. To seek one without the other is to get neither. Nothing underscores more the incisiveness of the socialist feminists than the continued existence of inequality for women after the success of the suffragist movement. In her celebrated study *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir reaffirmed and updated the socialist feminist critique of reformist feminism, with the conclusion:

According to law, obedience is no longer included among the duties of a wife, and each woman citizen has the right to vote; but these civil liberties remain theoretical as long as they are unaccompanied by economic freedom.<sup>8</sup>

While *Feminism and Art History* contains much original research and some new ideas, this anthology is characterized by the same internal conflicts as feminism in general. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard are apparently unaware of these contradictions, however, since they erroneously present all of the articles in this collection as having a common purpose. This collective aim is purportedly a novel way of broadening the discipline of art history by "expanding its boundaries to include new ways of looking at its subject,"<sup>9</sup> without really addressing the origin of this "subject" and the ideological basis for it. Unlike Carol Duncan and Natalie Kampen, the two socialist feminists with articles included in this collection, editors Broude and Garrard have only a very rudimentary awareness that feminist art history could lead to "the alteration of art history itself." Nor do they ever act on this elementary observation substantially because of the way they deal with both feminism and history.



At first, feminism is defined by the editors as “the historical discovery of women,” as if there were not many ways to explore history, all of which are value-laden and class-based. In the concluding section of their lengthy introduction, though, Broude and Garrard divulge their own basically positivistic basis for this “historical” discovery by claiming that a feminist perspective on the art will mean the elimination of biased and “subjective judgments.” Thus, the more perfect “objectivity” of feminism (never mind the “scientific” pretensions of mainstream art history) will permit us to experience artworks “more nearly as they were originally meant to be experienced.” In relating what they consider a significant consequence of the new feminist art history, Broude and Garrard place themselves in a contradictory position—a position which paradoxically reflects their own personal desires to take sides ideologically and yet their methodological failure to do so for fear of not being “above” ideology. On the one hand, they deny the possibility of art history predicated on “pure, aesthetic, ‘universal’ values,” based as they are on “patriarchal” views. On the other hand, they untenably claim that one of the articles opens the way to a “universal female art, transcending race, class, and national borders.” Instead of repudiating the a-historicism of mainstream art history, Broude and Garrard simply wish to recycle it. Rather than confronting the neutral style fallacy of established art historical studies with an approach both more self-reflexive (i.e., grounding subjectivity in self-criticism) and more rigorously researched, Broude and Garrard simply make the same claims to “objectivity” as their presumed academic adversaries. As such, Art History is still the “transcendental” enterprise of granting aesthetic pedigrees to a few *art object-makers* only this time women—some women, that is—have been incorporated into the canon of enlarged greatness. It was precisely this approach that art critic Griselda Pollock had in mind when she recently noted that mainstream feminism has simply produced an “alternative method of appreciation—another way of consuming.”<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of the articles by Duncan and Kampen, much of *Feminism and Art History* has little to do with history, except in a very restrictive form that “indirectly” connects with the art being considered. This truncated concept of history upon which several of the studies are based is presented in the “Introduction” by Broude and Garrard. History—all of history since writing was invented (from 3,000 B.C.)—is simply presented under the monolithic heading of the “Patriarchal Period.” Just as the articles cover the art from ancient Egypt to 1980s New York, so Broude and Garrard present us with a linear continuum of unremitting male domination in which a few great women (Pharaohs in ancient Egypt, Queens in the Medieval Period, Artistic Geniuses since the Renaissance) have creatively resisted only to have their heroic achievements overlooked by the male dominated discipline responsible for writing about them. As such, their concept of history is entirely linear and the impetus for it revolves around the individual heroines who have periodically arisen. Needless to say, with the sole difference that we are now dealing with heroines rather than heroes, this narrow framework is nothing more than

a new version of the “great man” theory of “history” that underlies all the mainstream discussions of art. Yet as Rozsika Parker stated in her critique of one “great woman” account of how women artists had to overcome more difficult barriers than their male counterparts: what we need to examine is not the obstacles to success, but the rules of the game that determine this success.<sup>11</sup>

To treat the last 5,000 years of history as “the Patriarchal Period” is to engage in a glib reductionism that all the major feminist studies from Simone de Beauvoir to Juliet Mitchell have explicitly denounced. The theoretical implications of locating women within, rather than just adding them to history, means much more than adopting gender categories as a fundamental part of historical analysis. A prerequisite for such an approach involves the knowledge that “the forms of male dominance vary historically and cannot be assimilated under the general rubric of patriarchy.”<sup>12</sup> It also would incorporate the latest anthropological and historical findings of June Nash, Eleanor Leacock, Mona Etienne, and others, who have clearly established that many pre-colonial and pre-capitalist cultures in North and South America, as well as Africa, had a much greater degree of parity or “parallelism” between the sexes than was to be the case after international capitalism penetrated these cultures.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a major consequence of capitalism has been the generalization of a gender hierarchy based on the ideological promise of public individualism and domestic dominance as consolation for the elimination of earlier freedoms and cultures. Furthermore, such a feminist approach to history would start with the recognition that a historical understanding of one gender can be accomplished only in relation to the other so that “separatist” histories of women not only naively distort the necessary interdependence of all history, but also leave women prisoners of precisely that pernicious status of otherness to which mainstream art history has assigned women.

