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# Art Criticism



# **Art Criticism**

Art Department  
State University of New York at Stony Brook  
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# On Painting, the Gaze, and Lacan

By Michael Peglau

Red in the East, the fertile light, the flayed  
bright water in the canebrake, quivering  
flesh of the air alive over the limber reed.  
Robert Bringhurst<sup>1</sup>

The gaze, or the look, a term central to what Martin Jay has called “the anti-visual paradigm” of recent French thought,<sup>2</sup> stands as a key if often unarticulated idea in much contemporary writing on painting in English. Apart from Norman Bryson’s interesting but problematical treatments of the gaze,<sup>3</sup> and the thoughtful consideration Richard Wollheim gives to it,<sup>4</sup> the term has received little sustained and careful discussion. Instead, in much art criticism, whether the term is stated or is merely implicit, its use trades on a vague negativity and can refer to many different modes of visuality, from the various construals of Heidegger’s *Vor-stellung*<sup>5</sup> to the voracious, consuming thrust of Lacan’s *le regard*, to simply the culturally inflected leers and Medusen stares which curry much trouble between men and women. What I propose in this essay is to consider what I find most relevant to painting in Lacan’s seminars “Of the Gaze as the *Objet Petit a*.”<sup>6</sup> While I am quite aware that Lacan’s project is scarcely centered on

painting, I am convinced that he locates the gaze in relationship to important psychological material and that this material in part suggests a basis for painting's great power and equally why painting is so troubling to the verbocentric thinking which shapes much contemporary art writing. In particular, Lacan understands painting as a necessary Apollonian structure between consciousness and the predatory, largely unconscious sweep of the gaze. Yet he also understands painting as descended from the gaze and thus, in some sense, informed with the gaze's irrational vitality and compulsive power; a power and a vitality, I will add, that finally trouble Lacan. Near the end of the last of the seminars on the gaze he speaks of painting as hypnotic, satisfying an innate voracity of the eye; and thus painting, descended from the gaze,<sup>7</sup> must be symbiotically related to this voracity and the unconscious ubiquity of the gaze. If indeed all painting is informed at a fundamental level by such irrationality, most uses of language, except poetry, skirt that ground. And certainly that art criticism which has been developed from post-structuralism, with good reason, finds painting inimical.

Lacan's treatment of the gaze is distinctly hermetic. On one side the hermeticism is a direct consequence of the emphasis Lacan places on the transformational play of language and particularly on the interstices or lacunae of that play as an access to the unconscious. It also follows from the elusive interface his principal terms enjoy and from the complexity of his topology, where there is no clear structural scheme or focused and dominant point of view. That is, in attempting to speak for the unconscious Lacan invites into his psychology a plurality of meanings, a refusal of definition, a symbolization and detachment of body parts and a cryptic transvestiture of basic psychoanalytic terms which can properly be called hermetic.<sup>8</sup> On the other side, the hermeticism seems a function of the gaze itself. In Sartre's famous discussion in *Being and Nothingness* the unexpected and the sudden are decisive factors in encounters with the gaze, as are also reversal and disappearance.<sup>9</sup> Each may announce the presence of the gaze or be particularly prominent in the experience of it. As Lacan points out, such traits remove the gaze from the strictly interpersonal terrain where Sartre locates it and instead place it properly as an aspect of the unconscious.<sup>10</sup> Lacan adds tellingly to such traits by speaking of the gaze as essentially elusive, as that which "slips" or "passes" vision either in relation to things or in "figures of representation."<sup>11</sup> He further says of the gaze, that not only does it elude vision but that in so far as consciousness may understand itself as vision it "escapes from the grasp" of such viscosity.<sup>12</sup> This point, which suggests how the gaze simply shears past a structure like perspective, suggests further that Lacan's interest in painting is very much with what might be called the obverse or latent aspects, which all too typically are inadequately discussed if they are at all mentioned.

The hermeticism that Lacan identifies with the gaze not only removes it from being the gaze of another person and places it as some manifestation of the unconscious but forces the question of its origin. Not surprisingly, Lacan locates it as the visual aspect of one of the prime terms of

his system, the *petit objet a*. In Lacan's system the *objet petit a*, or the *objet a*, as he variously calls it, stands for the unsatisfiable desire for the mother, that is, not for the mother herself or as an unconscious object, but for desire and its orbit about the unattainable object. Thus the *objet a* indicates fundamentally the absent object and the separateness of the subject; it stands therefore for the unrealizable goal of union with the mother, and so further indicates the insufficient or damaged condition of the subject.<sup>13</sup> These ideas, which Lacan evidently in part took over from Melanie Klein,<sup>14</sup> place the gaze as a manifestation of the vanished but omnipresent time of early childhood that progressively repressed epoch screened off by the sequential separations of birth, weaning, toilet training, the acquisition of language, and the castration complex. The gaze therefore in no way coincides with consciousness; rather it underscores how little consciousness actually masters vision, and indeed how much in the visual field is beyond the comprehension that consciousness or, better, any exclusively verbal construction may bring to it.<sup>15</sup> The gaze further marks how the seen, ordinary world is not simply in an inert, objective relation to the individual, but limned with the repressed and so continuously implicative of the insufficiency of the individual:

The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely the lack that constitutes castration anxiety.<sup>16</sup>

The gaze, in short, not only skirts the threshold of consciousness, it is tethered to the nether side of that which in Lacan's scheme constitutes the far horizon of consciousness, namely, castration anxiety. Within the visible the gaze threatens to carry the subject into a domain where consciousness would be disassembled, or disassociated. Such disassociation, the way in which consciousness framed in the visible can suddenly be overwhelmed or fragmented, suggests how the gaze can show itself in the most innocuous arrays, in any field or within whatever open space, in the shadow or the highlight or the surface of any thing. In this ubiquity the gaze is a threat to any distinction founded in language and, in Lacanian terms, to the organization of the subject through the symbolic. The gaze thus calls up the way the unconscious can transmute an ordinary thing into something uncanny and, indeed, the way in which the depiction of the ordinary can take an unanticipated density of significance—how in Velazquez's *Mercury and Argus* a fustian felt hat can freight such stealth and malevolence that it is as though Mercury's face.

In Sartre's account of the gaze, a key point is the gaze's power to reverse perspective,<sup>17</sup> as though the gaze somehow poured itself along the rationality of the grid or inverted some optical apparatus. For Lacan the gaze does not merely disorganize perspective but, as I remarked above, is fundamentally alien to perspective. As Lacan rightly points out, perspective is a method for mapping space but is inadequate as an accounting of sight, particularly to sight invaded by the gaze.<sup>18</sup> There the gaze is found in a "play of light and opacity,"<sup>19</sup> shimmering and spread out before one with

all the metamorphic variability of the visible. Thus the fundamental experience of the gaze is not the gaze of another person but of falling under an uncanny looking, rising out of the animateness of the world, a looking which evades the rational grid of perspective as easily as it slips past the rationality of any grid what so ever.<sup>20</sup> The disjunctness of the gaze is given by the incompatibility of its locus in the unconscious to consciousness understood as explicitly structured by perspective, to consciousness as the Cartesian *cogito*. The incremental and homogenous outreach of perspective, with its explicit project of quantifying distance in relationship to a single fixed geometrical point, can no more grasp the gaze, or allow the gaze to be seen, than can that out-reach map the affectivity of an introjected object. In its alienness to perspective and in its stress on the unconscious, Lacan's understanding of the gaze is antithetical to the various descendants of Heidegger's *Vorstellung*, such as Foucault's Panopticon.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in so far as the gaze might chance into such grid-determined views of the world, it does so only obliquely and emblematically, as Lacan's remarks on the anamorphic skull in Holbein's *The Ambassadors* indicate:

Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated—annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imagined embodiment of the *minus-phi* [ $(\Phi)$ ] of castration, which for us, centers the whole organization of the desires through the framework of the fundamental drives.<sup>22</sup>

Castration is embodied through the resemblance Lacan detects between the anamorphosis of the *momento mori* and an erection—the anamorphic elongation of the skull is as though a depiction of a phallus. This similitude allegorizes the gaze, which like an apparition is glimpsed through the overlay of emblems. While Lacan does not develop the issue, such an emblematic overlay is suggestive of other glimpses of what can be understood as unconscious contents projected into the image by either the beholder or the painter. This experience, which is common enough and often poorly discussed, is structurally given in a broad range of painterly painting. It is also a familiar experience within the endless variability of the visible, where suddenly, without one's willing, something seems to configure itself, say in a noon time wood. Such glimpses suggest the resonance of painting to dream and fantasy, and a profound similarity of the variegated surface of painting to the unending variability of the visible.

Following Merleau-Ponty, Lacan points out that we not only encounter such metamorphoses within the world but are ourselves part of that mime-ridden tissue.<sup>23</sup> Thus, while one looks from the place one is, one is looked at from all sides; this looking is not necessarily or primarily from other eyes. Rather, like other animals we are marked to invite the gaze. Such marking, which Lacan variously calls "the stain," "the spot," "the screen," not only invites the gaze but also situates us, as though through mimicry, into the endless mottled spectacle of the visible.<sup>24</sup> In this we are taken out of the context in which we might ordinarily "picture" ourselves: we come under the transformative sway of the gaze, and the landscape we just saw

becomes something other. While within the domain of painting such miming and such transformation are structurally antithetical to the lightless map of perspective (a mapping, incidentally, which was subordinate to the interplay of light and shadow in even that painting where it was deployed),<sup>25</sup> they suggest a deep analogy to the spotted, broken quality of some painterly processes. One may think of how the touch in the late works of Titian, or in certain Pollocks or certain late Monets, solicits or even mesmerizes one, how the touch enacts the interface of light and the thickness of the seen and incarnates the unintelligibility of the combustion between light and what it engages. Or one might recall how the touch sets forth the uncanny iridescent space within the perspectival hall of Tintoretto's *The Finding of the True Body of St. Mark*. Lacan, as we will note later on, chooses to speak about Cézanne's touch in relationship to this "descent of desire," this inhabitation of the gaze in painting.<sup>26</sup>

While the individual is beckoned by the gaze out of the iridescence of the visible and while the painter's touch may structure a semblance to that iridescence, the painting itself is not simply an incarnation of the gaze. Rather a painting is "a trap for the gaze," in the sense that the interwoven arbors of the visible act also as traps.<sup>27</sup> More precisely, Lacan understands painting as a lure, an enticement for the gaze.<sup>28</sup> The painting does not directly capture the gaze of the onlooker; instead Lacan claims that in offering "the eye something to feed on" the painting allows the onlooker to lay down the gaze as "one lays down one's weapons."<sup>29</sup> The exception to this "Apollonian" and "pacifying" quality is expressionism, which offers "a certain satisfaction of what is demanded by the gaze."<sup>30</sup>

However, two implicit questions arise. First, how is it that any painting actually subdues the gaze? Second, if the facture of any painting is informed by the gaze, as Lacan states, would not any painting offer something to the gaze? Lacan attempts to finesse these questions by distinguishing between the gaze and the eye on the basis of a parallel to the Phallus and the penis. The eye, like the penis, is an organ which, despite its physiological functions, never locates that which motivates the drive to look, "the scopic drive," anymore than the penis finds in its sexual goal "the phallus."<sup>31</sup> Rather both are doomed by castration to participate in an endless perignation driven by desires orbiting about the *objet a*. Painting thereby is a surrogate, gratifying the eye and standing as a lure for it; painting also acts as a baffle between the eye and the gaze. The eye and the gaze do not coincide in a painting; rather the painting acts as a kind of screen or a mask beyond which is the gaze.<sup>32</sup> Presumably a painting effectively mediates between the eye and the gaze in so far as it does not utterly incarnate that "play of light and opacity," that "space of light," which gives rise to the gaze in the world. Lacan, in short, is making an argument about painting's relation to "the scopic drive" which is parallel to the familiar argument of painting being sublimated anality,<sup>33</sup> but he leaves the precise mechanism of the gaze's sublimation unspecified. What is most striking in Lacan's argument is that painting must be understood as a crucial defense against the gaze. As such, if I may invoke a central issue in Freud's

*Civilization and its Discontents*, painting may be thought of as a fundamental structure in the edifice of culture.<sup>34</sup> In short, painting's primary function is not ornamental; instead, it is a necessity toward "taming" the gaze.

For Lacan, *trompe-l'oeil* is the paradigm of painting's capacity to control the gaze. *Trompe-l'oeil*'s efficacy, however, is not that it seamlessly mimics that to which it refers; rather, its efficacy arises from its seeming to be other than it is. Structurally, like all other painting, *trompe-l'oeil* stands between the beholder and the nether region of the gaze, the painting's other side, so to speak. In deceiving the eye by appearing to be continuous with the ordinary adjacent to it, *trompe-l'oeil* at once is able to allow the eye independence of the gaze as it also brings the eye upon an artifact while pendant, like all painting, to the gaze. Thus, *trompe-l'oeil* entices and deceives the eye; its allure consists not so much in the inveiglement of the eye by the image as by the gaze.<sup>35</sup> Lacan illustrates this inveiglement by retelling Pliny's famous story of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios, where Zeuxis's painting of grapes attracts birds. Parrhasios's painting of a curtain prompts Zeuxis to ask that it be pulled so that he might see the painting behind:

If the birds rushed to the surface on which Zeuxis had deposited his dabs of colour, taking the picture for edible grapes, let us observe that the success of such an undertaking does not imply in the least that the grapes were admirably reproduced, like those we can see in the basket held by Carravaggio's *Bacchus* in the Uffizi. If the grapes had been painted in this way, it is not very likely that the birds would have been deceived, for why should birds see grapes portrayed with such extraordinary verisimilitude. There would have to be something more reduced, something closer to the sign, in something representing grapes for the birds. But the opposite example of Parrhasios makes it clear that if one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is a painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it.<sup>36</sup>

Lacan's demarcation between his fictions of the paintings is precise and canny. Zeuxis's effort is spare and sign-like, not in any sense adequate to the brilliant virtuosity which, say, distinguishes the *Bacchus* of Caravaggio. But evidently Parrhasios's painting is of an even greater virtuosity. Moreover, it is distinguished by the remarkable conceit of seeming to be a veil protecting a painting. It achieves not merely a verisimilitude for things, but is so convincing in its deceit that it invites an actual course of action. Put another way, one painting appeals to birds because it corresponds to a coded pattern which signal "grapes" to them. Zeuxis, however, is deceived not merely by the verisimilitude of the veil, but by the fact that the virtual but apparently real veil is situated in a circuit of desires and acts: it invites the seemingly innocent question, what is behind it? Zeuxis may be thought of in relation to the spying, eaves-dropping, non-thetic "I" of Sartre's account of the gaze;<sup>37</sup> without his knowing it, Zeuxis is caught in a circuit of action whose locale and character pends from the gaze. In being thus ensnared, Zeuxis falls not merely for the artifice of the painting,

but into a zone of fantasy that includes him, the painting, and that which may be imagined as behind or beyond the painting. The artifice of the painting therefore is the absolutely necessary support of the fantasy which, so to speak, exists on both sides of its artifice. The fantasy, in short, requires the disarming factitiousness, the convicting deceits of the paintings achieved virtuality, to enjoy any immediate and unnoticed hold on the beholder. It further requires the permeability of that virtuality to thrust the beholder over and without the beholder's knowing it into the inviting spell of the gaze. In all of this Lacan's discussion closely parallels a profound but in the modern era largely forgotten rhetoric of painting. Following David Summers, it can be called "sophistic."<sup>38</sup>

Lacan, as one might expect, opposes his "sophistic" sense of *trompe-l'oeil* to Plato's well known complaint against the seduction of painting, a complaint which, especially in its moralizing implications, is again fashionable. Lacan of course is not about to pause over the moralizing aspect of Plato's argument; rather, it is Plato's claim that appearance is an inadequate version of the Idea which offers him an irony;

The picture does not compete with appearance, it competes with what Plato designates for us beyond appearance as being the Idea. It is because the picture is the appearance that says it is that which gives appearance that Plato attacks painting as if it were an activity competing with his own.<sup>39</sup>

Lacan touches here on a fundamental condition which underlies the power of naturalist painting, not merely the limited case of *trompe-l'oeil*. The work rises out of a complex dialogue between the painter, the exigencies of the image, the conventions inflected and followed in the image, and that which is depicted in all of its otherness and particularity apart from the image. But when the painting is completed and removed from the context of its making, the image indeed gives the appearance within the locale of the painting, or, in works which are singularly compelling—such as Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*—within a great circumference of seeing, remembering, and knowing. Nothing more blights the claims of the Ideal than the affecting and sensuous reach of such an image. For example, the characterizations of the figures—from the inverted bovine face of Marsyas, his eyes shaped by shock, to the sly, mouth-agape levity of Pan, whose manner suggests a lusty delight in the event—possess a primacy, a specificity and a force within the image which is impossible for ordinary writing or speaking to convey, though poetry is another matter. These painted figures cannot be reduced or transformed to something else, no matter how lucidly idealized, without defacing the image and thus, as Plato would, effacing its power. That power springs directly from the fervent, relentless embodiment of many tiers of fantasy,<sup>40</sup> from the exacting long incision Apollo makes with such calm focus to the tiny, greedy dog lapping blood fresh from that incision, from the humid and yet restlessly incandescent landscape to the inwardness of Midas, his eyes averted and his crown slid up and behind the asses ears Apollo awarded him for preferring satyr's music. Next to Midas a child satyr, his eyes dilated with fear restrains a large dog,

who appears to pant and to drool, his visible eye glinting with an avidity like that in the eyes of Pan. The warm, fetid light on the little satyr's shoulder is closely paralleled by the same light in contra-posto on Apollo's shoulder and on that of the hard eyed Phrygian hunter who has parted the goat hide of one of Marsyas' legs. To the far left Marsyas' friend Olympus,<sup>41</sup> won over by Apollo's music, holds a viol; his uplifted eyes are wide and stunned and painted with the open darkness of the shadows in the foliage. As these different figures and their differing points of view in part configure the scene, the landscape also "looks" upon it and us. The beholder is not only a witness to this event but at risk to the fantasy latent in any filament of paint marked into this image. For those frightened of the gaze as Lacan frames it, a painting such as *The Flying of Marsyas* is far more to be condemned than Parrhasios's curtain, for the uncanny is alive in the eye-ensnaring richness of every touch.

The palpability of such a painting, the grasp its fantasy can have upon the beholder, suggests an analogy to dreams, and although Lacan does not pursue it, an analogy implicit in his discussion of the gaze. The dreamer is subject to what the dream shows; that is, the dreamer is carried by the fantasy of the dream not unlike a beholder rapt or lost in a painting. The dreamer is as though someone who does not see in the sense of seeing where the dream is leading, or what lies behind it.<sup>42</sup> Akin to the absorbed beholder, the dreamer is immersed in the images, the mood, the texture of fantasy in the dream. Like the beholder, the dreamer is subject to the power incarnate in the seemingly oblique but sensuous showings of the dream, to its apparently utter gratuity, alive in the figures and things and often condensed silently into the background. Like the spell of a dream the thrall of a painting is given by the force and the sensuous evocation and seeming actuality of its images. The virtual reality of either leads the subject into the realm of a reality of another sort, uncanny and limning the images. The suspended dreamer and the rapt beholder are sustained by the vividness and the actual play of the virtuality of the dream or the painting, a virtuality born of gratuity. Neither in the face of such gratuity—which I would suggest is also a kind of grace—is capable of taking up the self-apprehending consciousness of the Cartesian *cogito*. Such a centered self-representation, the claim that "*I am the consciousness of the dream,*" or the consciousness producing through apprehension in this painting, is lost to the course of embodied but virtual fantasy, to "a gratuitous *showing*" which Lacan calls "the essence of the gaze."<sup>43</sup> In being caught, in being in either "picture," the dreamer or the beholder falls in with a world whose substance, affects, and course is not theirs.