Any incisive critique, then, must address the historical situation of women and art as conjunctural. This will necessarily entail discussing woman’s condition as a complex intersection of several factors *variously* constituted at different periods in history. Consequently this will mean rejecting the deduction of woman’s history merely from the economy and the consequent symbolic equation of this condition with society as a whole. The key historical determinants composing the contextual field within which women interact are the spheres of production, reproduction, sexuality, and socialization.<sup>14</sup> Specific combinations of these components help compose the complex unity of woman’s situation, yet each component may have reached a different level of sophistication at any given time. As such, each element must be examined in an interdependent and empirically precise way in order to illuminate the overall historical context. When such a context is properly located, it is then possible to proceed with a much more penetrating consideration of: the degree of access to art for women in general, the nature of patronage they have confronted, the formal and thematic traditions in which they have worked, as well as the individual concerns they have brought to art. In this way, it will be easier to under-

stand both the dominant values (ideologies) women face and the individuality of their responses to them.

One article in the anthology which fails to treat the issue of women in art as part of this conjuncture of various factors, but settles instead for the "great woman" theory of History, is Claire Richter Sherman's "Taking a Second Look: Observations on the Iconography of a French Queen, Jeanne de Bourbon (1338-1378)." Sherman attempts to discover the important status and role of the Queen within the French monarchy by examining the illustrations of the Jeanne de Bourbon cycle found in the Coronation Book (1365) and other iconographical examples. Through these ceremonial depictions and an interesting but undeveloped reference to the feminist medieval writer Christine de Pisan, who detailed "eye witness" accounts of Bourbon's activities as queen, Sherman calls for the recognition of the influential public power Jeanne Bourbon and other French queens possessed. She relishes the moral and religious duties assigned to Bourbon, whom she labels the "feminine model of the highest order," as significantly contributing to French society. Unfortunately, Sherman's narrow perspective on feminism, which only feebly acknowledges women's often ignored role in history, never prompts her to analyze the prescribed nature of the values associated with these "royal" duties nor to look at the completely hierarchical centralization of power connected to being a queen. Of course, the queen suffers relative oppression insofar as she is subordinate to a king, yet at the same time she has a position of domination over all other French women, as well as most French men. In Sherman's entreaties to look to this select group of women for cultural achievements, she necessarily follows the same exclusionary practice that she seeks to criticize about conventional art history. Neglecting to question extensively the class and gender relations that are obviously at work here as cultural determinants, the article serves only as an addendum to existing art historical studies and thus neither broadens the discipline, nor provides any real insights about *women in general*, specifically their relationship to art.

Similarly, Madelaine Millner Kahr's essay, "Delilah," deals with this Biblical heroine's popularity throughout 400 years of European art, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the psychological symbolism of the evil or seducing female. Kahr discusses the varying artistic treatments of the Samson and Delilah theme from Old Testament illustrations through the paintings of Rubens. She intersperses her consideration with a tentative interpretation of the sexual power relations implied in the works and ultimately argues that the unconscious psychological conflict and fear or women in erotic terms is a driving force behind some artistic creation. She acknowledges that male artists define Delilah in erotic terms, as well as identify woman as mother, oral satisfier, and source of sexual weakness. Yet she does not extend her discussion of these social relegations as a form of sexual domination any further, thus leaving us with the conclusion that this behavior by man is "natural." A more penetrating critique of art would perhaps lead to insights such as that of Griselda Pollock:

The hidden sexual prerogative of masculine appropriation of creativity as an innate attribute of that sex [since the Renaissance] is secured by the repeated assertion of a negative, an "other," the feminine as the necessary point of differentiation and lack.<sup>15</sup>

Not only do myths such as Samson and Delilah, or Susanna and the Elders, as discussed in an article by Mary Garrard, serve to maintain a gender hierarchy, they also reinforce the institutionalized nature of art ideology inextricably bound with social, political, and economic factors. Kahr does not move beyond obscure psychological forces to identify why the Samson and Delilah theme was used so frequently during the 16th and 17th centuries. Although she does show how it is linked to Christianity, particularly to the Crucifixion and Christ's redemption, she does not venture into the social position of the feudal Papacy at a time when feudalism itself was undergoing a fundamental restructuring. Had she done so, new light would have been shed on the meaning of these myths within an expanded social context involving the new impetus toward state absolutism and centralization, whereby art reproduced or legitimated these new historical developments. Thus it is essential to examine not only the topical meaning of themes represented in art, but also to ask why the themes themselves were of deeper significance. It is one thing to discuss the popularity of subjects, but quite another to deal with the more profound reasons for their popularity at a certain moment in history. Kahr, like a conventional art historian, attempts only the former.

In many regards, Carol Duncan's essays are exceptionally fine examples of a socialist feminist approach to art criticism. Duncan's analysis strikingly differs from other essays in *Feminism and Art History* precisely because she departs from the traditional issues of individual greatness, formal advances, and topical popularity. She moves into a broader concern with the class mediation and ideological complexity of art to give her inquiry greater scope and meaning. In "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in Eighteenth Century French Art," she explicitly outlines the changing historical situation and thought of bourgeois society that led to and simultaneously was reinforced by glorified new depictions of middle class family life in French art. Focusing on the "cult of motherhood," whereby middle class women were encouraged to internalize maternal desire (in the nuclear family) as their definitive role, Duncan points out the psychological needs of a new bourgeois order dictating this occurrence. These ideas of the family and childhood expounded by Rousseau and Diderot, and given visual expression in the paintings of Grueze and Fragonard, for example, were not illustrative of the current social reality, but conveyed ideals of different social relationships to come. She eloquently adds richer significance to 18th-century art through an incisive feminist art criticism by pointing out both women's social progression as pivotal point of the burgeoning nuclear family and their simultaneous social confinement within the rigid roles that these ideas required. As such, her discussion of paintings by artists like Grueze locates this art in, but does not reduce it to, a broader historical discourse. Significantly this art of the family is

seen as part of a historical dynamic in which the restriction of sexual expression for women was accompanied by an expansion of formal conjugal equality for women, with the resulting paradox giving rise to the possibility of further historical progression in future gender relations.

In another rightly celebrated article, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Painting," which is also included in the anthology, Duncan rigorously examines the ideology of vanguardism in German and French Expressionism. She is able, as a result, to show how some of the ideologies intrinsic to this art (particularly as related to the "nature" of creativity and the "natural" relationship of men and women) are in fact nothing more than mystified replications of the orthodox ideas whereby capitalism is explained and defended. What emerges from Duncan's article is a new and much more profound sense of the inner contradictions expressed by some of the major paintings at the turn of the century. Here also, as in her other article and in that of Natalie van Kampen's, the reader is faced with a penetrating glimpse into the paradoxical character of *Feminism and Art History*.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Both terms were coined in the second quarter of the nineteenth century by the Utopian Socialists. "Socialisme" first appeared in the Saint-Simonian newspaper *LeGlobe*, around 1832. "Féminisme" was first used by Charles Fourier, circa 1841, in the second edition of his *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* (Paris, 1841).

<sup>2</sup>Germain Greer, *The Obstacle Race*, (London, 1979), p. 298.

<sup>3</sup>See K.B. Clinton, "Femme et philosophe: Enlightenment Origins of Feminism," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, VIII, No. 3, Spring 1975 and Jane Abray, "Feminism in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review*, LXXX, February 1975. In 1787 the Marquis de Condorcet became the first person to integrate civic equality for women with the Enlightenment ideology for future progress.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Fourier wrote: "The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation." See Fourier, *Théorie Des Quatre Mouvements* (Paris, 1808) in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. 1, 131-133 (Paris, 1846).

<sup>5</sup>Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, tran. by M. Milligan, New York, 1964, p.134. For an incisive critique of Marx and the utopian socialists, see Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *New Left Review*, No. 40, December 1966, or Mitchell's *Woman's Estate* (New York, 1972) which incorporates this earlier material into a longer study.

<sup>6</sup>Alexandra Kollantai, "Towards a History of the Working Women's Movement in Russia" in *Selected Writings* (New York, 1977), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>Emma Goldman, "Woman Suffrage," in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, 1917 (New York, 1969), p. 207. Goldman specifically cites what she feels is Susan B. Anthony's antagonism to labor. Susan B. Anthony's position toward labor was more one of ambivalence, than antagonism, however. Anthony did found a Working Woman's Association of printing trade employees (craftswomen, not wage-laborers) in 1868, and was their delegate to the National Labor Congress. Nonetheless, in her most famous speech "Woman Wants Bread, Not the Ballot!" (1870), Anthony naively argued that working men, because they could vote, were not dominated by capitalists. She therefore concluded that working women only needed the ballot to be liberated. See Meredith Tax's *The Rising of Women* (New York, 1980) for a look at class conflict within feminism of this period.

<sup>8</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. by H.M. Parshley (New York, 1974), p. 755.

<sup>9</sup>Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Feminism and Art History* (New York, 1982), p. 1. This and all other quotations by Broude and Garrard in this section are from "Introduction: Feminism and Art History," *Feminism and Art History* (New York, 1982), pp. 1-17.

<sup>10</sup>Griselda Pollock, "Women, Art and Ideology," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring-Summer 1983, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup>Rozsika Parker, "Breaking the Mould," *New Statesman*, Nov. 2, 1979, 682, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup>Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History," *New Left Review*, No. 133, May-June 1982, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup>Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, *Woman and Colonization* (New York, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 1966.

<sup>15</sup>Griselda Pollock, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

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