Lacan limits his discussion of this "gratuitous showing" in painting to asking after the origins of the painter's touch, the paint stroke. In separating that showing from the imagistic material proper to it, he not only disembodies the facture of painting but exposes a fundamental weakness of his psychology and a way in which it is utterly different from Freud's: Lacan avoids the fateful particularity of images, and of fantasy. As with Holbein's *Ambassadors* he is at pains to reduce them to the abstemious peculiarities



of his central terms; but in so doing he forecloses other possibly more searching lines of interpretation. In speaking of the origin of the painter's touch Lacan invokes Merleau-Ponty's memorable essay on Cézanne, and particularly its point that in some crucial sense Cézanne's art was already given and beyond the painter's conscious volition.<sup>44</sup> Thus for Merleau-Ponty the deep, sustained deliberations of Cézanne's painting procedure are not simply questions of choice and intention on Cézanne's part, but are also given in multiple distances Cézanne's rather schizoid temperament imposed on his work. Lacan, however, rather incautiously generalizes Merleau-Ponty's point:

What occurs as these strokes, which go to make up the miracle of the picture, fall like rain from the painter's brush is not choice, but something else. Can we not try to formulate what this something else is?<sup>45</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the gratuity of the painter's brush is "the first act in the laying down of the gaze." The key term for Lacan in this "laying down" is "the gesture." Lacan distinguishes it as unwilled and in opposite to "the act," a term he does not explicitly define. "The gesture" gives

a new and different meaning to the term regression—we are faced with the element of motive in the sense of response, in so far as it produces, behind it, its own stimulus.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the painter's gesture, like much in Lacan's thinking, is a riddle whose end is its beginning: the movement of the brush ends up producing what prompted it, a regression to the introjected objects and the unconscious wishes occasioned by them, the *objet a* and desire. For Lacan, therefore, "the gesture" is shaped through the unmediated presence of unconscious wishes; it is distinguished from "the act" by its termination in its origin, the desire sprung from and organized by the unconscious. In asserting that "the gesture" is the chute for "the descent" of the gaze and of desire Lacan also borrows a prime tenet of the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, a tenet of considerable naivete:

It is by means of the gesture that the brush stroke is applied to the canvas. And so true is it that the gesture is always present there that there can be no doubt that the picture is first felt by us, as the terms *impression* or *impressionism* imply, as having more affinity with gesture than with any other type of movement. All action represented in a picture appears to us as a battle scene, that is to say, as something theatrical, necessarily created for the gesture.<sup>47</sup>

Lacan's stress on kinetic imprint as the prime experience of painting, and on the corollary that painting is foremost a theater for the display of gesture, invites demoting the significance of any other aspect of the image. Thus qualities as different yet interrelated as color and the psychological ordering of narrative can be suppressed as inconsequential, or as some kind of hindrance to the proper business of gesture. Similarly, whole orders of meaning, such as reference to a shared and socially articulated world or

the depiction of fantasy as distinct from desire prodded through gesture, can—under such a reductive understanding—invite being labeled as false and ideological. Even the kinetic qualities of touch as they might be understood apart from unconscious motivation can be shunted aside. In fact, Lacan supplants painting as virtual and seen with a notion of it being known fundamentally through touch as the unmediated emissary of the unconscious.

Lacan, surprisingly for someone steeped in the code-riddled literature of linguistics, ignores the basic issue of convention and the exigencies of pictorial structure in order to maintain the immaculate “descent” of desire into painting. Surprising also, particularly for an analyst, is the avoidance of any question of resistance, repression, or inflation in this “descent of desire” through “the gesture.” Likewise, what interference or interrelation intention may have with “the gesture” goes unmentioned. While Lacan speaks of the “*little blues, little whites, little browns*” of Cézanne, the careful, searchingly deliberative labor evident in those patches of color and so frequently mentioned both by Cézanne and those who knew of his methods, does not in any way qualify how essentially, how utterly for Lacan those discrete touches carry the gaze.<sup>48</sup> That Cézanne’s work might have other telling relationships to unconscious material, as Schapiro,<sup>49</sup> Badt<sup>50</sup> and others have argued,<sup>51</sup> or that his work and stated intentions obviously center on the complex problems of describing nature, in no way seem to limit the comprehensive significance of the gaze, “the gesture,” and “desire.” Instead, one is asked to subscribe to the notion that Cézanne, like all other painters, “operates by remote control,” a control whose locus is the operation of the gaze through the “descent of desire” at the end of which is “the *showing*,”<sup>52</sup> which if not the naked display of the gaze is primarily informed by the gaze. Thus, for Lacan the work of any painter is fundamentally a manifestation of unconscious demands, or as he dryly states, “a sort of desire on the part of the Other.”<sup>53</sup> Just what characteristics of a painting might save this “Other” from being simply an abstraction, an implicitly ideal agent authoring the painting and mirroring the void of its ideality there, is not raised as an issue. Similarly, those qualities which might compellingly mark “the gesture” as the location of desire’s “descent,” and in particular distinguish one gesture from another, are left simply as the gratuity of the brush. Indeed, if the ensemble of the gaze, desire, and the *objet a* are primary to painting, the basic questions of how and why paintings might meaningfully differ, either within a tradition or in competing or merely different traditions, are given over to what can be parsed out from the Lacanian algebra.

Lacan, having constricted painting to a flat tableau where only “the gesture” is necessary to the image, must face the question of what appeal such painting could possibly have. His answer not surprisingly is that painting gratifies a compulsion. What is surprising is the way in which he presents that gratification. He identifies what he calls “some appetite of the eye” and asserts that it “must be fed.”<sup>54</sup> This projection of an appetite to the eye is not, as one might first think, a figurative usage. For Lacan

the appetite, the craving is actual, and as he says points to the “true function of the organ eye, the eye filled with voracity, the evil eye.”<sup>55</sup> To substantiate this “true function” Lacan turns to a lower hermeticism; he attempts to use superstition as argument:

It is striking, when one thinks of the universality of the evil eye, that there is no trace anywhere of a good eye, an eye that blesses. What can this mean, except that the eye carries with it the fatal function of being in itself endowed—if you will allow me to play on several registers at once—with a power to separate. But this power to separate goes much further than distinct vision. The powers that are attributed to it, of drying up the milk of an animal on which it falls—a belief as widespread in our time as any other, and in the most civilized countries—of bringing with it disease or misfortune—where can we better picture this power than in *invidia*?<sup>56</sup>

While there are any number of common phrases in English, such as “fond gaze,” “benign look,” “charitable glance,” “smiling eyes,” “kindly eye,” or even, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” which limit the sweep and vitiate the spell of “the evil eye,” French may be another matter. Yet whatever the wealth of anti-visual phrases in French, Lacan like a credulous believer in disaster-crossed folklore, seems to have found evidence contradicting his most daunting apprehensions safer to ignore. The “several registers” of “the fatal function” of the eye depend on the humbug of ascribing hexing and spell-casting to the eye itself, and then believing that such lore is substantiated in the actual processes of vision. The eye by itself, of course, does not see nor does it loose serpents, toss daggers, or wither udders. That Lacan seriously invokes the eye as a powerful source of dangerous magic, as a malevolent artifex launching its divisiveness catastrophically into the world, suggests more than credulity on his part. For certainly the eye here has more in common with a split off and highly troublesome complex than any true cat’s paw of mischief.

Lacan tries to bolster this legerdemain by introducing the latin word, *invidia*, (envy), which he ties etymologically to *videre*, (to see).<sup>57</sup> However, to think that *invidia* reveals the true and essential character of *videre* again personifies vision—Lacan’s telling ignores the fact that, say, to invite has the same etymology—and projects onto language incantatory authority. Once more Lacan does not balk at such Odylic saying. He retells the story St. Augustine tells of how, seeing his brother sucking at his mother’s breast, he looks at him with such bitterness that it seems to tear the child to pieces and then to rebound on Augustine as a poison. Lacan is at pains to distinguish between *invidia* and mere jealousy, and certainly the animosity projected by Augustine has a hallucinatory vividness suggesting a far more profound derangement than jealousy.<sup>58</sup> Rather, Augustine’s animosity is charged with all the annihilatory power of those negative fantasies which Melanie Klein so accurately describes in her work on early childhood.<sup>59</sup> But Lacan is willing to traverse yet another hermetic ellipsis to avoid placing such fantasies in specific psychological conditions and processes, for he wants to spin a thread from Augustine’s *invidia* and the

hallucinated reach of its bitter look to the demonized sense he has of the gaze as voracity conjured by the *objet a*:

Such is true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the *petit a*, the separated *a* from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction, *Befriedigung*. It is to this register of the eye as made desperate by the gaze that we must go if we are to grasp the taming, the civilizing and fascinating power of the function of the picture...<sup>60</sup>

In this passage Lacan shifts from the “true” or “fatal function” of the eye filled with voracity and aiming divisiveness to the eye as the gaze’s victim. This “desperate” eye, no less split off than “the evil eye,” suggests the degree to which Lacan is in thrall not just to magical thinking but to the fantasies Melanie Klein described as typical of a rather schizoid and paranoid child.<sup>61</sup> In particular, he projects on the eye destructive impulses which are distinctly akin to the annihilatory fantasies of early childhood, and then in a reversal typical of such projections, finds the dangerous object itself menaced because it was after all an important but unintegrated aspect of himself. The eye therefore proves to be an insufficiently resilient vessel for the gaze, which, with so much undifferentiated and largely unconscious anger and fear at work, seems omnipresent, often unseen or unrecognized, and likely to crop up anywhere. Secured by “the gesture” the gaze may be encountered in a relatively circumscribed and safely sublimated state in painting, evidently providing that the fantasies proper to it are not too directly or explicitly presented. That is, Lacan buffers the gaze with the notion of “the gesture” or with the idea that the gaze is just beyond or behind the painting. He thereby staves off the more threatening but interesting possibility that the gaze is at work, on many levels, in the imagery of the painting. With these thoughts in mind it is hardly surprising that Lacan’s terms, the gaze, *objet a*, the lack, or Phallus are so un-descriptive in relationship to painting; they serve in the repression of what is most vital, the embodiment of the vivid in the image.

Yet while Lacan recoils from his understanding of the gaze and especially from the few examples of fantasy he relates to it, he nonetheless suggests a deep psychological source for some crucial aspects of painting. He also implies that certain structures, such as perspective, retain an important prophyllactic function. He thus indicates, for example, an intriguing line of inquiry into photography; or, to take another example, into the prevalence of grids in much twentieth century painting. The question remains, however: is the gaze essentially characterized by the oral-sadistic trends that shape Lacan’s presentation? Or, do the regressive features of Lacan’s manifest fear of the gaze amplify those qualities and exclude others? While oral-sadistic traits may well be intrinsic to the gaze, grounded in the realm of early introjected objects the gaze would also be expected to have its benign side. The notion, in short, of the gaze as magically and thoroughly destructive, overlooks the complexity and ambiguity of the experiences of early childhood, the complexity of the unconscious, and especially the com-

plexity of painting. Surely, if painting descends from the gaze, as Lacan claims, the beneficence of painting must in some sense include the gaze. Indeed, if Eros and the death instinct are inextricably linked, as Freud argued,<sup>62</sup> and if the gaze fundamentally belongs to such a “real” pre-existing the child, the painter, or the painting, then the gaze is not simply all consuming and murderous, nor is it exclusively male. Rather, if painting is indelibly marked by the gaze, as Lacan insists, that marking can no more be simply transformed to Apollonian poise and clarity than anything else which is connected to the far from limpid world of early childhood. The Apollonian aspect of some paintings—all paintings are not Apollonian even if Lacan seems finally to so hope—is fundamentally other than what is implanted by the gaze. Better Apollo’s sister Artemis be invoked, for at least she was thought to watch over the childhood of all living creatures, and her clear eyes were a danger to any man trespassing into the full “play of light and opacity” beyond the edge of husbandry. Merely glimpsing her left Actaeon a stag, and then run down and torn to pieces by his own hounds. But while the gaze as Lacan speaks of it has certainly something of that light dancing in a glade which brought such misfortune on Actaeon, he also speaks of the gaze as terribly fateful and ever-present. If it sharpens one’s sense of the Lacanian gaze to find a mythological source, I suspect that she must be far more archaic, and many eyed and breasted, than we now can easily name. I think then that Lacan speaks rightly of the ever-present but obscure qualities of the gaze, “not only does it look, it also shows,” and the eye does feed, or painters’ eyes feed as they look. But by not tying dreams to painting and by not enmeshing the gaze fully and positively in the fantasies proper to it, he misses what Merleau-Ponty considered to be the painter’s inhabitation of the flesh of the world,<sup>63</sup> just as he misses what remains so significant in Cézanne’s work:

The “world’s instant” that Cézanne wanted to paint, an instant long since passed away, is still thrown at us by his paintings. His Mount Sainte Victoire is made and remade from one end of the world to the other in a way that is different from, but no less energetic than, that of the hard rock above Aix. Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—a painting mixes up all our categories in laying out its oneiric universe of carnal essences, of effective likenesses, of mute meanings.<sup>64</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert Bringham, “Four Glyphs,” from *The Beauty of the Weapons* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 23-25. The full text of the glyph cited:

### IV

Tezcatipoca at Tula, the Toltec  
Smoking Mirror, can be looked for in four  
directions:

Red in the East, the fertile light, the flayed  
bright water in the canebrake, quivering  
flesh of the air alive over the limber reed.

Black in North, the vanished absolute  
fruit of the fire, the cold flint flat between  
two hands, tasting of death and the dead land.

White in the West, where the wind lies  
over gold water and under a beam  
like flame on a flat stone, under hewed timber.

Blue to the South, under the sun's beak, where  
the rabbit hears the iridescent bird.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought," *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>In *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven and London, 1983) Bryson, perhaps influenced by the film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry, treats the gaze as a subspecies of perspective. In short, as we will see, this treatment is at antipodes with Lacan's understanding of the term. In *Tradition and Desire* (Cambridge, 1987) Bryson continues to understand the gaze as a focused, objectifying mode of encultured visuality, albeit he introduces a psychoanalytic level or interpretation which is influenced by Lacan. In his essay, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988), ed. Hal Foster, Bryson in discussing Lacan takes a far more open and suggestive approach to the gaze. In particular, by citing the work of two Japanese philosophers, Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani, Bryson attempts to make an argument for a radically de-centered visuality. I hope to discuss Bryson's thinking on the gaze in the future.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, 1987), "Painting, Omnipotence, and the Gaze: Ingres, The Wolf Man, Picasso," pp. 249-304.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Lacan, "Of the Gaze as the *Objet Petit a*," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London and New York, 1981).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup>On the hermetic from a psychological perspective see Karl Kerényi, *Hermes Guide of Souls* (Zurich, 1976).

<sup>9</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1966). See Part Three, Chapter One, "The Existence of Others," section 4, "The Look."

<sup>10</sup>Note 6, pp. 82-85.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>13</sup>Of use to me in formulating this likely all too simple sketch of the *objet petit a* and its effects: Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London, 1970); Juliet Flower Mac-

Cannell, *Figuring Lacan* (Lincoln, 1986); Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* by Jacques Lacan, trans. A. Wilden (Baltimore, 1968).

<sup>14</sup>For example see Melanie Klein, "The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," *The Selected Melanie Klein* (New York, 1986).

<sup>15</sup>Note 6, pp. 73-77.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>17</sup>Note 9, p. 360.

<sup>18</sup>Lacan is clearly influenced by Merleau-Ponty on this matter. Compare, note 6, 79-89 to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, 1964), pp. 169-178.

<sup>19</sup>Note 6, pp. 94-96.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-89; 91-97.

<sup>21</sup>See, note 2, pp. 178-179; 190-191.

<sup>22</sup>Note 6, pp. 88-89.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-77. See also note 18, pp. 162-169.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 73-74; 97-100; 105-111.

<sup>25</sup>See, David Summers, *The Judgement of Sense* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 6-8; 137-138.

<sup>26</sup>Note 6, p. 114.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-96; 101.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-103.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 116-117.

<sup>34</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1961).

<sup>35</sup>Note 6, p. 103.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 111-112.

<sup>37</sup>Note 9, pp. 347-350.

<sup>38</sup>David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, 1981); for example, see Summers's remarks on Gorgias, p. 18. The book lays out in extraordinary detail the deeply sophisticated poetics of art within the orbit of Michelangelo.

<sup>39</sup>Note 6, p. 112.

<sup>40</sup>Robert Bringhurst who had the good fortune to spend several days with the painting in Kromeriz pointed this out to me. I had the opportunity to look at the painting over two days while it was in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. A remark David Sylvester once made, that *The Flaying of Marsyas* is the greatest painting he knew of, seemed absolutely prescient of my own feelings on seeing it. Bringhurst has written a poem on the Marsyas theme, "Bone Flute Breathing"; it is also in *The Beauty of Weapons*. See note 1, pp. 125-128.

<sup>41</sup>I owe this identification to Sidney Freedburg, "Titian and Marsyas," *FMR*, 4 (September 1984), pp. 52-64.

<sup>42</sup>Note 6, p. 75.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>44</sup>See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Nonsense* (Evanston, 1964), especially p. 20.

<sup>45</sup>Note 6, p. 114.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>48</sup>On such issues see Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago, 1984).

<sup>49</sup>Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne," *19th and 20th Century Art: Selected Papers* (New York, 1978).

<sup>50</sup>Kurt Badt, "The Cardplayers," *The Art of Cézanne* (Berkeley, 1956).

<sup>51</sup>For example see John E. Gedo, "Paul Cézanne: Symbiosis, Masochism, and the Struggle for Perception," *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, 2 (Hillsdale, N.J., 1987).

<sup>52</sup>Note 6, p. 115.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>59</sup>Note 14, and in the same volume see "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," and "A Study of Envy and Gratitude."

<sup>60</sup>Note 6, p. 116.

<sup>61</sup>Note 14, see especially pp. 179-189.

<sup>62</sup>Note 34, p. 64-69.

<sup>63</sup>Note 18, pp. 162-164.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 169.



# John Dewey's "Art as Experience": A Revaluation of Aesthetic Pragmatism

By Udo Kultermann

Among modern philosophers John Dewey, along with Benedetto Croce, George Santayana, Martin Heidegger and R. G. Collingwood, establishes art and art theory in close relationship. To define Dewey's position and relate it to modern art developments, especially to American art, is a challenge that has never been attempted, in spite of the numerous investigations into all aspects of Dewey's way of thinking. How far are movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting, Happenings, and even Pop Art in line with the thinking of John Dewey? Did his philosophical insights help the formation of these artistic developments?

Abraham Kaplan, the editor of volume 10 of the *Collected Works of John Dewey*, contends that Dewey would have condemned "the indifference of much of contemporary art to significant human concerns, the rupture of continuity between art and daily life."<sup>1</sup> But is Kaplan correct? He argues by means of his own contempt for the art of our time, extending his bias to Dewey. There are facts that tend convincingly to prove the opposite,

indicating how intensely involved in the art of his time Dewey was. Not only was he concerned with the principles of art in general, but, beyond that, art forms which at the time of his writing were not even conceivable.

John Dewey was a philosopher engaged in academic, social, and political activities which affiliated him with nearly every aspect of American life in the years between 1880 and 1960. Born in 1859 in Vermont, he began his teaching career in Minnesota (1884-94), moved on to Chicago (1894-1905), and finally settled in New York, where he had a long and fruitful tenure at Columbia University. His basic line of thought was considered to be the Philosophy of Pragmatism, a programmatically anti-idealistic approach to all matters of thinking.<sup>2</sup>

Dewey's interest in art was greatly influenced by his friendship with Albert C. Barnes, the inventor and art collector. In 1917/18 Barnes, then age 45, enrolled as a student in Dewey's seminars at Columbia University in New York. Barnes had already received an M.D. degree (1892) from the University of Pennsylvania, with a concentration in experimental chemistry and medicine. The combination of these interests led to his invention of Argysol, a silver nitrate solution used for new-born infants. He made a fortune from its sale, enabling him to enter still another field of interest, art collecting. His collection of French paintings soon became one of the finest in the world; it included masterpieces by Cézanne, Degas, Matisse, Monet, Picasso, and Renoir. In 1922 he founded the Barnes Foundation near Philadelphia; it was endowed with 10 million dollars for upkeep and research. John Dewey became the Foundation's educational advisor and consultant. In 1925 Barnes published *The Art of Painting*, a book dedicated to John Dewey.

In Dewey's *Carus Lectures* (1925), enlarged and edited into his book *Experience and Nature* (1929), art was considered, but not to the extent it was in *Art as Experience* (1934), one of the major aesthetic publications of the time. It was strongly influenced by Barnes, as is acknowledged in Dewey's preface.

Many of Dewey's critics have argued that his theory of art was a late addition to his general philosophy, which encompassed, among other subjects, psychology, moral philosophy, logic, and metaphysics. This view has recently been challenged by Philip M. Zeltner, who came to a completely opposite conclusion: "Dewey's aesthetic theory is the capstone of his entire philosophy. This theory is not so much implied, nor indicated, but forced out from the energetic internal development of his previous thinking. His aesthetics is no more tacked on to his general philosophy than mountains are tacked on to the earth. Dewey's philosophy is his aesthetics, and all that he meticulously worked on in the areas of logic, metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology is brought to culmination in his understanding of the aesthetic and art."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, this is also the point Dewey himself made when he wrote: "there is no test that so surely reveals the onesidedness of philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience."<sup>4</sup> In the foreword to the Barnes Foundation's book *Art and Education*, Dewey wrote: "I take profound if

somewhat melancholy, ironic, satisfaction in the fact that the most thoroughgoing embodiment of what I have tried to say about education is, as far as I am concerned, found in an educational institution that is concerned with art."<sup>5</sup> Mortimer R. Kadish has claimed, no doubt in a somewhat exaggerated way, that "Among all recent philosophers of major stature who have sought to expand rather than contract the claims of scientific inquiry, Dewey is perhaps the only one to place the image of an art at the center of his argument, so that science itself becomes an art and the presence of art the very measure of reason in our dealings with the world and one another." Dewey's position in this respect approaches that of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, except that in their conception art as the revealed truth of the world has a more radical definition.<sup>6</sup>

Dewey's main contention, separating him from many of his predecessors, is that art has to be located beyond the isolated sphere into which it is usually positioned: "Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement."<sup>7</sup> Thus, his task was to restore the lost continuity "between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience."<sup>8</sup>

Dewey wanted art to be experienced within the normal and usual dailiness of life, not apart from it. In his opinion every type of particularization of art is an obstacle to recognizing the overall rhythm of life and life experience that generally informs it. Thus, he saw the institution of the museum as a particularization of art which occurred only in modern times and which, according to Dewey, has had a profound impact on modern art in general: "An instructive history of modern art could be written in terms of the formation of the distinctly modern institutions of museums and exhibition galleries."<sup>9</sup>

Irwin Edman indicated that this definition of art had important consequences for the development of the philosophy of art: "Thus considered, art has a far wider signification than is, in the hands of aestheticians, commonly assigned to it. It has not to do exclusively with the composition of symphonies, the painting of pictures, the chiseling of statues. It is the name for that process of intelligent direction by which the natural tendency of events, the implicit and unrealized meanings of objects are furthered and secured. It is that conscious technique by which, out of some uncertainty and crisis, desired goods, first foreseen as ideal possibilities, the self-suggesting hopes of an imperfect present, are achieved and stabilized."<sup>10</sup>

Dewey tried to define art as an integral part of life experiences, rejecting those theories which did not live up to the challenge: "It is to indicate that 'theories' which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specific extraneous conditions."<sup>11</sup>

Dewey's goal was to recover continuity of aesthetic and normal experience. Zeltner has summarized Dewey's approach to the substance and

form of works of art: "The substance of works of art is synonymous with the product of expression, that is, the new meanings which have been brought into being through an individual experience. The subject of a particular object or event is the vehicle by way of which these new meanings have been brought forth. The subject matter of a work of art is the funded meanings which an individual or the artist brings to bear on the work. They are brought to bear in that the work produced is a result of an initial stirring of this subject-matter through some contact with the world. The expressiveness of an object to a perceiver is dependent upon the subject matter he brings with him to the object, and the resultant interaction which ensues. Form, at this early stage of our inquiry, is understood as being more than shape, figure, or design of natural materials, and not something which is imposed upon matter. Essentially form is 'how' meanings are made known, and is inclusive of processes broader than the awareness of shape and design."<sup>12</sup>

A very important term in Dewey's art theory is "energy," a term also used widely to cope with much of the American painting that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, especially the works of such artists as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. In a 1950 interview with William Wright Pollock said that "the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have a mechanical means of representing objects in nature such as the camera and the photograph. The modern artist it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world—in other words, expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces."<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 8 in Dewey's *Art as Experience* is devoted to "The Organization of Energies": "When all materials are interpenetrated by rhythm, the theme or 'subject' is transformed into a new subject-matter. There is that sudden magic which gives us the sense of an inner revelation that brought to us something we had supposed to be known through and through. In short, the reciprocal interpenetration of parts and whole, which we have seen to constitute an object as a work of art, is effected when all the constituents of the work, whether picture, drama, poem or building, stand in rhythmic connection with all other members of the same kind—line with line, color with color, space with space, illumination with light and shade in a painting—and all of these distinctive factors reinforce one another as variations that build up an integrated complex experience. It would be pedantic as well as ungenerous to deny all esthetic quality to an object that is marked in some one respect by rhythms that consolidate and organize the energies involved in having an experience. But the objective measure of greatness is precisely the variety and scope of factors which, in being rhythmic each to each, still cumulatively conserve and promote one another in building up the actual experience."<sup>14</sup>

At the end of the chapter, Dewey referred to the English writer John Galsworthy who defined art as "The imaginative expression of energy which, through technical concretion of feeling and perception, tends to reconcile the individual with the universal by exciting in him impersonal emotion." Dewey followed this line of thought with affirmative details,

ending with his innovative conception of the "construction and organization of objective energies."<sup>15</sup>

A great amount of argument in Dewey's book is devoted to the perception and artistic use of color, so powerful a part of the American revolution in painting, beginning with Josef Albers' paintings and theories and culminating in the works of such painters as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Ad Reinhardt.<sup>16</sup> Dewey refers to a statement by Eugene Delacroix, who said that the painters of his day used coloration rather than color: "The statement signified that they applied color to their represented objects instead of making them out of color. This procedure signifies that colors as means and objects and scenes depicted were kept apart. They did not use color as medium with complete devotion. Their minds and experience were divided. Means and end did not coalesce. The greatest esthetic revolution in the history of painting took place when color was used structurally; then pictures ceased to be colored drawings. The true artist sees and feels in terms of his medium and the one who has learned to perceive esthetically emulates the operation."<sup>17</sup>

Dewey also discusses architecture, directly relating it to existence: "buildings, among all art objects, come the nearest to expressing the stability and endurance of existence."<sup>18</sup> Architecture is also mentioned when Dewey emphasized his main, underlying theme of the continuity of the arts with all other aspects of life: "As long as art is the beauty parlor of civilization, neither art nor civilization is secure. Why is architecture in our large cities so unworthy of a fine civilization? It is not from lack of materials nor from lack of technical capacity. And yet it is not merely slums but the apartments of the well-to-do that are esthetically repellent, because they are so destitute of imagination. Their character is determined by an economic system in which land is used—and kept out of use—for the sake of gain, because of profit derived from rental and sale. Until land is freed from this economic burden, beautiful buildings may occasionally be erected, but there is little hope for the rise of general architectural construction worthy a noble civilization." Charles Edward Gauss compared Dewey with Frank Lloyd Wright, stating their mutual goal: "Both wanted fluidity and interpenetration of spaces."<sup>19</sup>

Dewey expresses a rather personal and anticapitalistic view, quoting Auguste Comte, who once said that the great problem of our time is the organization of the proletariat into the social system. Along the same line of thinking, reminiscences of William Morris and the English Arts and Crafts movement occur. In this sense, Dewey's art theory has heterogeneous elements that relate it to social reform movement, rather than to basic philosophical reasoning about art. He clearly stated his view when he advocated: "What is true is that art itself is not secure under modern conditions until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work. That the material for art should be drawn from all sources whatever and that the products of art should be accessible to all is a

demand by the side of which the personal political intent of the artist is significant."<sup>20</sup>

Art in this sense, even in its political implications, is seen as a challenge to the philosopher. After acknowledging Wordsworth and Shelley as universal defenders of poetry, Dewey goes on to say: "Philosophy like art moves in the medium of imaginative mind, and, since art is the most direct and complete manifestations there is of experience as experience, it provides a unique control for the imaginative ventures of philosophy."<sup>21</sup>

He continues, attempting to make a conclusive statement about art in general: "In art as an experience, actuality and possibility as ideality, the new and the old, objective material and personal response, the individual and the universal, surface and depth, sense and meaning, are integrated in an experience in which they are all transfigured from the significance that belongs to them when isolated in reflection. 'Nature,' said Goethe, 'has neither kernel nor shell'. Only in esthetic experience is this statement completely true. Of art as experience it is also true that nature has neither subjective nor objective being: is neither individual nor universal, sensuous nor rational. The significance of art as experience is, therefore, incomparable for the adventure of philosophic thought."<sup>22</sup>

In Dewey's later years, which were also the years of so-called non-objective art, several attempts were made to deny his impact on the art scene. Leon Jacobsen went so far as to write: "We have just demonstrated the incongruence of Dewey's objective philosophy of 'Art as Experience' with the reality of our current non-objective fine art production. To the extent of his disharmony, Dewey's art ideology has failed the 'correspondence' test of truth."<sup>23</sup>

This conclusion is not only premature, but wrong. It is not the art theory of Dewey which has failed the "correspondence" test of truth, but the one-sided and limited approach of Leon Jacobsen, who basically misunderstood the nature of American art of his time. The non-objective art of the 1940s and 1950s is indeed in complete harmony with Dewey's way of thinking, and artists such as Pollock, Rothko, and Still cannot be confined by such almost irrelevant terms as "non-objective" or "abstract." It is the artists themselves who have the key to a better understanding of their art, with its implicit indebtedness to Dewey's idea of art.

The impact of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy on art is important, and can be traced in many directions. Artists of Dewey's day have written that his theory stimulated their own works. One of them is Josef Albers, who, in 1935, a year after the publication of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, praised all the disciplines of art and their interconnectedness with life, in an article under the title "Art as Experience" in the magazine *Progressive Education*. "If art is an essential part of culture and life, then we must no longer educate our students either to be art historians or to be imitators of antiquities, but for artistic seeing, artistic working, and more, for artistic living."<sup>24</sup>

Robert Motherwell also brought art and philosophy into close connection. During his studies at Stanford University (1932-37), while majoring

in philosophy, Motherwell became absorbed in the writings of John Dewey. In a 1979 interview Motherwell said: "I realize that I was full of Dewey during the forties, and he remains one of the really significant, subconscious forces in my art today." Motherwell referred to Dewey's *Art as Experience* as "one of my early bibles."<sup>25</sup>

Some time later, the Surrealist painter Wolfgang Paalen stated that Dewey presented the basis for a genuinely modern aesthetic. Paalen had been introduced to Dewey's philosophy by Motherwell. In his article "The New Image" in *Dyn* (1942), Paalen distanced himself from the Surrealists, defending a new art form based on the idea of "experience." "The true value of the artistic experience does not depend on its capacity to represent, but on its capacity to prefigure, i.e., on its capacity to express a potentially new order of things." The philosophy of Dewey was instrumental in an artistic change of direction which many Americans were to follow: "For Paalen as for Motherwell, Dewey provided a philosophical parallel for the view of painting as an activity of direct contact between the artist and his medium, an encounter which could be signified by nonrepresentational paint marks upon the canvas."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, an art historian such as Meyer Schapiro—prominent on the New York art scene during Dewey's lifetime—was under the spell of the great philosopher. While not directly referring to Dewey, Schapiro nevertheless emphasized "experience" in his analysis of a work of art's quality: "It is clear from continued experience and close study of works that the judgment of perfection in art, as in nature, is a hypothesis, not a certitude established by an immediate intuition. It implies that a valued quality of a work of art, which has been experienced, at one time, will be experienced as such in the future, and in so far as the judgment of perfection covers the character of the parts and their relation to the particular whole, it assumes that the quality found in parts already perceived and cited as examples of that perfection will be found in all other parts and aspects to be scrutinized in the future."<sup>27</sup>

The most influential art critic of the 1950s, Clement Greenberg, offered a convincing key to Dewey's way of thinking: "Art happens, however, to be a matter of self-evidence and feeling, and of the interferences of feeling, rather than of intellection as information, and the reality of art is discussed only in experience, not in reflection upon experience."<sup>28</sup>

But Dewey's influence reaches even further; many of the creative movements in American art can easily be related to his basic theoretical assumptions. One of these movements, Abstract Expressionism, is the first international manifestation of an authentic American art. Pollock, the leading artist of this movement, repeatedly used a vocabulary not unlike that in Dewey's art theory. When Pollock describes his experience of making art as his tendency to "be in the work of art," he is using the same language Dewey did in denying and finally destroying the particularization of aesthetic experience. Pollock was very clear in his few statements about his art: "When I am in a painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of 'getting acquainted' period that I see what I

have been about. I have no fear of making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own."<sup>29</sup>

Some years later the art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "Action Painting," which is also based on Dewey's conception of art's deep interconnection with life experience. In 1948 Rosenberg and Motherwell edited the magazine *Possibilities*, in effect devoted to the new art experience Dewey had long ago envisioned. Motherwell defined it in the editorial statement: "This is a magazine of artists and writers who 'practice' in their work their own experience without seeking to transcend it in academic, group or political formulas."<sup>30</sup> In this context, Mortimer R. Kadish emphasized the importance Dewey gave to the "immediate realization of intent," writing that this would be visible in action. He also saw gestures as "immediate realizations of intent" which could be extended into art.<sup>31</sup>

The strongest impact of Dewey's ideas on the American art scene came by way of the teaching of Josef Albers, the painter and educator who for many years was instrumental in the education of generations of American artists. Albers, who taught in 1933 at Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina (1933-49), had a tremendous influence on several American artists. At Black Mountain not only painters and sculptors came in contact with Dewey's basic thinking, but also the composer John Cage and the dancer Merce Cunningham. Their work is the direct embodiment of "Art as Experience," and influenced many painters to share in its spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most radical consequence of Dewey's theory was the so-called "happening." Allan Kaprow, the first important American pioneer of this art mode, advocated an art experience which consists in literally taking down the borders between everyday and aesthetic experience.<sup>33</sup> "According to Dewey, the culminations of art are culminations of life experiences."<sup>34</sup> This direct interpretation of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy comes close to later concepts of art.

Still another, uniquely American art movement, has a precedent and stimulus in Dewey's *Art as Experience*. In chapter 1 Dewey celebrated such little acknowledged popular art manifestations as movies and comic strips. In his day they were not considered part of art, but in taking them seriously he prepared the way for the Pop Artists of the 1960s: "So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set Art upon a remote pedestal, that many a person would be repelled rather than pleased if told that he enjoyed his casual recreations, in part at least, because of their esthetic quality. The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazz music, the comic strips, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and exploits of bandits."<sup>35</sup>

Dewey continues to see these works of non-art in close experimental relationship to high art: "For, when what he knows as art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse toward the experiences enjoyable in themselves finds such outlet as the daily environment provides....For the popular notion comes from a separation of art from



the objects and scenes of ordinary experience that many theorists and critics pride themselves upon holding and even elaborating. The times when select and distinguished objects are closely connected with the products of usual vocation are the times when appreciation of the former is most ripe and most keen. When, because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people, esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar."<sup>36</sup>

Barbara Rose has attempted to relate still other artistic achievements of the 1960s to the philosophy of Pragmatism, including in her effort such artists as Donald Judd and Robert Morris: "Pragmatism differs from Idealist philosophy in another crucial respect which has consequences for current American art: it rejects any kind of mind-body dualism in favor of a synthetic perception, involving motor, retinal and kinesthetic as well as emotive factors in a single response. The direct physicality of American art, at least since Pollock, can similarly be seen as tied to pragmatic preferences. Robert Morris rejects internal relationships of any kind within a work because they 'have a dualistic character in relation to the matter they distribute'."<sup>37</sup>

Even one of the most pioneering artist-theoreticians of recent years, Robert Smithson, voices in principle the concepts that Dewey postulated several decades ago: "The artist must come out of the isolation of galleries and museums and provide a concrete consciousness for the present as it really exists, and not simply present abstractions and utopias. The artist must accept and enter into all of the real problems that confront the ecologist and industrialist."<sup>38</sup> It appears that the Philosophy of Pragmatism and the revolutionary concept of environmental art work well together.

Dewey's theory of art expressed the mood of a particular time. Its impact influenced and shaped a specific period in American art history, overcoming foreign influences on American art theory and cultural philosophy. Ernest S. Bates regarded Dewey's *Art as Experience*, as "the most important contribution to aesthetics that America has yet produced."<sup>39</sup> It is significant that in the early 20th century America produced its first great philosopher of art, who was soon followed by the first great flowering of American art. We do not know whether a direct cause and effect relationship between the two exists, but since Dewey and the rise of Abstract Expressionism America has been one of the centers of international art, holding its own in world culture.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Dewey *The Later Works*, (1934), (Carbondale, Ill., 1987), vol.10, p. xxx. For basic literature about Dewey's aesthetics see Robert D. Mack, *The Appeal of Immediate Experience: The Philosophic Method of Bradley, Whitehead and Dewey* (Freeport, 1945); George Boas, "Communication in Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (December 1953); C.E. Gauss, "Some Reflections on John Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter 1960); Stephen C. Pepper, "The Concept of Fusion in Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (December 1953); Van Meter Ames, "John Dewey as Aesthetician," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (December 1953); D.G. Gotshalk, "On Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Fall 1964).

<sup>2</sup>George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Ill., 1973): The Greek term 'pragma' can be translated by "action". See Barbara Rose, "Problems of Criticism, V; The Politics of Art, Part II," *Artforum* (January 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Philip M. Zeltner, *John Dewey's Aesthetic Philosophy* (Amsterdam, 1975), pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. ix.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted after Gilbert M. Cantor, *The Barnes Foundation, Reality vs. Myth* (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 44; Howard Greenfield, *The Devil and Dr. Barnes. Portrait of an American Art Collector* (New York: Viking, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>M. R. Kadish, "John Dewey and The Theory of the Aesthetic Practice," *New Studies in the Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Stephen M. Cahn (Hanover, N.H., 1977), p. 75. See also U. Kultermann, *Kleine Geschichte der Kunsttheorie* (Darmstadt, 1987), pp. 185-188. A comparison between Dewey and Heidegger, restricted to metaphysics, has been attempted by Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," *Review of Metaphysics*, 30 (December 1976).

<sup>7</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Irwin Edman, "A Philosophy of Experience as a Philosophy of Art," *Essays in Honor of John Dewey on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday, October 20, 1929* (New York, 1929), p. 123.

<sup>11</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. 16. Zeltner accuses Dewey of using sloppy language and maintains that it should read "substance" instead of subject-matter (p. 55).

<sup>12</sup>Zeltner, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Ellen H. Johnson, ed., *American Artists on Art* (New York, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>16</sup>Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (December 1952).

<sup>17</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 234.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. p. 346. Charles Edward Gauss, "Some Reflections on John Dewey's Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter 1960), p. 127.

<sup>20</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. 347.

<sup>21</sup>John Dewey, *The Essential Writings*, ed. David Sikorsky (New York, 1977), p. 280.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>23</sup>Leon Jacobsen, "Art as Experience and American Visual Art Today," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter 1960), p. 124.

<sup>24</sup>*Progressive Education*, 12 (October 6, 1935), pp. 391-93. See also Josef Albers, *Search Versus Re-Search* (Hartford, 1969).

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Motherwell, The Formative Years* (New York, 1987), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup>W. Paalen, *Form and Sense* (New York, 1945), p. 18. See also Stewart Buettner, *American Art Theory 1945-1970* (Ann Arbor, 1981), p. 58 ff.; Ellen M. Johnson, ed., *American Artists on Art* (New York, 1982). Quotes from Mattison, pp. 28, 36. See also Gustav Regler, *Wolfgang Paalen* (New York, 1946) and Mona Hadler, *The Art of William Baziotes* (New York, 1977).

<sup>27</sup>Meyer Schapiro, "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," *Art and Philosophy, A Symposium*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York, 1966), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Clement Greenberg, "T.S. Eliot: A Book Review," *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), p. 243.

<sup>29</sup>Jackson Pollock, "My Painting," *Possibilities*, I (Winter 1947/1948), p. 79. See also Frank O'Hara, *Jackson Pollock* (New York, 1959); Bryan Robertson, *Jackson Pollock* (New York, 1960).

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Mattison, p. 162; Rosenberg, pp. 23-28.

<sup>31</sup>Kadish, pp. 86-87.

<sup>32</sup>Eugen Gomringer, *Josef Albers* (New York, 1968).

<sup>33</sup>U. Kultermann, *Art and Life* (New York, 1970).

<sup>34</sup>Kadish, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup>Dewey, *The Later Works*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup>Rose, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup>Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York, 1979), p. 221.

<sup>39</sup>Ernest S. Bates, "John Dewey's Aesthetics," *American Mercury*, 33 (1934), p. 253.

# Kandinsky's Early Theories on Synaesthesia

By Patricia McDonnell

Kandinsky begins his 1913 autobiography for *Der Sturm*:

The first colors to make a powerful impression on me were light juicy green, white, carmine red, black, and yellow ochre. These memories go as far back as the age of three. I observed these colors on various objects that today appear less distinctly before my eyes than the colors themselves.<sup>1</sup>

This recollection of colors and their impression upon the artist is an unorthodox beginning for an autobiographical essay, unorthodox even for a radical painter among the very first to achieve abstraction in his art. It poignantly directs attention to the special value Kandinsky attributed to color and consequently also to his belief in synaesthesia. His acceptance of multi-sensory perception is integral to his simultaneous belief in color's ability to express spiritual content. "Color," he states in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, "directly influences the soul.... Color harmony must rest ultimately on purposive playing upon the human soul."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, an examination of Kandinsky's thoughts about *color-music* or synaesthesia requires a simultaneous understanding of Kandinsky's particular beliefs and

theories regarding art, its role and its communicative means.<sup>3</sup> Kandinsky looked beyond the realm of aesthetics in formulating his theories. Thus, while analyzing Kandinsky's beliefs regarding synaesthesia and artistic expression, this essay will examine his immediate sources in aesthetics as well as in theosophy and the pseudo-scientific. In so doing, greater estimation of Kandinsky's particular role in early twentieth century art may come to light.<sup>4</sup>

Kandinsky's landmark book of 1912, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, suggests the early direction of his thought. Art, for Kandinsky, was the spiritual communication between the artist and the observer. Yet he acknowledged this concept of art was an alien one for the prevailing materialism and determinism of his time. Nevertheless, he saw this possibility of "spiritualized art" as the promise of the future, which was only then in its nascent stage. In his 1912 book, he wrote:

Only just now awakening after years of materialism, our soul is infected with the despair born of unbelief, of lack of purpose and aim. ...Our soul rings cracked when we sound it...When religion, science and morality are shaken (the last by the strong hand of Nietzsche) and when outer supports threaten to fall, man withdraws his gaze from externals and turns it inward. Literature, music and art are the most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt.<sup>5</sup>

The means for this spiritual communication is the externalization of the artist's individual and genuine emotion, Kandinsky's "innerer Klang" or "innerliche Notwendigkeit." "Innerer Klang," or inner sound, is the term Kandinsky used most often for this basic concept, which in itself suggests his predilection toward musical metaphor. Kandinsky suggests three potential meanings or interpretations for *klang* by his usage during this period. First, he often uses *klang* or its verb, *klingen*, in a purely metaphorical manner. For example, he writes of this concept in his *Reminiscences*, "Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos—by means of catastrophes which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments the symphony we call the music of the spheres."<sup>6</sup> Secondly, there are instances where he employs *klang* to describe a patently synaesthetic experience. For example, "Praise be to the palette for the delights it offers...it is itself a 'work,' more beautiful indeed than many a work. It sometimes seemed to me as if the brush...conjured up in the process a musical sound. Sometimes I could hear the hiss of the colors as they mingled."<sup>7</sup> Or elsewhere, "the yellow mailboxes sang their shrill canary yellow song."<sup>8</sup> The third potential meaning of *klang* in Kandinsky's usage is actually a confusion or combination of the preceding two. At points, Kandinsky is not at all clear whether he intends an analogy or not. "Apparently limitless freedom and the intervention of the spirit arises from the fact that we have begun to sense the spirit, the inner sound within every object."<sup>9</sup> Another instance of this is his frequently stated desire for works of art to *klingen* or to sound forth.<sup>10</sup>

This "innerer Klang" or inner necessity ultimately derived from three essential elements, according to Kandinsky: first, from the personal individuality of a given artist; second, from the conditions of the time period, which

Kandinsky believed to be always evident in great art; and third, from the need to advance art. Kandinsky was also absolutely clear regarding the means through which inner necessity is expressed. He found the unique means of different artistic media dissimilar only in their physical manifestation, but identical in their spiritual origin. Moreover, all artistic media are inherently the same and therefore employ inner necessity similarly to effect expression. Kandinsky explained:

The means belonging to the different arts are externally quite different. Sound, color, words! In the last essentials, these means are wholly alike: the final goal extinguishes dissimilarities and reveals the inner identity....The indefinable and yet definite activity of the soul (vibration) is the aim of the individual artistic means....The correct means the artist discovers is a material form of that vibration of his soul to which he is forced to give expression. If this means is correct, it causes a virtually identical vibration in the receiving soul....This vibration in the receiving soul will cause other strings within the soul to vibrate in sympathy....Strings of the soul that are made to vibrate frequently will, on almost every occasion other strings are touched, also vibrate in sympathy. And sometimes so strongly that they drown the original sound....Yet the original sound is not destroyed, but continues to live and works, even if imperceptibly, upon the soul.<sup>11</sup>

In this description, Kandinsky accounts for synaesthesia. One *heard* colors, because a reverberation was effected in his soul. Elsewhere he stated:

In highly sensitive people the approach to the soul is so direct, the soul itself so impressionable, that any impression of taste communicates itself immediately to the soul, and thence to the other organs of sense....This would imply an echo or reverberation, such as occurs sometimes in musical instruments which, without being touched, sound in harmony with an instrument that is being played. Men of sensitivity are like good, much-played violins which vibrate at each touch of the bow.<sup>12</sup>

With identical accuracy and precision, Kandinsky analyzed how one responds to the spiritual vibration or impression of a painting.

If you let your eye stray over a palette of colors, you experience two things. In the first place you receive a *purely physical effect*....The eye is stimulated as the tongue is titillated by a spicy dish....But to a more sensitive soul the effect of colors is deeper and intensely moving. And so we come to the second result of colors: *their psychological effect*. They produce a correspondent spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the physical impression is of importance.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the physical, the sensory is excited as a means toward communication with the immaterial, the spiritual.

On the other hand, Kandinsky was adamant that he did not paint music, as his detractors mockingly charged. He did see the various artistic media expressing unique and independent sensory communication. Any mixing of artistic effect occurred in the soul of the observer, not in his sensory perceptions. Clarifying this argument he wrote in 1913, "I personally am

unable to paint music, since I believe any such kind of painting to be basically impossible, basically unattainable.... It is an impossible and useless task to attempt to replace one form of art by another.... It is our good fortune that the different arts dispose of fundamentally different means."<sup>14</sup>

Kandinsky increasingly realized that the means for the most direct expression of the spiritual demanded the autonomy of artistic effects. If art was to communicate to the spirit and if spirit was to be manifest in art, this must occur without the limitations of convention, indeed, without the restrictions of artistic representation. He considered painting an integral part of a contemporaneous movement to purge art of all ungentle practices. Music was seen by Kandinsky as the model art form in this respect. On this point in particular, Kandinsky adhered to the tradition of thought fortified by Schopenhauer in the nineteenth century. He hoped to similarly achieve for painting an abstract or "absolute" art, to use his own terminology. His clearest articulation of this appears in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

Music is found to be the best teacher.... Music has been the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but to the expression of the artist's soul and to the creation of an autonomous life of musical sound. A painter who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his internal life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the least material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the means of music to his own art.<sup>15</sup>

Such beliefs reflect many ideas circulating in the early twentieth-century milieu. Kandinsky's theories evince influences—whether direct or indirect—from a great many contemporary sources. Of primary importance for his belief in synaesthesia were the contemporaneous activities of the German Theosophical Society and its leader Rudolf Steiner; experiments in color psychology which Kandinsky followed with some interest; and the advances in music with special emphasis upon Wagner, Scriabin and Schoenberg. Considering sources of influence more broadly, Symbolism and the late-nineteenth-century Arts & Crafts movement also conditioned Kandinsky's theoretical development. Peg Weiss carefully documented the impact of progressive design ideas circulating in Munich upon Kandinsky's artistic beginnings.<sup>16</sup> She and Rose Washton Long both have examined the extent to which the Symbolist notion of correspondences and its vague, indirect formal vocabularies, which ultimately reveal elemental truths, influenced Kandinsky to seek non-literal, non-representational truths in his art.<sup>17</sup> However, it was Kandinsky's interest in theosophy, color psychology and contemporary music that most directly informed his ideas about *color-music*.

From the volumes preserved from Kandinsky's pre-war library, it is apparent the Kandinsky read widely in the occult and theosophy.<sup>18</sup> He mentioned Madame Blavatsky's *The Key of Theosophy* in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, and his annotated copy still exists in Munich.<sup>19</sup> However, as a resident of Germany during the first decades of the century, Kandinsky would have been influenced most by Rudolf Steiner within the context of theosophy. Steiner headed the German chapter of the Theosophical Society from 1902 to 1913, when a conflict with Annie Besant, then the President,

caused him to secede *with* the chapter and form the Anthroposophical Society. Steiner and his activities were of further significance to Kandinsky, because Steiner began his career as a Goethe scholar and founded many of his subsequent beliefs on Goethian principles. Kandinsky's first documented contact with Steiner was in the winter of 1908 in Berlin where he and Gabriele Munter attended Steiner's lecture series.<sup>20</sup> Several volumes of Steiner's publications and issues of his theosophical magazine, *Lucifer-Gnosis*, have also been preserved from Kandinsky's library.<sup>21</sup>

According to Steiner, Goethe eliminated any dichotomy between nature and art. As Sixten Ringbom explains:

Goethe's dictum that works of art, like works of nature, are produced according to the divine necessity of true and natural laws, is by Steiner regarded as an epoch-making discovery. Artistic creation, [within this conceptual framework]...is a higher form of *Naturwirken*; the work of art is the more perfect the more its adherence to natural laws is allowed to find expression. The artist realizes ideas of nature. He demonstrates what nature would look like if its inherent forces were accessible...to direct perception. But the artist reaches farther than the scientist or philosopher since he [or she] possesses the unique ability to visualize laws that remain inaccessible for science. Hence, Steiner lays great emphasis on Goethe's assertion that 'the Beautiful is a manifestation of secret laws of nature which otherwise would have remained hidden forever.'<sup>22</sup>

Obvious parallels exist between Steiner's interpretations of Goethe's principles and Kandinsky's theories. Both perceive the artist as seer or mystic, as one who transcends material phenomena to receive impressions of "secret laws" or "the spiritual" and give material form to those impressions. The similarity of approach was by no means coincidental. Kandinsky clearly looked to the tradition of German idealism, for which Steiner's interpretations of Goethe were close at hand. The parallels between these approaches relates directly to Kandinsky's ideas regarding color, because it is through his particular understanding of artistic expression that he explains synaesthesia.

Kandinsky was also familiar with Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, a treatise which Steiner republished and prefaced in 1907.<sup>23</sup> Goethe found Newtonian color theory overly deterministic and argued that all color phenomena could not be explained by the single phenomenon of the spectrum. The spectrum Goethe believed to be "no more than the thorough-bass of music."<sup>24</sup> To explain this metaphor, the thorough-bass was a shorthand notational system widely used in Baroque music. From the shorthand thorough-bass notation, the complete harmony could be reconstituted. Hence, Goethe finds Newton's spectrum a minor aspect of the potential of coloristic effect. Kandinsky reiterated Goethe's thorough-bass metaphor in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.<sup>25</sup> Since he believed that "color directly influences the soul," he understandably felt some affinity with Goethe's rejection of the explanation of color by the physical sciences.

Kandinsky would have felt similar affinity to the theosophical view of matter and spirit that Steiner articulated in his 1908 Berlin lecture series. Steiner argued that the material world was nothing more than delusion. Matter did not exist, he continued, with a conviction reinforced by Rutherford's by then



well-known dissolution of the atom in 1902.<sup>26</sup> Spirit alone existed, Steiner maintained.

When we really scrutinize, what do we find? Spirit! Color relates to spirit as ice to water. Tone relates to spirit as ice to water. Instead of a fantastic world of whirling-about atoms, the true thinker and spiritual pioneer finds spirit, spiritual reality behind that which he sees and hears, so that the question regarding the existence of the material loses all sense. When the spirit becomes external, then it appears as color, as tone. Color and tone are nothing other than pure spirit. It is exactly the same thing which we discover in ourselves when we properly understand ourselves.<sup>27</sup>

Kandinsky attended these lectures in 1908.<sup>28</sup> In fact, his theories in 1909 to 1912 resemble Steiner's assertions from 1908.<sup>29</sup> Steiner suggests in the brief excerpt above that color and tone are intangible, but perceptible through the spirit. Additionally, one can discover their essence within oneself. Steiner continued to explain in his 1908 lectures that we see the prismatic colors of a rainbow as a reflection of the sun. Similarly our "higher organs" may be trained to perceive the reflections of the spiritual behind colors.<sup>30</sup> Kandinsky's beliefs regarding the expression of *innerer Klang* and the special expressive value of color were clearly stimulated by these ideas of Steiner, which we know he heard and discussed.

Kandinsky most likely also discovered a fertile source for ideas in the work of the French critic-theosophist, Edouard Schuré.<sup>31</sup> In 1906 Steiner met Schuré, and a collaboration ensued. Steiner produced Schuré's plays in Munich beginning in 1907 and continuing through 1912.<sup>32</sup> In fact, through Schuré and his belief in the ability of performing arts to evoke spiritual or transcendent experience, Steiner became convinced of the proselytizing power of theatrical works and began himself to compose and produce plays he termed "mystery-dramas."<sup>33</sup> In the productions of Schuré and Steiner, the symbolism of colored lights, sets and costumes were carefully coordinated to the textual themes, a device which presaged Kandinsky's employment of symbolic color in his theater-pieces written in the early teens.

For Schuré, the notion that the unified performing arts were a medium for eliciting spiritual states derived from Wagnerian principles, a point he clearly acknowledged in his 1875 *The Musical Drama*. This two volume work examined the development of music and poetry from Greek drama to modern opera. In fact, the second volume is exclusively devoted to Richard Wagner, who, Schuré asserted, was single-handedly preparing the foundation for a future age of spiritual regeneration.<sup>34</sup> By combining dance or gestural movement, poetry and music, Schuré explained Wagner's operas employed artistic, material means to unveil transcendent, spiritual realities.

Schuré further developed his spiritualist ideas in a later two volume work, *The Great Initiates*, originally published in France in 1889 and translated to German with a preface by Steiner in 1907.<sup>35</sup> This work presented a history of mystical knowledge by explaining the philosophical and mystical doctrines of carefully selected historical and legendary figures, from the Aryan Rama to Moses, Plato and finally Jesus. This historical approach was to stem the tide of what Schuré perceived as a hostile opposition between science

and religion. Schuré hoped his account of earlier philosophies, which emphasized an organic unity of "intellectual principles and spiritual life," would foster the synthesis of science, religion and art central to theosophic doctrine.<sup>36</sup>

Considering that Schuré's work was readily available to Kandinsky in Munich, due in large part to Steiner, that Schuré was among the first to praise and promote the Wagnerian unity of the arts in theater, and that Schuré provided a historical model for a synthesis of science, religion and art, one can argue reasonably that Kandinsky would have found the coincidence of ideas between himself and Schuré an encouragement to advance his own independently evolving theories regarding the primacy of art.

Another apparently influential theosophical source for Kandinsky was the book *Thought-Forms*, a copy of which still exists in his Neuilly-sur-Seine library.<sup>37</sup> Besant and Leadbeater attempted in this book to codify a mystical phenomenon they termed "thought-forms," which can be best explained as the configuration of color and shape elicited by a given emotion or thought. They described the phenomenon.

Man, the Thinker, is clothed in a body composed of innumerable combinations of subtle matter of the mental plane.... The mental body is an object of great beauty, the delicacy and rapid motion of its particles giving it an aspect of living iridescent light.... Every thought gives rise to a set of correlated vibrations in the matter of this body, accompanied with a marvelous play of color, like that in the spray of a waterfall as the sunlight strikes it, raised to the nth degree of color and vivid delicacy. The body under this impulse throws off a vibrating portion of itself, shaped by the nature of the vibrations...and this gathers from the surrounding atmosphere matter like itself in fineness from the elemental essence of the material world. We have then a thought-form pure and simple, and it is a living entity of intense activity animated by the one idea that generated it.<sup>38</sup>

The possible array of thought-forms are explained and illustrated throughout the book. For example, "definite affection" is illustrated as a red projectile shape. The color red signifies affection and personal well-being, while the shape indicates "emphatic intention coupled with unhesitating action of the original thought."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, "rush of devotion" is portrayed by the projectile shape, but is blue to indicate spirituality.

The book ends with a section on "Forms Built by Music," thus not thought-forms per se. These are presented as "another type of forms unknown to those who are confined to the physical senses."<sup>40</sup> Essentially these "music-forms," like thought-forms, are psychic configurations of color and shape produced by music. Acknowledging the reality of synaesthetic effect, the authors describe music-forms.

Many people are aware that sound is always associated with color—that when, for example, a musical tone is sounded, a flash of color corresponding to it may be seen by those whose finer senses are already to some extent developed.... Sound produces form as well as color, and...every piece of music leaves behind it an impression of this nature which persists for

some considerable time... [They] remain as coherent erections for...an hour or two at least and during that time they are radiating forth their characteristic vibrations in very direction, just as our thought-forms do.<sup>41</sup>

Two fundamental principles can be identified in this book which reappear in Kandinsky's writings several years later. The first is the notion of psychic or spiritual vibration. The second is the phenomenon of synaesthesia. For the theosophists, the color and shape in thought-forms and music-forms are produced by *vibrations*. Kandinsky reiterates this notion stating, "the indefinable and yet definite activity of the soul (vibration) is the aim of the individual artistic means."<sup>42</sup> In his 1913 essay "Painting as Pure Art," he wrote, "the work of art consists of two elements: the inner and the outer....The inner element, created by the soul's vibration, is the content of the work of art. Without inner content, no work of art can exist."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in Kandinsky's conception of the work of art as an object which speaks directly to the observer's soul and which is an outer or material manifestation of the artist's inner vibrations, inner necessity, one definitely recognizes theosophical ideas. This notion of spiritual vibration also provides license for Kandinsky's belief in synaesthesia. To repeat Kandinsky's explanation previously quoted, "vibration in the receiving soul will cause other strings within the soul to vibrate in sympathy."<sup>44</sup> Hence, people taste and hear colors.

This avowal of synaesthetic phenomena relates simultaneously to Kandinsky's interest in contemporary color psychology. Although Kandinsky did not directly incorporate the results of specific experimental findings in his aesthetic theory, he followed color experiments undertaken in the period. Franz Marc acknowledged that the latest scientific discoveries were frequently discussed.<sup>45</sup> Kandinsky's interest in these experiments provides a more complete understanding of his developing ideas at the time.

Through *Thought-forms* Kandinsky would have been aware of Hippolyte Baraduc's experiments in so-called "transcendental photography." Baraduc was engaged in experiments to record the aura of humans and their psychic vibrations. In a February 1913 letter, Kandinsky mentioned the experiments of Charcot, who I assume to be Jean-Martin Charcot, an early scientist of neurology whose experiments with hypnotism influenced the young Sigmund Freud.

You surely also know the experiments of Charcot, which rather incontestably prove the material power of the mental aura. That made me think that in time brush and paint will no longer be necessary and ultimately also the "canvas" [will be unnecessary]. This won't exclude the I of discretion, of the conscious-compositional [i.e. the volition of the artist]. It will be so to speak in the final sense only a technical relief.<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he refers to three separate instances of color experimentation. Kandinsky cited an article by Dr. Franz Freudenberg, which discusses a case of a woman who tasted colors.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Kandinsky references this article to substantiate his further arguments regarding the validity of synaesthetic experience. He also mentions the

therapeutic method of the Russian music teacher, Madame Sacharjin-Unkowsky.<sup>48</sup> Apparently, she taught unmusical children melodies by a system relating color, sound and numbers. Finally, Kandinsky mentions a 1901 article from *Dekorative Kunst*, in which various means of chromotherapy for mental patients are discussed.<sup>49</sup>

Kandinsky seems to have been particularly interested in chromotherapy. Among his materials in Munich is A. Osborn Eaves 1906 book on chromotherapeutic practices, *Die Kräfte der Farben*. In this book the author suggests red light for people who feel cold or suffer from lethargy or paralysis, because of its ability to enliven and animate. Blue, on the other hand, is prescribed for people suffering from inflammation or nervous excitement, because of its ability to soothe. Judging from the markings in the margin, Kandinsky apparently carefully studied this text.<sup>50</sup> However, it is doubtful that any of these pseudo-scientific texts directly affected the development of Kandinsky's aesthetic principles. Rather, they bolstered his independent, but contemporary ideas.

Finally, music, particularly contemporary music, stimulated Kandinsky's developing ideas regarding color-music. That Kandinsky looked to music as the model for the autonomous, absolute expression he sought in painting has been acknowledged earlier. To stimulate his own thinking regarding the means through which such independence and purity of expression could be achieved in painting, Kandinsky drew especially from the accomplishments of Wagner, Scriabin and Schoenberg.

Wagner and Wagnerian principles exerted a forceful influence over Kandinsky's development. The many times that Kandinsky mentioned Wagner in his writings is partial testimony to his influence. In fact, Kandinsky stated in his *Reminiscences* that his early experience of listening to *Lohengrin*, before he had committed himself to painting, convinced him of the potential for abstract painting. Apparently, this opera elicited a synaesthetic experience for Kandinsky, who said it was as though Wagner painted music.<sup>51</sup>

Kandinsky saw in Wagner's precedent a means for freeing art from literal or overly-rational and conscious expression. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he praised Wagner's use of leitmotifs. Kandinsky found these gave a second, musical personality, rather than a strictly narrational one, to his characters. Wagner's leitmotif, Kandinsky asserted, "creates a spiritual atmosphere by means of which a musical phrase precedes the hero, which he seems to radiate from any distance."<sup>52</sup> While Kandinsky praised Wagner in this text published in January 1912, he levels harsh criticism against him in his essay "On Stage Composition," printed in the May 1912 *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*. What he earlier considered "spiritual atmosphere," he later found "purely external and superficial." Wagner, in the later essay, is presented as representative of the nineteenth-century materialism and its "ultimate degree of abasement."<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, he did acknowledge that Wagner's perception of weaknesses in nineteenth-century opera and his innovations to strengthen it led toward the development of a more spiritually-enriched or "internal" *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a concept for which Kandinsky supplies his own term, namely "monumental art."<sup>54</sup> He found that Wagner's

*Gesamtkunstwerk* did not ultimately achieve an organic cohesion of various media or devices to activate vibrations of the soul.

In particular, Kandinsky disliked Wagner's *repetition* of two media or two devices to intensify one theme, e.g. music and drama, or music and natural sound. Yet he credited Wagner for having the right idea in at least combining two forms. He criticized specifically Wagner's leitmotif for being overly literal and employing "parallel repetition" unnecessarily. These criticisms are tied to Kandinsky's conviction that great art must reflect its era. Recall that an element of "inner necessity" was evidence of the conditions of one's epoch. Since Kandinsky perceived chaos, contradiction and conflict as characterizing his age, he determined that "conflicting stimuli," not "parallel repetition," resulted in more powerful, more moving art.<sup>55</sup>

The degree to which Wagner's principle achievement of *Gesamtkunstwerk* actually influenced Kandinsky is most detectable in his stage piece, *Der gelbe Klang*. The work was never performed, although the text was published in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, music was written for it by Thomas Hartmann, and a lead performer had been selected.<sup>56</sup> The work puts into practice his notion of contrasting stimuli of the various media, and it represents his ultimate expression of a monumental work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, encouraging a synaesthetic experience.

*Der gelbe Klang* incorporates music, dance, color in light effects, and literary text. The text was minimal and non-narrational, involving the recitation of suggestive, yet abstract poetry at only two points in the piece.<sup>57</sup> Kandinsky abandoned plot, used ritualized dances, colored light, incantations of nonsensical phrases, and simplified set design to establish a mysterious setting. The various media are "emancipated," to use his term, and therefore facilitate an unmediated, immediate impression upon the spectator's soul. Kandinsky explained his objective.

Three elements that are used as external means, but for inner value [color, music, dance]...play an equally significant role, remain externally self-sufficient, and are...subordinated to the inner purpose. Thus, music can be completely suppressed or pushed into the background if the effect of the movement is sufficiently expressive and could be weakened by the combination with the powerful effect of the music. The growth of musical movement can correspond to a decrease in the movement of the dance, whereby both movements...take on a greater inner value.<sup>58</sup>

This coordination of color, music and dance resulted in what Kandinsky termed "collaboration and opposition" of media or in "contrasting stimuli" mentioned earlier. The stage piece falls clearly within the Wagnerian tradition of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Kandinsky's innovation within the tradition was to apply his concept of conflicting stimuli and to remove any artistic conventions which might inhibit the innate power of music, dance or color in their abstract, pure form.

Both Scriabin and Schoenberg also contributed to the development of Kandinsky's ideas leading to *Der gelbe Klang*.<sup>59</sup> Kandinsky became aware of

Scriabin's work in an article on Scriabin's *Prometheus*, which appeared in the Russian periodical *Muzika Ezedelnik* of January 1911.<sup>60</sup> During the year, Kandinsky contacted the author, the critic Leonid Sabaneiev, and published an edited version in the May 1912 *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*. Two things about this work would have piqued Kandinsky's interest. First, as Sabaneiev explained, Scriabin attempted "mystical art," which would "lead to an ecstatic experience—to ecstasy, to the perception of more elevated dimensions."<sup>61</sup> Scriabin was an ardent theosophist, and like Kandinsky, attempted to use artistic means to make spiritual consciousness manifest. Additionally, Scriabin also innovated a new form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. *Prometheus* was an orchestral symphony which incorporated the use of a color organ. Sabaneiev explained that

Mystical-religious art...has always used *all* available means to affect the soul.... [Scriabin] unites music with...the play of colors. In *Prometheus* the symphony of colors is based upon the principle of corresponding sounds and colors.... Each key has a corresponding color, each change of harmonies has a corresponding change of colors.... The impression produced by the music is indescribably strengthened by the play of colors.<sup>62</sup>

Kandinsky naturally admired Scriabin's intentions and recognized *Prometheus* as a variant attempt to achieve a monumental art of coordinated media. His praise was reserved, however. As with Wagner's opera, Kandinsky observed that Scriabin created a parallel between music and color. Hence, Scriabin did not incorporate the opposition of media Kandinsky found necessary for a truly affective monumental art. Regardless of this minor, but to Kandinsky significant objection, the model of Scriabin's innovation encouraged Kandinsky in the composition of his related *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

January of 1911 was a landmark month for Kandinsky. During that month he learned of Scriabin's experiment and attended a concert with Münter, Marc, and Jawlensky during which two pieces by Schoenberg were performed.<sup>63</sup> Apparently impressed by the dissonance and atonality of the music, Kandinsky wrote to Schoenberg and initiated their famous friendship.

Kandinsky recognized in Schoenberg's music a freedom he was attempting to master in painting. He suggests this in his letter to Schoenberg, stating, "the independent progress through their own destinies, the independent life of the individual voices in your compositions is exactly what I am trying to find in my paintings."<sup>64</sup> Kandinsky recognized certain implications in Schoenberg's atonality. Tonality as a convention was not actually essential to music, despite the fact that previously it was regarded as the indisputable basis of music. The inherent laws of music still applied whether a composer retained a sense of key or not. Such thinking and *practice* within another art form supported Kandinsky's independently developed views regarding painting and provided him further license to discard representation and pursue abstraction. Kandinsky also considered Schoenberg's abandonment of tonality a means which increased the direct communication to the listener's soul. He paid Schoenberg the highest compliment, writing in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that, "his music leads us to where musical experience

is a matter not of ear, but of soul—and from this point begins the music of the future.”<sup>65</sup>

In summary, color-music or synaesthesia was a central aspect of Kandinsky's early aesthetic theories. For him, the greatest potential for such synaesthetic effects was obviously possible during a multi-media performance, a form he called “monumental art.” Although he was clear regarding his inability to actually paint music, the painting itself can, if it is affective “inner” art, stimulate other senses in the observer's soul. Thus, for Kandinsky, the individual arts can “sing.” He wrote of art that, “in every case the inner sound [of spirit] will be independent of external significance. The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually affective beings.”<sup>66</sup>

## Notes

I would like to acknowledge the kind and generous support of Kermit S. Champa, whose helpful criticisms greatly enhanced this article.

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo, eds. “Reminiscences,” *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 2 vols. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>*Color-music* was a term in common usage by the first decades of our century, a term signifying the phenomenon of synaesthesia, but specifically the relation of color and music. See in particular, A. Wallace Rimington, *Color-Music, the Art of Mobile Color* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1912); Adrian Bernard Klein, *Color-Music, the Art of Light* (London: Lockwood, 1926).

<sup>4</sup>This essay concentrates on Kandinsky's early writings from 1896 to 1914 in Munich, since his fundamental ideas developed during this period. Analysis in the essay focuses upon his theoretical discussions and will not apply these theories to his own paintings of the time.

<sup>5</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 24, 33.

<sup>6</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, “Reminiscences,” 1, p. 373.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 1, p. 359.

<sup>9</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, “On the Question of Form,” 1, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup>See also Jerome Ashmore, “Sound in Kandinsky's Painting,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 35 (Spring 1977), pp. 329-336.

<sup>11</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, “On Stage Composition,” 1, pp. 257-258

<sup>12</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>14</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, “Postscript to the 1913 *Der Sturm* Kandinsky Retrospective,” 1, p. 345.

<sup>15</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup>Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich, The Formative Jugendstil Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Peg Weiss, "Kandinsky and the Symbolist Heritage," *Art Journal*, 45 (Summer 1985), pp. 137-145.

<sup>17</sup>Rose Washton-Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup>Kandinsky's library collection is preserved in the Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich.

<sup>19</sup>Sixten Ringbom, "The Sounding Cosmos," *Acta Academie Aboensis: Humaniora*, 38, no. 2 (1970), p. 212.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 224-225. Kandinsky mentions Steiner and the importance of his work in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup>Sixten Ringbom, "Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual: Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 29 (1966), p. 399.

<sup>23</sup>John Gage, "The psychological background to early modern color: Kandinsky, Delaunay and Mondrian," *Towards a New Art, Essays on the Background to Abstract Art, 1910-1920* (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup>Ringbom 1970, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 54. "Generalbass" from the German original has been translated literally here as "general bass," yet the accepted musical term in English is thorough-bass. Kandinsky mentioned Goethe three times in this text, pp. 46, 54, 73.

<sup>26</sup>Kandinsky cited the "division of the atom" as a factor which directed him from law to art. Lindsay and Vergo, "Reminiscences," 1, p. 364.

<sup>27</sup>Rudolf Steiner, *Die Erkenntnis der Seele und des Geistes: Fünfzehntöf. Vorträge* (Dornach: Verlag der Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung, 1965), pp. 70-71; cited in Ringbom 1970, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup>Ringbom 1970, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup>Kandinsky wrote the manuscript for *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1909. It was edited and published several years later in 1912. See Lindsay and Vergo, 1.; p. 114.

<sup>30</sup>Ringbom 1970, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup>I am grateful to Kermit S. Champa for bringing the relationship of Schuré and Kandinsky to my attention.

<sup>32</sup>Washton-Long, p. 55.

<sup>33</sup>See Washton-Long, pp. 55-56; Hugo Reiman, *Rudolf Steiners Mysteriendramen* 4 vols. (Dornach: Philosophisch-Anthroposophisch Verlag, 1977).

<sup>34</sup>See Richard A. Schindler, "Edouard Schuré and the *Au-dela*" (M.A. thesis, Brown University, 1982), p. 14.



<sup>35</sup>Kandinsky cited this translation by title and table of contents in his notebook dated 1908. Ringbom 1970, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Edouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates* (London: Wm. Rider and Son, 1912), p. xiv.

<sup>37</sup>Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, *Thought-forms* (London, Chicago: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905). The first edition in German was *Gedankenformen* (Leipzig: 1908). See Ringbom 1970, p. 62.

<sup>38</sup>Besant and Leadbeater, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 75, 77.

<sup>42</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "On Stage Composition," 1,, p. 257.

<sup>43</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "Painting as Pure Art," 1, p. 349.

<sup>44</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "On Stage Composition," 1, p. 258.

<sup>45</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, 1, p. 356.

<sup>46</sup>Wassily Kandinsky to Arnold Rönnebeck, February 25, 1913, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

<sup>47</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 44. Franz Freudenberg, "Über Spaltung der Persönlichkeit und verwandte psychische Fragen," *Die Übersinnliche Welt*, 16 (1908), pp. 18-22, 51-67, 101-111.

<sup>48</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46. Karl Scheffler, "Notizen über die Farbe," *Dekorative Kunst*, 5 (February 1901), pp. 183-196.

<sup>50</sup>Ringbom 1970, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "Reminiscences," 1, p. 364. In a later Russian publication of *Reminiscences*, however, Kandinsky added a footnote qualifying his enthusiasm for *Lohengrin*. Instead at that point in 1918, Kandinsky preferred *Tristan* and the *Ring des Nibelungen*, which, as he stated, "held my critical faculties in thrall for many a long year by their power and uniqueness of expression," Lindsay and Vergo, 1, p. 889.

<sup>52</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 35.

<sup>53</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "On Stage Composition," 1, p. 259.

<sup>54</sup>For definition, see *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, pp. 40, 65; "On Stage Composition," 1, p. 260.

<sup>55</sup>Washton-Long, p. 63. Kandinsky apparently formulated this notion between 1909 to 1911, when *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was written and prepared for publication, and the spring of 1912, when his article on stage composition was published, for during this interval in time he revised his attitude toward Wagner.

<sup>56</sup>The play was to have been performed in the Münchener Künstlertheater in 1914, but the outbreak of the war prevented its completed production. See Jelena Hahl-Koch, "Kandinsky's Theories on Synthesis of the Arts," *Arnold Schoenberg, Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures, Documents* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 148-152.

<sup>57</sup>Washton-Long has suggested that the Prometheus myth, especially popular in late-nineteenth-century Russian artistic circles, may provide the theme and essential meaning for this stage piece, p. 60.

<sup>58</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "On Stage Composition," 1, p. 264.

<sup>59</sup>Kandinsky wrote three other such stage compositions in the early teens, but they were never published or produced. See Susan Alyson Stein, "Kandinsky and Abstract Stage Composition: Practice and Theory, 1901-1912," *Art Journal*, 43 (Spring 1983), pp. 61-66.

<sup>60</sup>Leonid Sabaneiev, "O zvako-cretorom sootvetstvyj," *Muzika Ezedelnik*, no. 9 (January 1911), pp. 196-200.

<sup>61</sup>Klaus Lankheit, ed. *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 127.

<sup>62</sup>Lankheit, pp. 132-133. In a footnote to Sabaneiev's article in *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, Kandinsky commented, "Scriabin's musical color sensations could represent a theory of which the composers could gradually become aware....Those who listened to the *Prometheus* with the corresponding light effect admitted that the musical impression was in fact absolutely equaled by the corresponding lighting. Its power was doubled and increased to the last degree." Lankheit, p. 131.

<sup>63</sup>Second String Quarter, Opus 10 (1907-1908) and Three Piano Pieces, Opus 11 (1909). Hahl-Koch, p. 135.

<sup>64</sup>Hahl-Koch, p. 21.

<sup>65</sup>*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 36.

<sup>66</sup>Lindsay and Vergo, "On the Question of Form," 1, p. 250.

# "Can You Say Hello?"— Laurie Anderson's *United States*

By Herman Rapaport

And I said: 'Listen, I've got a vision.  
I see myself as part of a long tradition  
of American humor. You know—Bugs Bunny,  
Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd,  
Roadrunner, Yosemite Sam.'

And they said: 'Well actually, we had  
something a little more adult in mind.'

And I said: 'OK! OK! Listen, I can adapt!'

Laurie Anderson, *United States*

I

"Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am?" A voice unsure about a turn made in a car at night is asking for directions. "Hello. Excuse me," the voice says, aware of its hollowness, its persistence. "Hello..."

Searching for a whereabouts on a darkened nightclub stage, the voice of Laurie Anderson casts us deep into the precarious loneliness and awkwardness of postmodern space. It is here that saying "hello" sounds life-threatening, that initiating conversation can seem at once natural and mindlessly flippant, while disintegrating into a number of confusing tonalities and gestures bordering on nightmare. A postmodern United States. Which is to say, a postmodern unification and minimalization of experiential states, a

voyage into those common experiences within which the reduction of meaning and neutralization of apprehension betrays uneasy polyvalences. Call it the exacerbation of dead pan.

In our country this is the way we say Hello. It is a diagram of movement between two points. It is a sweep on the dial. In our country, this is also the way we say Good-bye.

Curious that the easiest gestures which are so close to us conceal a crazy semiotics.

"Say Hello" is a gesture through which bodies become signs. For example, on a spacecraft there are drawings suggested by Carl Sagan in which the outlines of a man and a woman are sketched. They are sixties figures, the woman with a rather awkward though seductive posture, the man a bit more erect. It is the man, interestingly enough, whose right arm is bent up at the elbow in a ninety degree angle. For it is he who is supposed to make contact first. "Do you think that They will think his arm is permanently attached in this position?" Anderson's blunt question is expressionless, exposing the fatuousness of "big science," the silly presupposition that aliens are going to be able to read our "signs." She suggests that in a postmodern culture scientists are so overspecialized that when it comes to basic questions they are enormously obtuse. No one has noticed that saying "hello" is exactly the same as saying "good-bye," that even if aliens could read our signs, they would be confused. The fallacy of science: let " $x = x$ ," the "united state."

*United States*. It is a performance piece of several hours duration which is narrated, illustrated, and accompanied by music. A short version has been released in a five record set by Warner Brothers, and texts with photographs have been published by Harper and Row.<sup>1</sup> "Say Hello" marks the beginning and end of the performance and has iconic force since it reminds us of a dial or clock marking not only the beginning and end but a sense of gradation or change during the piece. "Say Hello," then, is the analogue to the clocks on Anderson's projected image of the *United States* relating to time and space, which is to say, in *United States* greeting takes on spatial attributes. Indeed, the whole of *United States* can be read, watched, listened to as an analysis of how communication is determined by the conditions of postmodern space. In this sense, Anderson undertakes an anthropological project which attempts to define postmodern consciousness in terms of how communication is, in fact, subordinated to an artistic frame of reference within which the question of how things are situated in space becomes of greatest importance.

Postmodern architecture, of course, is most intriguing because in American culture it manifests a hegemonic relation between mass culture (the production and transmission of ideology by a dominant class through various media) and popular culture (the transmission of vernacular styles through gestures, word of mouth, habit, etc. within groups of all classes). Charles Jencks acknowledges this when he writes in *Architecture Today*,

A postmodern building is doubly coded—part Modern and part something else: vernacular, revivalist, local, commercial, metaphorical, or contextual. In several important instances it is also doubly coded in the sense that it seeks to speak on two levels at once: to a concerned minority of architects, an elite who recognizes the subtle distinctions of a fast-changing language, and to the inhabitants, users, or passersby, who want only to understand and enjoy it.<sup>2</sup>

Postmodern space, in other words, conflates elitist domination with spontaneous vernacular modes of apprehension. Use of the vernacular, in particular, helps speed up public comprehension and insures that because the new is somehow always something old and familiar, people will not be required to ask reflective questions, since what they are seeing is self-evident, literal. Jencks speaks for the elite when he says that “the inhabitants, users, or passersby ... want only to understand and enjoy it.” He means, in fact, that passersby are to immediately accept the hegemonic relation set up between mass and popular cultures. That the postmodern building is, in fact, not a unity but a coalition of styles is frankly admitted by postmodern architects. Again, notice Jencks who reflects on the postmodern classicism of Michael Graves’ work.

It does not try to achieve the integration, consistency, and propriety of a Vitruvian or Palladian language, but rather attempts to reach out to a variety of languages—including the industrial style—in an effort to be more broadly based.<sup>3</sup>

Postmodern architecture is, in this sense, cumulative but not integrative, aesthetic but not organic, vernacular but not anti-authoritarian. Postmodern space signifies a medley of architectural rhetorics whose interplay is appreciated on a metastylistic level which cannot be reconciled within a single interpretive glance. The work is composite and made up of stylistic zones which often break down into time zones, since the work’s coherence ultimately depends upon our ability to locate, date, and align the discontinuous and fragmentary suggestions of various periods and vernacular practices of both high and low culture. The work’s coherence is, therefore, accidental or what we might consider forced in the baroque sense. But, thanks to the work’s rhetoricity or semiosis, these stylistic fractures only strike us as playful and consonant revisions of old styles which nostalgically remind us of something at once familiar and fresh. If, as some architects assume, architecture is really to be defined as a “sphere of influence” rather than as pure formal concerns, postmodern architecture’s influence is transmitted by way of heterogeneous styles whose manner is to “invite” the eye or to “say hello.” It is in this sense that the play with the vernacular is of importance, since it functions to make people receptive to space even while as a violent interplay of styles it keeps that space at a distance, asserts an aesthetic remoteness of space from within what is familiar.

Anderson’s *United States*, because it is a “performance piece,” begins with the assumption that as landscape the U.S. is a postmodern work in which the hegemony of mass culture and popular culture is so thoroughly

established that the difference between the vernacular (pop culture) and elite (mass culture) becomes undecidable.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is an undecidability which is conveyed through the literal, the use of commonplaces and clichés which delimit what reality is supposed to mean for us. It is as if the vernacular is always saturated with authoritarianism, hence becoming sinister, and as if the authoritarian were always being contaminated by the vernacular in such a way that it seems ridiculous, idiotic, in its oversimplification of complex thoughts. This transference between popular and mass culture is reflected everywhere in postmodern architecture, and in Anderson's *United States*, we hear the rhetoricity of that transaction in terms of communication as an act taking place within a particular spatial condition. This is thematized in "Example #22" in which reference is made to an empty room which after twenty years is being monitored by a microphone and a tape recorder for sound residues. The phrases supposedly captured on the tape recorder as well as the whole "scientific" project is delimited by way of the question of spatiality, for it is as if space itself were talking. But throughout "Example #22," which is recited in poor German (referring to Goethe's last words), the collision in this space is that of elitist culture (science) and a vernacular culture (i.e., "Goethe ist ein diplomat," "So viele licht hier"). Obviously, the frame of the room as space imitates the empty stage which Anderson herself is occupying, and the collision of elitist and vernacular styles is emphasized through the engagement of ordinary talk with sophisticated electronic equipment. In "Say Hello," as well, one notices how something simple in the vernacular when performed within an authoritarian or elitist space—i.e., Carl Sagan's noble experiment to talk to aliens—becomes an embarrassment. Here it is not so much that a class of speakers is resisting high culture, but that the vernacular itself displays innate potentials for making scientists appear idiotic. Conversely, however, in a song piece entitled "O Superman," authoritarianism saturates vernacular or pop culture in such a way that behind flimsy expressions we intuit something murderous and catastrophic. Indeed, the placid crying of birds in the background of the piece suggests extinction, because by way of mass culture the sounds of nature have become associated with authoritarian messages about living in a world where life is becoming extinct. Yet it is a message which is communicated by way of a certain muzak, that is to say, a very unthreatening, even pleasant, experience. And it is this "invitation" to consider disaster which constitutes a postmodern receptivity or familiarity with that which is life threatening.

So hold me Mom, in your long arms,  
in your automatic arms,  
your electronic arms,  
So hold me Mom, in your long arms,  
your petrochemical arms,  
your military arms,  
in your electronic arms...

As map, the United States itself is conveyed to us in a very child-like and inoffensive manner, its time zones demarcated with the appropriate parti-

tions and clocks. *United States* performs these zones and in doing so develops themes like greetings, love, signs, women, outer space, government, homelessness, catastrophe, science, business, ethnocentrism, objects, rituals, etc. Like Brecht, Anderson is not rigid about final versions of her work, and *United States* is very much a collage of music, words, and pictures which the performer can change at will without really disturbing the overall scheme too much. Perhaps it is because the tonality of the performance as a whole is so strong that the individual parts of *United States* do not depend upon plotting or sequencing so much as they do upon "voicings." And it is in this sense that music is a very crucial element, sustaining, as it does, a number of moods which saturate the individual song-pieces. Like a postmodern building, of course, Anderson's work stresses the accidental and the element of surprise, not to mention the fundamental ambivalences about how mass culture affects popular culture and vice versa. That is, *United States* is about space as a "sphere of influence" which is comprised of ambiances of meaning that are, like postmodern buildings, at once extremely self-evidently literal and yet unassimilable because of their blending of extremely subtle harmonies of elitist and vernacular expressions. The four zones of *United States* represent 1)transportation, 2)politics, 3)money, and 4)personal relationships. Each of these temporal/spatial zones is associated with a movement, like panning, dropping, grabbing, free standing. And these visual "movements" suggest an Eriksonian mode of erotogenetic developing which concern not just body zones but stages of personal growth.<sup>5</sup> Yet if *United States* incipiently concerns such notions of growth, it does so only to show how contrary to an American emphasis on development and getting ahead, America reflects a network of relations which only lead to a postmodern condition of advanced underachievement, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of late capitalist underdevelopment. In itself this is already a part of the American postmodern landscape, for what one detects is the collision of vernacular styles signifying a purposeful retardation of critical power, a stunting of conceptual development, opting for instantaneous motifs, nostalgic fixations, cultural leitmotifs. Instead of styles which show a capacity for development and growth, the postmodern displays little more than resonance or the power of evocation, what Fredric Jameson has called the "commodification of the unconscious."<sup>6</sup>

## II

Whereas architects consider questions of form and function or, more recently, the semiotics of architecture, Anderson notices space less as an area in which to be confined than as a surface to be crossed. Alan Colquhoun in "On Modern and Postmodern Space" has written of "modern" architecture that the heart of the problem of such space concerns

[The] blowing apart of perceptible urban space, its insistence on high-rise housing, and the precedence it gave to fast automobile circulation. It seems that what started as a utopian critique of nineteenth-century housing

conditions turned into nothing more than what was needed for the success of twentieth-century economic centralism, whether in the form of monopoly capitalism or socialist bureaucratic control. This raises the whole problem of the unbridgeable gulf between what the individual can perceive and feel at home in, and the vast, abstract infrastructural network that is necessary for the operation of the modern consumer and media-based society.<sup>7</sup>

Colquhoun is very much aware of modern space as a dimension of mass culture, which is to say, the production of space as a sphere of influence whose purpose is to advance a "media-based" culture. Architecture itself functions like a medium, a network which makes possible the propagation of a utopian but elitist culture which depends upon consumption as much as upon production. Central to this view, Colquhoun points out, is the fact that at the turn of our century architects and social planners begin to think of space as preexistent and unlimited, as abstract and essentially undifferentiated.

Anderson's *United States* is largely about how popular culture has situated itself within this modernist notion of space. In a section of part 4 of *United States* entitled "The Stranger," Anderson projects four pictures of suburban houses onto a screen behind her. These houses are typical of any one would find in a current real estate market booklet, though the styles Anderson has chosen are somewhat similar: two story homes built in the 1950s or thereabouts. As she projects the photographs, Anderson comments: "It's the one with the pool." "It's the one on the corner with the big garage." "It's the one with the fir tree in the front yard." "Leave the lights on. It's twilight." Anderson intuits that even though the houses are all different, their owners would probably demarcate their homes by means of vernacular descriptions, such as "it's the one with the pool." Differences are extremely minimal in the vernacular imagination, as if it were impossible to describe where one lived in terms of explaining the architectural style. For popular culture has adapted itself to the idea that living space is so abstract that only some very minimal detail can distinguish one place from another. "It's the one with the fir tree in the front yard." Similarly, with respect to a map of the United States, it is only the minimal cue of the time zone which really differentiates one zone from another. For, once more, space is abstract, undifferentiated, monotonous, and, above all, limitless in the eyes of the "developer."

Space, because it is so abstract, is less a place in which to live than a surface to traverse. And this traversing occurs, Anderson suggests, in the service of communication, since it is through making and breaking contacts that the postmodern individual comes to be. Most striking is that the subject undergoes a certain reduction as it becomes more and more involved in crossing space for the sake of establishing communication, and Anderson symbolizes this condition in terms of making references in words, pictures, and music to the image of a dog.

I came home today  
and you were all on fire.  
Your shirt was on fire,



and your hair was on fire,  
and flames were licking all around your feet.  
And I did not know what to do!  
And then a thousand violins began to play,  
And I really did not know what to do then.  
So I just decided to go out  
and walk the dog.

“Walking the Dog” reads like a poem by Eluard, though its surrealism underscores the mobility which allows one to simply walk out on someone in trouble, that mobility which we have in common with dogs. In “Dog Show,” we are told

I dreamed I was a dog in a dog show.  
And my father came to the dog show.  
And he said: That’s a really good dog.  
I like that dog.

The identification of narrator and dog suggests that the more minimal one becomes the more attractive one becomes. And it suggests that the minimalism of a canine condition is the primary means by which we gain access to others.

And then all my friends came and I  
was thinking:  
No one has ever looked at me like this  
for so long.

The subject as dog is “safe,” for such a subject has the mobility through which to break off relations which demand obligations of the subject and establish relations which make possible a certain necessary popularity.

Since dogs traverse spaces more or less at will in daily life, as well as in Anderson’s *America*, the inference is established that dogs are best at bringing together the activity of making personal contact with that of crossing spatial boundaries. The dog is that minimal signifier which operates in order to bring things into proximity while its very condition of being is one of floating across or traversing various locations. It is, in a word, the “floating signifier” of *United States*. Moreover, the dog has postmodern architectural attributes in that like the nostalgic or pop motif it is immediately assimilated even though as a thing-in-itself the dog is insignificant. The dog functions as merely a minimal cue by means of which dialogue is easily entered. And, as is well known, dogs are often used as occasions or invitations for starting and stopping conversations. As such, they are united states or gestures which function like “hello” or “good-bye” to control the flow of communication. The ability of the dog to function like a switch allows the subject to cross social space quickly, or, to scan that space, by suddenly entering and exiting dialogues, thus saturating a social space with great ease. As walkers of dogs, we take on minimal qualities ourselves as we blend into the vernacular act of “walking the dog.” Suddenly, like our dogs, we

can roam space without being suspected of having an “interestedness” or involvement with space. For as canine being we are permitted to snoop everywhere but explore nowhere, since our movement makes up an unanalytical snooping, perhaps even a random and “disinterested” crossing of space which is non-threatening. “And he said: That’s a really good dog. I like that dog.”

In a postmodern age, the modern has been assimilated rather than rejected, and it is in this sense that *United States* is not so much a celebration of modernism as it is a demonstration of the degree to which we have internalized what previous generations have considered alien and pernicious. That we have acceded to the condition of dogs is less a criticism of our postmodern condition than it is a recognition of what we really are, an acceptance that we succeed best when we take on a dog’s minimal appearance. The disinterested condition of our canine existence is what postmodern architects take as endemic to our aesthetic relation to space: mere traffic, non-consciousness. Since postmodern space is meant to be minimally hermeneutic for the casual passerby, these urban complexes withdraw from intellectual reflection and apprehension, and not only do these buildings not belong to us—they are, after all, “private property”—they refuse to even appear as constructions worthy of attention, themselves but postmodern dogs. Yet, as Anderson notices in “Dog Show,” it is this vacuity which elicits an elongated staring whose expansiveness is a measure of a failure to grasp the object. “No one has ever stared at me for so long, for such a long time, for so long.” Postmodern space thus becomes phantasmic and dreamy as the gaze is dissipated in the massive thereness of the inappropriable.

This resistance of mass culture to appropriation is what facilitates the fugitive glance, the trafficking of the self through space. Visually we find ourselves moving through space rather than in it, and this is a point also made in another work about America entitled *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film about postmodern space with music by Philip Glass, privileging the notion of life as a condition of being reduced to mere traffic. But whereas *Koyaanisqatsi* sickens with its prolonged redundancies of futile transit in New York City and Los Angeles, Anderson’s *United States* investigates our trafficky relation to postmodern ambience in more nuanced and individualistic terms. For Anderson is more receptive (less modernist) to the fact that our conversations and intimate encounters are patterned on a mode of inhabiting space which has much in common with transitional states of consciousness, with a traveling consciousness. Our conversations are patterned on the model of the expressway where we are always suddenly encountering signs or gestures indicating entrances, exits, continuations, turn offs, detours, mergings, speed signs, and so on. Like a track, talk is made up of cues indicating directionality, facilitating passage, noting locations. Which is to say, talk is itself embedded within the codes of postmodern space. Notice, for example, “New York Social Life.”

Hi! How are you? Where’ve you been? Nice to see you. Listen, I’m sorry I missed your thing last week, but we should really get together, you know, maybe next week. I’ll call you. I’ll see you. Bye bye.

Or,

Listen, Laurie, uh, if you want to talk before then, uh, I'll leave my answering machine on...and just give me a ring...anytime.

These excerpts from "New York Social Life" focus less on the outrage of what is evidently an awkward discourse painfully aware of its own compulsion towards insincerity, what is a wavering between sympathy and selfishness, than upon the superficiality of conversation as a slick surface of ready-made signs or gestures used to quickly break off or establish contact. It is what in business is called "one minute management." In "New York Social Life" it appears that the persona has been depressed; yet, the conversations surrounding her use a rhetoric of concern to maintain an interpersonal network whose purpose is to map an individual's relationship within a social system. Concern is merely an excuse for finding out "are you there?" The notion of United States as map, then, so basic to Anderson's work, relates to the true purpose of postmodern talk: to determine where one is on a social grid when en route. To make telephone calls, in this way, is to establish something close to radar contact with other entities, and this is reflected in Anderson's fascination with airplanes, missiles, and spacecraft. We are ourselves but vehicles that not only cross spaces but are monitored, and the answering machine in "New York Social Life" is simply a monitoring device which fulfills a primary condition of postmodern communication: to make contact and check in. Conversation itself is superfluous. For in a postmodern world it is through tracking that we affirm our niche in a community always on the move, and our attachments, obligations, and sympathies are only ways of facilitating the kinds of contact needed to perform a map of social relations. Like a dog, feelings, concerns, issues, and information become excuses to open and close conversations. They are merely "switches." Much of *United States*, then, is a performance of this use of operators through which conversations become less about messages than the making and breaking of contacts in the Jakobsonian sense.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of communication is to draw people's relations, to map our position, rather than enter into situations as part of day to day experience. To "walk the dog" is precisely to negotiate inhabiting a space on the margin of "situations" such that one can relate without having to be related. And performance art itself is but the re-enactment of this mapping or "drawing" of relations.

But such minimalization of content and maximizing of contact requires "undercommittedness," and Anderson exaggerates weak social contacting through tautology. The undercommitment makes for bonds that are strong enough to establish one in a position without allowing that to solidify into a situation where one can become bound. The tautology is crucial because it asserts position without defining what occupies this space. This is an essential feature of postmodern architecture which promotes circulation, immediacy, passage, movement, a space which depends upon weak contacts in order that circuits are established for commercial success. In *United States* Anderson is well aware that she is, herself, a postmodern topos, and writes of herself,

Well I was trying to think of something to tell you about myself and I came across this brochure they're handing out in the lobby. And it says something I wanted to say—only better.

It says: Laurie Anderson, in her epic performance of *United States Parts 1 through 4*, has been baffling audiences for years with her special blend of music...slides...films...tapes...films (did I say films?)...hand gestures and more. Hey hey hey hey hey hey! (Much more.)

The tautology of saying "I am what this says I am" allows for a re-performance of pre-established relations, mainly those set out in the promotional literature. Anderson and her work are established as a sign which involves a stable contact rather than a specific content. The promotional material is not an accurate description of what Anderson does, because its function is not meant to be mimetic; rather, it is supposed to make familiar through the manipulation of easily assimilated signs. The point is to give the performer position or location (space) at the expense of definition. And in this sacrifice of definition, Anderson gains freedom and ambiguity which allows her to be many things in many places while as contact always remaining minimally the same. It is in this sense that she "deconstructs" the border between identity and difference, that she appears as something at once determinate and indeterminate.

The tautology establishes Anderson as postmodern motif as well as statue to the extent that she is fixed as minimal cue, as a "really good dog." This relates to the business of performance art generally, of course, in that success is everywhere based on such minimalization, since one must be active as a contact in proximity to other contacts on a performance map: other performance artists, entertainers, singers, actors. Anderson becomes like a movie star whose conversations on television talk shows ironize the fact that speaking in person on camera does nothing else than serve to reinforce one's minimal reference or position relative to others in the media and society at large. In this sense the performer acts as a complex signifier whose significance is syntactic. This minimalization of the performer as content and maximizing of the performer as contact or relay reveals a structuralist view of television that accounts for why this medium is so powerful for entertainers: it activates and maps the reduction of the star to a point which is related or drawn within a mobile array of faces and figures which present themselves synchronically on contiguous stations. That we are not particularly interested in or fascinated with certain figures as agencies of visual content is compensated for by the fact that these figures are meaningful only in terms of how they are set up as references with respect to one another. In this sense the communication between figures is intimately connected within a tele-vised space, predicated on the conditions of postmodern, structuralist space. Indeed, it is the figure's vacuousness or minimalism which allows for its powerful mobility as cursor within an electronic system of mapped and transitory relations. Hence to have character in this context becomes a measure of one's inability to become present as something determinate. One accedes to becoming "Pac Man," and in large part Anderson's *United States* is a long meditation about how such reductionisms are performed or imitated.

It is in terms of this performance, however, that we see not merely the minimalization of the artist but also its powerful propagation within a media culture, and it is for this reason that Anderson's work becomes strangely allied with mass culture. For she is herself acceding to an authoritarian system of cultural production disseminating her work through Warner Brothers and Harper and Row. Therefore in Anderson's performance art we see the easy alliance of both popular and elite culture, the postmodern replication of a hegemonic structure which has caused alarm for some critics of her work. And yet, one could argue that this replication of the hegemony is itself but an imitation of something that is occurring in our culture generally, that in performing the hegemony Anderson is also miming it. Here again one is reminded of Anderson's formula "let  $x = x$ ," which in computer lingo means, let  $x$  stand for whatever you wish.

## II

I had this dream  
and in it I wake up in this small  
house...I'm not  
a person in this dream; I'm a  
place. Yeah...just a place.

In *United States* woman is herself considered a space or topos of postmodern existence. And as such she is tautologous, minimal. Especially in the last part of *United States*, Anderson explores not merely the position one occupies on a map of social relations, but the existential "moods," as Heidegger might have called it, of postmodern being. This is already well anticipated in "modern" literature, and particularly important in this respect is Marcel Proust's depiction of Albertine in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Marcel recounts his apprehension of the tom-boy at Balbec in this way.

To be quite accurate, I ought to give a different name to each of the selves who subsequently thought about Albertine; I ought still more to give a different name to each of the Albertines who appeared before me, never the same, like those seas—called by me simply and for the sake of convenience 'the sea'—that succeeded one another and against which, a nymph likewise, she was silhouetted.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout Marcel's lengthy descriptions of Albertine in *A la recherche* we notice that she is viewed as a topos that is refracted, luminous, and surfacy. She is approachable but not appropriable. Like the movie star of the silver screen she is a topos of projected light, a minimal being whose indistinctness becomes a measure of her power to fulfill her ambitions as a social climber, to become "known." Of all the women Marcel meets, Albertine is the closest to being "nothing." For she says and does nothing which might give substance or ballast to the impressions she makes. Even the fact that she is a bicyclist only emphasizes her vacuity and fugitive qualities. She is, finally, more like an atmosphere than a character, a minimal finitude that is only traced or drawn from within the hypotheses of a hypochondriac's

mercurial wishes and fears. She is, in terms of Marcel's mean spirited jealousy in *La prisonniere*, a crazy quilt map of possible liaisons whose constructions are as fantastic as they are plausible in the wake of Marcel's careful trackings of Albertine's movements.

There is, admittedly, little of the high seriousness of Proust in the flippant portrayal of postmodern woman in Anderson's *United States*, no sense of judgment in this anything-is-okay world. And yet in the song-piece, "Blue Lagoon," Anderson's persona, "Blue Pacific," has everything in common with Proust's Albertine. For Blue Pacific is also a sea surface, an atmosphere of modulating moods. Like Albertine, Blue Pacific is seen as a tourist whose state is an undercommittedness of consciousness, a studied underachievement. And like Albertine, Blue Pacific appears to sleep even while awake. She is that enigmatic surface basking in the unaccountability of its actions, slipping into habitual and monotonous personal abandonments that are unconsidered and unrecoverable. Like Albertine, Blue Pacific is beyond remembrance of things past.

I got your letter. Thanks a lot.  
I've been getting lots of sun  
and lots of rest. It's really hot.  
Days,  
I dive by the wreck.  
Nights,  
I swim in the blue lagoon.

I always used to wonder who I'd bring  
to a desert island.  
Days,  
I remember cities.  
Nights,  
I dream about a perfect place.

Days,  
I dive by the wreck.  
Nights,  
I swim in the blue lagoon.  
Full fathom five  
thy father lies.  
Of his bones  
are coral made.  
Those are pearls  
that were his eyes.  
Nothing about him fades.  
But that suffers a sea change.  
Into something rich  
and strange.

And I alone am left to tell the tale...  
Call me Ishmael.  
I got your letter. Thanks a lot.  
I've been getting lots of sun. It's really  
hot.

I always wondered who I'd bring  
to a desert island.

Days,  
I remember rooms.  
Nights,  
I swim in the blue lagoon.

I saw a plane today flying low  
over the island.  
But my mind  
was somewhere else.

And if you ever  
get this letter:  
Thinking of you.  
Love and kisses...  
Blue  
Pacific  
signing off.

The narration is accompanied by sonorous music: overlays of the new consonance, unfocused, busy, in suspension, the metallic drumming contradicting the pacific references. The heat and lazy acquiescence to dives by wreck, the nightly swims in the lagoon, and tanning are submerged in waves of aural unfocusing. Anderson's slow and deliberate reading accentuates tonal registers of depression, lassitude, longing, and also a remote pleasure and bliss within a space of quiet forgetfulness reminding us of lotus eaters by the beach. As a whole, "Blue Lagoon" does not try to achieve integration or cohesion, but ripples out into a variety of tonal saturations as Blue Pacific modulates attention from the letter to the weather, from her remembering cities and her dreams about perfect places. "I always used to wonder who I'd bring to a desert island." As in a postmodern structure there are meta-textual allusions; for example, Shakespeare, Melville, T.S. Eliot, Adrienne Rich, but also the film, *Blue Lagoon*, starring Brooke Shields. These intertexts are not cited but simply merge or float into Blue Pacific's reveries, suggesting however remotely a vague yet poignant hostility towards men and paternity (death of the father in Shakespeare, death of Ahab in Melville, the death of parents in *Blue Lagoon*, the rejection of males by Rich, Amfortas in Eliot, etc.). Here the intellectualism of the allusions meets the tonality of burnt-out existence, particularly with the desperate last line in which an S.O.S. can be detected. "Love and kisses. Blue Pacific. Signing off."

Although Blue Pacific knows where she is on the social map of leisure, she has, nevertheless, lost self-reference, closure. She is at the furthest limit of attenuated contactings and as such in the heart of postmodern mass culture, basking in the sun at a high class resort. Whereas Proust's Albertine is capable of harboring secrets, Blue Pacific is emptied of all interiority. She is herself the island space on which she lies, a sleepy surface suspended in the water. "Days, I dive by the wreck. Nights, I swim in the blue lagoon." The name,

Blue Pacific, is itself resonating contradictions that defy coherence, while overall a sense of tranquility is communicated, for Blue Pacific suggests "sad ocean" or "sad peacefulness" while suggesting the play of light on a beautiful sea, azure and calm. Perhaps "Blue Pacific" isn't a name at all but just the topos associated with a floatation of voicings, the dissipation of woman into landscape. "I'm not a person in this dream; I'm just a place. Yeah...just a place." And yet, despite this dissolution of voice into space we feel traces or residues of volition uneasily affirming themselves. For the narration suggests a question never explicitly formulated but hovering. "But if I am what everyone desires to be, why don't you want me?" Traces of willed confrontation make up an under-consciousness of words, a submerged, marginal insistence which pleads from beneath: the "wreck" in Shakespeare, Melville, Eliot, Rich, *Blue Lagoon*. It is this "wreck," of course, that the "letter" elides even as it sounds its depths, careful to avoid intimacy.

Readers will no doubt notice that as "poetry" the lyrics of "Blue Lagoon" are reminiscent of an American poetry written in a self-consciously flat and laconic style in which colloquialisms typically introduce pathetic ironies of everyday life. One is reminded of not only Adrienne Rich, but of Howard Nemerov, or Carolyn Kizer. Anderson's lyrics, however, are not meant to satirize so much as they re-perform while carefully abandoning pretensions of the well craftedness of poetry. For it is in the awkwardness of approximations that Anderson captures tonalities of an American lingo. Her project is to produce a mock-up or facsimile, to draw, as it were, from real life a model in the medium of the things themselves. In this sense performance art is by nature ephemeral, since the copy offers itself as something almost interchangeable with the object it mimes. That is to say, the performed work deconstitutes the difference/identity between object/facsimile. It is, to recall the work of Jacques Derrida, deconstructive. However, whereas Derrida's deconstructions always give rise to "saying," Anderson's trace-work has much more in common with the autistic drift of the New Realism. As Duane Hanson has said about new realism:

New Realist painting reflects everyday life or what we are thinking about, whatever it is you recognize, imagery you are confronted with. But it's not like Pop Art, it's more reserved; it's just taking it with no comment.<sup>10</sup>

The translation of this new realism into performance occurs, of course, by way of figures like Yvonne Rainer, a dancer associated with the Judson Dance Theater, who in the mid 1960s drew up a chart outlining the relation between objects and dance. In this schema she opposes "illusionism" (objects) to "performance" (dance) and she has written,

The artifice of performance has been reevaluated [in the sense that] what one does is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude, and that action can best be focused on through the submerging of the personality; so ideally one is not even oneself, one is a neutral 'doer.'

Also,



The display of technical virtuosity and the display of the dancer's specialized body no longer make any sense.<sup>11</sup>

Rainer was especially interested in translating objects into performance such that "the dance equivalent is the indeterminate performance that produces variations ranging from small details to a total image."<sup>12</sup> And this is precisely what Anderson's version of the new realism achieves as a performance: the production of an indeterminacy whose variations are at once extremely nuanced and unpredictable, yet uncomfortably faithful to the "objects" themselves. It is in this performance that personality is submerged, as Rainer suggested twenty years ago, and that technical virtuosity is abandoned. In "Blue Lagoon" we see the apogee of this type of performance insofar as the tonalities of a represented object, *Blue Pacific*, are performed such that character itself is never quite established, since the performer has successfully "submerged" herself in a neutrality of doing. The performance of the words, themselves so reminiscent of contemporary American poetry, accedes to an anonymity through which both the apparatuses of mass culture and popular culture can be heard in what literary critics today call a "dialogic relation," that is to say, an interpenetration of cultural voices.<sup>13</sup> However, whereas dialogic structures are often considered to be polyvalent, massive, complex, modernist, in Anderson they are achieved much more economically through a minimalist approach that is much closer to Yvonne Rainer's notions of minimalist dance than has, perhaps, been recognized.

#### IV

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson talks about the postmodern production of "blank parody" or "pastiche," and he notices it not in performance art, but in film.<sup>14</sup> Jameson argues that postmodern parody has the aim of pointing out the "death of the social subject"—the end of consciousness—and the total degradation of language. What Jacques Ehrmann addressed in the late sixties as a "death of literature" on the avant garde horizon has in our time become a generally recognized feature of contemporary life, in Jameson's view. Hence in place of authentic works we have merely retreads, pastiches.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.<sup>15</sup>

With respect to cinema, pastiche marks, in Jameson's opinion, a loss of an historical point of reference, that basis upon which satire in previous periods depended. Jameson writes,

It seems to me exceedingly symptomatic to find the very style of nostalgia films invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself.<sup>16</sup>

For Jameson, “blank parody” is an indictment of the decadence of consumer culture, a formation of art which is symptomatic of an ahistoricism, an anti-intellectualism. At issue is that such art is not simply uncritical, but fundamentally anti-critical, that it is, as Susan Sontag noted long ago, “against interpretation.” In this sense, a work like “Blue Lagoon” or *United States*, as a whole, maintains its position within the hegemony of mass and popular culture, precisely because it replicates something very fundamental to late capitalism itself: a presentation of a now which is inaccessible to critical consciousness, which elides the very capacity to gain that point of view by means of which contemporary culture can be evaluated, thought, represented. However literal the “new realism” may appear, it is, like the most abstract “modern” art forms, anti-representational and hence what Georg Lukács would have called wholly “subjective.”<sup>17</sup> For, paradoxical as it may seem, it is only when a representation takes a position other than the purely neutral that it becomes “objective,” since it is then that the representation begins to relate diachronically with culture as a whole, implying, as it does, a system of values, attitudes, forms, criticisms, positions, and so on. Postmodern pastiche, in Jameson’s opinion, is the antithesis to an aesthetics which implies, as Kant would have noted, a judgment.<sup>18</sup>

“Blue Lagoon” uses “blank parody” or “pastiche” not to indict postmodern space, but to perform it. Reminiscent of Yvonne Rainer’s remarks above, Anderson herself has said, “In a performance, though, you don’t have to have character. If you want to talk about earthquakes all you have to do is say ‘earthquakes.’” And with regard to space itself, she has said, “You become aware, because of [the sending of standing] waves, of your placement in the room. It’s like being blind, in a sense, because you feel the space behind you; it’s a way to prevent falling into an illusion, into film space.”<sup>19</sup> Both of these statements address questions of how representation or illusions are “framed” in a mimetic sense; they are statements referring to what Derrida has called the “parergonal.”<sup>20</sup> And they are concerned not with structuring an uncritical space so much as the production of an ambiguous or undecidable space within which sonorities, textures, or tonalities can be aired such that their incipient judgments, worn and torn through use, make themselves felt. It is here that character or “film space” only gets in the way, that it pre-structures our apprehension of ephemeral nuances which have become so much a part of our *Gerede*, our everyday talk.<sup>21</sup> That Blue Pacific is a texture of worn out American vernacular signals a blending of speech: the clichés of vacationers, the institutionalized lyric, the ham radio operator, the talk show, and so on. It is within this surprising harmony or consonance that critical space is filled in and judgments apparently suppressed. And yet, within this foreclosure of criticism we still hear the traces of judgment, the

residues of attitudes, the under-consciousness of vacuity. Especially in "Blue Lagoon" pastiche is less a celebration of the death of the subject than it is the performance of authoritarian colonization, the take over by mass culture of the subject whose very acquiescence is a measure of historical consciousness. This, of course, is what Jameson views as an effect of postmodern art in any case; however, it is an effect not intuited from without by the critic, simply, but is always already part of the act of performance itself.

Anderson's work is not part of a historical forgetting, but is an attempt to accurately describe through pastiche how the hegemony of pop and mass culture manages to suture the historical subject. It is a suturing that paradoxically elicits experiences of a decentered and detotalized consciousness whose nostalgic, vernacular expressions reveal an uncomfortable alliance between elite and vernacular culture. In "Blue Lagoon" the vacationing woman is at once consonant with mass culture, that of the "island vacation," though she is dependent on ready-made expressions, with vernacular overtones. In fact, her reliance on banalities insures that she can gain, at the cost of decentering, what is known as coverage, reach, extension. That is, by acquiescing, she accedes to a particular kind of power: "Always wondered who I'd bring to a desert island." Emphasis, then, is not upon who one is, but upon where one can be.

Rather than searching the wreckage of culture for depleted bits of language, Anderson looks for expressions which resonate in terms of the postmodern hegemonic relations between popular and mass culture. To see this aspect of her work one has to be sensitive to the possible kinds of vernacular bits and pieces which Anderson could successfully appropriate, what we might call the postmodern lexicon of everyday life. A good example turns up in *The Executive Female*, a trade journal for women, in which we find monthly tips about successful behavior. This particular section is entitled "Working Smart."

In a poll of Fortune 500 company chief executives, the Pets Are Wonderful Council in Chicago found that 94 percent of 76 respondents have a cat or dog as a 'child.' The executives said pets helped them develop positive character traits. 'My dog taught me about love, devotion and sacrifice,' said one.<sup>22</sup>

The matter-of-factness with which an executive can say 'My dog taught me about love' is perfectly in step with the uncritical tonalities in Anderson's "Dog Show." In *Executive Female*, of course, the moral is that mobility and success come at the price of interpersonal relations, and the sacrifice involved is not seen as depersonalizing, but rather as a very intelligent option considering a society in which personal attachments only lead to professional complications. Blue Pacific is, perhaps, most representative of such a mentality, a faithful description of how executive females think of themselves in contemporary life. To this degree, *United States* is merely a mimetic depiction of our world; it is "realistic." The problem is not so much that art has changed but that our world has changed, for there is certainly something very new about seeing phrases as obviously demeaning

as “my dog taught me about love” quoted without irony or second thought. In “my dog taught me about love” we hear, without any assistance from a performance artist, a strange medley of tonalities, at once silly, pathetic, vacuous, uncritical, cynical, naive. Indeed, it is such phrases which may be determining the fate of speaking and being.

Michel Foucault is well known for having discussed at length the ideological implications of the institutionalization of space, and, he has noted that such institutionalization has had a major impact on how communication is structured. Anderson’s *United States* considers space, too, as a communicative structure, one in which the hegemonic relationship between mass and popular culture is awkwardly reflected through an accumulation of details which however consonant reveal their suturings. Whereas in a culture such as that of Brazil one can view the class antagonisms in terms of a stratification of discursive practices, in American culture one must interrogate the democratization of such practices, the blending of differences whose sharp edges or antagonisms are invaginated, fused, harmonized. In this sense, Anderson’s postmodern work resembles those rounded arches of postmodern architecture, those buildings which are so adept at assimilating extremely heterogeneous modes of stylistic expression. It is here that the hegemony of stylistic relations points to an effacement of the line between dominator and dominated, an effacement that isn’t even a co-optation or a measure of repressive tolerance. In Anderson this is particularly relevant for the condition of woman—in large part, Anderson’s social subject—to the extent that like all subjects she must perform in a way that stresses copying, imitating, borrowing, assimilating, appropriating, taking on styles, phrases, attitudes, forms, notions which come from outside, from a culture that prefers not to express domination in terms of subjecthood, in terms of naked power. Indeed, to exist in this kind of culture one must be prepared to be decentered, assimilated, appropriated, prepared to understand that living requires less and less effort from us, since success depends not upon being able to challenge the system and hence attempt to master it, but to acquiesce, as Blue Pacific does, to its resonances, its uncritical pathways of thought. To perform successfully in life is to become like a dog in a “dog show,” to have people say, “that’s a really good dog; I like that dog.” Postmodernism is easy, provided one knows how to access others, how to perform the “map,” how to say hello.

“Can you say hello?”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Laurie Anderson, *United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). All quotations cited from this volume. Anderson has been developing this performance piece for about a decade and in interviews during the 1970s it is sometimes referred to as “Americans on the Move.”

<sup>2</sup>Charles Jencks and William Chaitkin, *Architecture Today* (New York: Henry Abrams, 1982), p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>*Architecture Today*, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Marilena Chaui, a Brazilian political scientist, for suggesting the terms elite, mass, and popular culture. I have adapted them in terms of the Gramscian notion of hegemony for the purposes of explaining voicings in Anderson's work.

<sup>5</sup>Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963). Coincidental as it may be, Erikson develops a notion of performance space with respect to erotogenic modes and zones. In his studies of child development, Erikson becomes very interested in what children do within finite spaces. For example, "Simple enclosures with low walls and without ornaments were the largest item among the configurations built by girls," p. 105. In short, Erikson is incipiently formulating his model of developing in terms of childhood architecture, and the implications between space and communication are, of course, quite evident. One could read Anderson's *United States* as an incipient critique, for she is suggesting, as I mention in the body of my text, that postmodern architecture is really underdevelopmental. But would that mean in Erikson's terms that it is implicitly feminine?

<sup>6</sup>Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology" in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>Alan Colquhoun, "On Modern and Postmodern Space" in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), pp. 108-109.

<sup>8</sup>Roman Jakobson, whose linguistic theories are so central to structuralist linguistics, has advanced a well known communication model based on the polarities addressor/addressee. Between these two terms we find contact, code, message, context. Perhaps contact is the most abstract, suggesting the purely phatic. However, in Anderson's work it is contact which becomes privileged.

<sup>9</sup>Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 1010. The passage occurs in the final passages of *Within a Building Grove* where many extremely lyrical pages are given to the description of Albertine and her little band of friends.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Duane Hanson, reprinted from *Art in America* (November-December 1972) in *American Artists on Art*, ed. Ellen H. Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 167.

<sup>11</sup>Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio*" in *Minimal Art*, ed. G. Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 267.

<sup>12</sup>*Minimal Art*, p. 272.

<sup>13</sup>M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Bakhtin's terms "heteroglossia" and "polyglossia" are quite relevant to a study of postmodern art.

<sup>14</sup>Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Culture" in *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).

<sup>15</sup>*The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup>*The Anti-Aesthetic*, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup>Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe" in *Writer and Critic* (New York: Grasset and Dunlap, 1971).

<sup>18</sup>Immanuel Kant writes, "If, however, the object is presented as a product of art, and is as such to be declared beautiful, then, seeing that art always presupposes an end in the cause (and its causality), a concept of what the thing is intended to be must first of all be laid at its basis." *The Critique of Judgement* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 173. Kant considers the serious contemplation of the aesthetic in terms of the teleological and the diachronic, and in this sense his writings are quite compatible with Marxism.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Laurie Anderson in *View* (January 1980), in *American Artists on Art*, ed. Ellen Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 242.

<sup>20</sup>Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978). In "Le Parergon," an essay in this volume on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the emphasis is directed at the way in which Kant frames representation or mimesis. Derrida's strategy throughout this essay is to break the frame of and resituate framing devices in order to show to what extent classical notions of mimesis are merely the result of parergonal strategies and the lexicons or philosophemes they generate. In *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), Gregory Ulmer investigates at some length the relevance that parergonal criticism has in terms of contemporary art, mainly the work of Joseph Beuys.

<sup>21</sup>*Gerede* is a term used by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). *Gerede* is translated as "idle talk," though it is clear Heidegger means by it not a disparaging condition of language but, rather, "a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting." Again, "We do not so much understand the entities which are talked about; we already are listening only to what is said-in-the-talk as such. What is said-in-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially" (pp. 211-212). Perhaps *United States* could be said to be about a listening to the "approximate" and the "superficial" in this serious Heideggerian sense.

<sup>22</sup>*The Executive Woman* (January/February 1985), p. 7. Part of the tips section entitled "Working Smart" includes the caption "Fido as Mentor." This sounds more ironic out of context than it really is, because this, too, modulates tonalities of silliness with the authoritarian sense that maybe fido really is our mentor, that we have underrated fido.

# The Good Enough Artist: Beyond the Mainstream Avant-Garde Artist

By Donald Kuspit

Conceptions of the artist come and go through the ages, some exaggerating the artist's significance more than others—my assumption is that the more oppressive everyday life seems in a society and the more a society lacks a transcendental conception of life, the more it falsely conceives of the artist as a beacon of imaginary liberty, a spurious alternative—but the twentieth-century conception of the avant-garde artist has a particularly pernicious hold on the imagination. Actually, the avant-garde artist is a multiple personality, a two-headed monster. That is, there are two types of avant-garde artist, both equally vainglorious and mythical, equally self-justifying and grandiose, what might be called the artist-re-educator and the personalist artist. They do not have to diverge, there are in fact clear cases of their convergence—Joseph Beuys is an exemplary one—but generally do. They are opposite sides of the same coin, but their opposition is more telling than the fact that they are chips off the same block. Each in fact has a basically different attitude to art—a different sense of its role in life—than the other. However, they are born of the same matrix of discontent and anxiety. They are contrary responses to the same uncertainty about

the destiny of art in the modern world of instrumental reason and contractual relationships—the world of rationalized existence. At the same time, they both attempt to restore a sense of the charismatic and messianic to life. Indeed, each offers a magical solution to a perpetual problem, the dialectic of togetherness of self and world, if emphasizing one at the expense of the other. Instead of offering art as a way of adapting to the mundane, given world—with all the masterful cunning that requires—the artist-re-educator argues that it can be changed into a higher world. This is the position underlying the work of Mondrian and Gropius, among others. The artist-re-educator takes his place among the twentieth-century's revolutionaries, visionaries who propose to destroy the given world—which no doubt has its miseries and problems—to proclaim a brave, new one, which of course has trouble arriving, leaving us living in the wreck of the old world. And instead of offering art as a means of integral selfhood, the personalist artist argues that art is a special way of suffering, one that assures us—demonstrates—that if one suffers properly one can have a higher self. The personalist artist offers himself as the exemplary sufferer. He takes his place among religious teachers; he is a kind of secular preacher of painful salvation. Kirchner and Marc on the one hand, and Kandinsky on the other, reveal the two dimensions of this position: the suffering, and the higher self that is its end. Thus, the artist-re-educator puts us in critical relationship to the world, promising its salvation through art, and the personalist artist puts us in critical relationship to the self, promising its salvation through art. Implicit in both is recognition of the precariousness of artistic existence, and existence in general.

Essential to the development of my idea of the good enough artist—the ideal post-avant-garde artist—is the notion that the avant-garde artist has become *passé*, more precisely, an establishment conception of artist. The artist-re-educator and the personalist artist are modes of being-an-artist that have become institutional, conventional, even cynical—mechanisms of artistic selfhood that automatically assure one a place in the sun of the mainstream, but no longer imply inner necessity. To be an artist-re-educator or a personalist artist is no longer to have a calling but rather a career. Each is an academic strategy for marketing oneself as an artist, not the manifestation of a sense of artistic destiny. The art the current crop of artist-re-educators and personalist artists produces is rarely, in Rilke's sense, an offering to the attuned spectator—he who has elected himself to have an affinity with it, to be sensitive to it—but a token of careerist narcissism. At bottom, it appeals to no one—at least to no true self, in Winnicott's sense of the term, which I will later elaborate—except those who have a similar careerist pathology as the establishment avant-garde artist, those who get their sense of self more from their external than internal relations. Today there is a new necessity for a good enough artist, if no guarantee that one will be historically realized with any adequacy, although I think some are clearly around. In any case, what early in the twentieth century were daring conceptions of the alternative artist have become self-serving stereotypes at this late moment in it. What originally represented an attempt to ar-



ticulate, in an artistic way that seemed appropriate to the modern world, a universal existential problem, has become an avant-garde mandarin.

Thus, a new conceptualization of being-an-artist is necessary, more precisely, a re-conceptualization of being-an-artist-outsider in a society in which the artist has become an insider. This re-conceptualization must forego the notion of the artist-as-hero—as more than good enough, as the possessor of a larger-than-life surplus of being. Not only has this never been the case—our overestimation of the artist is, as Otto Rank has suggested, a reflection of our own desperate need for self-esteem—but our making it the case blinds us to the human sense of artistic purpose. In my opinion today's mainstream of conventionalized avant-garde heroism has as its ulterior motive the repression of recognition of this sense, for such recognition would instantly undermine the sense of avant-garde purpose which has become socially successful, thus leading to great commercial loss as well as loss of critical face for those who have propagandized it. But of course the question is whether the good enough artist, who recovers the sense of human purpose in art making, produces a good enough art. All one can say at this point is that the art he produces impinges upon—challenges—the avant-garde sense of good art. These days it is enough to be suspicious of much art that is proclaimed to be avant-garde to have a fresh sense of artistic possibility.

Today, the outsidership of the good enough artist is more of a personal than social matter. Its pre-condition is the solitude that is created by lack of mainstream success. The solitude generated by not being an avant-garde personalist artist or artist-re-educator can lead to depression, but it can also lead to the production of good enough art. The pre-condition of such production is transcendence of the irony of being avant-garde. For to be avant-garde involves at first being deviant, nonconformist, and heterodox, and in the end the same, conformist, and orthodox—that is, a new status quo, academy. This perverse dialectic points to the fact that the avant-garde artist wants more success than he openly claims to. That is, he wants acceptance by the system he rejects, implying that he cannot abide his own insecurity—the insecurity of being avant-garde. In his heart of hearts, the avant-garde artist wants his outrageous art to become official and sacrosanct. His subversive innovations, symbolic of alternative values, end up serving his narcissistic desire for success. One might even dare to argue that avant-gardism is the contorted way of achieving success that a pathological narcissist necessarily takes. This is not to discount the genuine artistic and ideal achievements of avant-gardism in its heyday, but only to call attention to its shadow side—a shadow side which has become its major substance today. That is, what was once a repressed infantile wish for success, involving the use of one's own authenticity as a means of becoming successful, has become an upfront adult wish for success, leading the artist to lose sight of, even obliterate, the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. In a sense, wanting to be a good enough artist is to want to restore the distinction, while recognizing the inseparability or dialectic of authenticity and inauthenticity, that is, the necessity of having

both a true and false self, or of being both true and false to oneself—without losing a sense of the difference.

The good enough artist gives up the avant-garde artist's sense of the omnipotence of his own artistic thoughts. Where the avant-garde artist wants success on his own grandiose terms, implicitly dismissive of those of the world, the good enough artist rises above his sense of his own exclusivity as well as of the world's domination. What is at stake in the difference between the avant-garde artist and the good enough artist is an entirely different sense of being in the world, more precisely, of being a particular self in a particular world. That is, the avant-garde artist conceives the world in the same grandiose terms as he conceives himself, pitting himself against it as one giant against another. In contrast, the good enough artist is less interested in doing battle to the death with the world—or until successful in it—as in finding a satisfactory way of relating to it, a way at once critical and intimate. The world is neither friend nor enemy, but the ground of self-realization, that is, self-differentiation or individuation. This is not so much a matter of reconciling with society, as of realizing that there is no sense of self without it.

Avant-gardism is an ironical recapitulation of the familiar issue of the alienation of the individual from society, the irony coming from the fact that the avant-garde artist wants to be rewarded for his alienation, which he mistakenly thinks is a way of being uncompromising. That is, the avant-garde artist thinks that because he is disaffected with society it is illegitimate, but at the same time he wants it to legitimate him. The good enough artist moves beyond the paradox of this unconscious position, beyond the vicious circle of being consciously subversive for the unconscious purpose of success. The good enough artist accepts the fact that one is always, in some sense, part of society, which does not so much hinder a critical relationship to it as make that relationship particular, rather than sweeping in its conclusions, as in the case of the artist-re-educator. The avant-garde artist thinks that society is never good enough, which may indeed be the case, while the good enough artist, also knowing this, does not think it precludes producing a good enough art, as an alternative society or environment. It may seem peculiar to say this, but the avant-garde artist ends up destroying his own art, for it always seems tainted by society. This confirms his sense that there can never be a good enough environment, a truly self-facilitating society, not even in art. It also perversely confirms his sense that he is radically different from other people, indeed, superior to them—more of a self, more aware, more critical. The ultimate nihilism of avant-gardism has been much noted, from Poggioli's study on. It must be emphasized that it is a nihilism of the self as well as the world. In a sense, avant-gardism is a demonstration that alienation takes one only so far towards adequate selfhood, becoming in the end disruptive of the sense of self, even complete self-defeat. In contrast, the good enough artist attempts to re-construct, as it were, his sense of both self and world, in however cautious and tentative a way. He does not regard himself as better than the world and/or better than other selves, but in the same existen-

tial dilemma and difficult worldly relation as them. With other selves, he shares the vicissitudes of the world, rather than claiming superiority to them, or the ability to use the power of art as a springboard to a position of privilege above them, and the world. The good enough artist does not appoint himself as the avant-garde artist-leader of the world and other selves, a megalomaniac fantasizing a superior knowledge and affect than them. This is why the good enough artist is beyond the dialectic of conformity and nonconformity, recognition and nonrecognition, acceptance and non-acceptance, success and non-success, charisma and absence of charisma. The good enough artist is self-accepting in a way that the avant-garde artist can never be. The good enough artist has both the advantages and disadvantages of self-acceptance, that is, he gains a sense of embeddedness in existence, but also acknowledges self-limitation. The gain in the sense of the profundity of particular existence seems worth the price of the loss of avant-garde grandiosity, with its pseudo-profound generalization of existence.

The good enough artist in effect creates a new kind of personalist art. To call it a postmodernist personalist art, in contrast to avant-garde or modernist personalist art, is a mistake, since good enough art is an attempt to restore the generic human purpose of art. It also exists in avant-garde personalist art, but in hyperbolic form, and finally, with its assimilation and domestication, in a mock way, as the false consciousness of art buried under the supposedly true consciousness of it as style. Good enough personalist art has nothing to do with avant-garde expression of grandiose self, taking its final suicidal form in a sense of absolute style. Stylistic considerations are secondary to good enough personalist art, which has as its first priority symbolic maintenance of contact with the true self, in Winnicott's sense of the term. More precisely, good enough personalist art is a way of striking a balance between the true and false selves, allowing each to press its claims to recognition without denying those of the other. Expression of the grandiose self in avant-garde personalist art is also an attempt to articulate the true self, but a confused one, because it involves the impossible ambition of destroying, or at least transcending, the false self, and thus to live completely true to oneself. By definition that is to be self-destructive, for it involves destroying the self as a whole. It is composed of both true and false selves, the latter existing to protect the former, that is, to mediate between true self and the world, which is external social reality.<sup>1</sup>

The attempt, by good enough personalist art, to dialectically balance the realities of true and false selves, is implicitly socially critical—critical of the false world, in defense of the true self—but it does not involve offering a grandiose utopian critique of the world, as the avant-garde artist-re-educator does. Such a critique is always implicitly punitive, always involves blaming the world for what it is—an outrageous place to live in—which becomes annihilative—devaluative—of both the self and world. The one is beside itself with rage, the other maddeningly ridiculous. At the least, the re-educative critique leads to the loss of the sense of the world as specific place—a place with many specifics. Like the avant-garde personalist artist,

the avant-garde artist-re-educator tends to produce an autistic art—one that is a kind of hectoring autism, as it were. Both kinds of artist unwittingly reveal the blind, arrogant demands of the psychotic self, that is, the self which, as Freud said, has lost its sense of reality—of itself as well as the world. Avant-garde art lives by the unreality principle, as it were. This gives it a certain revolutionary power but is finally terrorist, which is a much more serious matter than simply being absurd. It is fascinating social analysis to understand the full implications of modern society's assimilation of nihilistic, terrorizing authentically avant-garde art. Does modern society idolize avant-garde art in order to express its unconscious sense of its own absurdity and potential unreality, that is, its unconscious recognition that it barely holds together, or, what is the same thing, tends to fall apart—become pathologically disturbed—because it repeatedly changes (necessarily so, by reason of its modernity)? In any case, good enough personalist art establishes a transitional relationship to society, where “transitional” has the weight of the special meaning associated with Winnicott's concept of the transitional object. That is, the good enough artist is in perpetual transition between society and himself, sometimes tending towards the one, sometimes the other. It is a reversible relationship, relying on no one style, for that would give it a preferred orientation, for some styles are oriented more to—represent—the self, others the world.

It must be emphasized that this is quite different from the narcissistic authoritarianism, with its correlative stylistic and ideological dogmatism, implicit in avant-garde art. And from what might be called the art-wishfulness implicit in it—the wishful belief in the special power of art, magically superior to all other social means in effecting human ends. Nor is the good enough artist interested in the higher suffering or vulnerability of art proclaimed by avant-garde personalist art, nor its superior powers of social leadership, proclaimed by the avant-garde artist re-educator. The good enough personalist artist, it must be emphasized, is completely beyond any such manifestations of pathological narcissism. It is in a sense remarkable to propose, in today's art world, the possibility of an artist who lacks any narcissistic pretension to superiority, but then the good enough personalist artist is not in the art world, and indeed seems provincial and naive compared to the avant-garde sophisticates that inhabit it. Nonetheless, the necessity of the good enough personalist artist is an urgent matter. For this century has seen the social catastrophes wrought by all manner of sociopolitical re-educators, and the great spread of personal psychopathology, in part contributed to by the sense that serious suffering is inevitable in, and in some mysterious sense necessary to, life. The attempt to make superior sense of suffering by regarding it as *the* context of significance for life only betrays the possibilities of life, including the possibility of realistic happiness.

The avant-garde artist re-educator and personalist artist have contributed to this disastrous state of psychosocial affairs, however obliquely. They are instances of pernicious types of modern commissars: one who believes that social change can be imposed from above, and one who believes that

suffering is *the* necessary sign of authentic selfhood. Both have led the world and self astray, causing much unnecessary misery with their “radical measures.” The artist types who reflect this larger cultural syndrome have their stylistic radicality—their reconceptualization of art—as their only justification. But in the end all style becomes obsolete decoration, that is, loses its original purpose of signalling mastery, or giving form, and becomes an empty symbol of such mastery.. In the last analysis, the avant-garde personalist artist offers a dangerously archaic sense of selfhood, and the avant-garde artist-re-educator a dangerous delusion of the world. Their simplifications are signs of deep resistance to the complex realities of both. The old avant-garde alternatives, which once seemed viable paths to authentic art, must be discarded, not only because they have become institutional and conventional, but psychosocially poisonous. They may still have their old justification—catalyzing artistic innovation—but such innovation no longer seems necessary to authentic art. Moreover, to believe in art’s comprehensive power of self and world transformation is to give it a noble but highly improbable—completely unrealistic—identity. Avant-gardism, as a doctrine, is a form of madness.

Instead of conceiving of art as total transformation, it is best conceived, more subtly, as a mode of transition or mediation between the self and the world. It is a very circumstantial affair, circumstance in Ortega y Gasset’s sense of “Circum-stantia! That is, the mute things which are all around us. Very close to us they raise their silent faces...as if they needed our acceptance of their offering....We walk blindly among them, our gaze fixed on remote enterprises....We must try to find our circumstance, such as it is, and precisely in its place in the immense perspective of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Circumstance is always local, insistently particular; one might say that the good enough artist is in perpetual transition to local circumstance, that good enough art is a constant search to find and orient one’s self to circumstance. In contrast, the avant-garde artist tends to be involved in remote stylistic enterprises. While the transitive role of art is generally the case, it is most evident in art that has been abandoned by the mainstream avant-garde world of art and that has in turn abandoned it, especially its pretentious stylistic enterprises. The dregs of the avant-garde’s claim of presenting a radical sense of self and society survives only in the form of its claim to produce ever new, ever more “radical” style. No one will dispute this claim; what is highly debatable is the continuing necessity of novelty and self-styled radicality (as well as the higher self and truth it presumes to symbolize). The ambition of neo-avant-garde art, that is, establishment avant-garde art, is beside the generic point of art, which is to be a good enough mediator or transition between self and world, in the process helping to create a good enough sense of self and world, which involves creating a shareable self and world. Such generically good enough art is in a sense a mode of solitude, in Anthony Storr’s sense of the term.<sup>3</sup> Only the solitary artist, attempting to intimately interact with particular circumstance—environment—can realize an adequate sense of self and of world, that is, a sense of self good enough for a world that seems good enough, partly because art made it seem so.

The good enough artist has a modest sense of the work of art. It is a way of, in Winnicott's words, relating "subjective reality to shared reality which can be objectively perceived," that is, it is a transitional object.<sup>4</sup> The goal of such a transitional relationship is self-healing and world-healing, that is, generating the sense that one is good enough to be alive and that the world is good enough to live in. The artistic, transitional point is to relate "the inner world's richness" to the "reliably objective" world,<sup>5</sup> without losing a sense of inwardness and the world's reliability. Only then do the inner self and the outer world seem good enough. In the artistic, transitional state, the outer world is experienced as both invented and discovered, and the self and world seem to exist in easy simultaneity, which, it should be recalled, is hardly the case for the avant-garde artist. Out of such simultaneity comes a sense of inhabiting a good enough environment, that is, one good enough for—facilitative of—the self. Using Kohut's language in a perhaps extravagant way, one can say that the objectively given world becomes a selfobject. Indeed, this seems to occur in the best non-mainstream landscape or nature-oriented art. This is in stark contrast to the pseudo-landscape art currently prevalent in the mainstream. Such art seeks to re-invent objective nature, as though there was no moment of subjective discovery—and thus self-discovery—in its articulation. Much good enough art has a deep interest in nature, which since Romanticism, if not before, has become a sign of longing for the good enough environment—bringing with it a sense of being a good enough self—that modern society has failed to create, despite all its promise. In general, I submit that the enormous dissatisfaction with mainstream art that exists outside the mainstream—the sense that it is a subtle fraud, faux art made by a faux elite—has to do with the fact that it does not conceive of art transitionally. We now have an avant-garde style establishment, which is almost completely beside the generic human point of art making, however historically significant its products, and a world of artist outsiders struggling to create a good enough art. The credo of the one is style for style's sake—art with no true self—and the credo of the other is art that is facilitative of humanness, which suggests an art with no falsity—an equally impossible art.

In conclusion, it should be noted that only as a transitional phenomenon can art become what John Dewey thinks it is, the building up "an experience that is coherent in perception while moving with constant change in its development."<sup>6</sup> As Dewey wrote, "to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience,"<sup>7</sup> which is not unlike the notion of transitional experience, that is, the sense of experience in the "zone of illusion" or "potential space," as Winnicott also calls the psychic space of transition uniting inner and outer worlds. Art is about the character of the relationship between these two worlds, reflected in the character of the art's integration of its parts. It is not about the imposing of the inner world on the outer world, as in avant-garde personalist art, nor the imposing of a preconceived notion of the outer world on the inner world, as it is for the avant-garde artist-re-educator. Life is also about the character of the relationship between the inner and outer worlds—the endless effort to strike a balance between them, which is in fact the on-

ly way of physically as well as psychically surviving. Such a balance is in effect between the true and false selves. By accepting the inevitability of the relationship between these seeming opposites, the good enough artist puts himself in a position to change both worlds, that is, make them seem less harmful places to live in.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" (1960), *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), pp. 140-52. Winnicott asserts, p. 148 that the "True Self is the theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. Whereas a True Self feels real, the existence of a False Self results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility. The False Self, if successful in its function, hides the True Self, or else finds a way of enabling the True Self to start to live.... There is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness." Winnicott thinks that the True Self comes from the experience of the body's aliveness and "the idea of the Primary process," that is, a process "essentially not reactive to external stimuli, but primary." In a sense, the trouble with mainstream art is that most of it no longer feels alive and implies primary process—no longer seems spontaneous and implies personal idea—and thus communicates a feeling of unreality and futility. It thus has nothing to do with the true self. If a work of art always tends to be a false self, then today works of mainstream art militantly tend towards false selfhood, for they seem to refuse to collect and integrate the details of the experience of aliveness. This makes such works purely matters of style. Avant-garde personalist art, before it became stereotyped, institutionalized, and academic, attempted to articulate the sense of anguished aliveness that came from the experience of the disintegration of the true self—the ultimate kind of suffering. Sometimes the sense of true aliveness associated with integrative sexuality was also articulated, in defiance of the social repression—the collective false selfhood—which tried to deaden sexual bodily aliveness, but it was hardly a match for the sense of living death conveyed by disintegration of the true self. And the avant-garde artist-re-educator once tried to absolutize the false self, making its sense of futility and unreality the norm, in the form of aspiration to a world too perfect to live in.

<sup>2</sup>José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Storr, *Solitude* (New York: Free Press, 1988), p. 169 argues that there comes a time in life when organic communication with others tends to become secondary to meditation upon the patterns of life. In my opinion these are always a matter of deciding upon what seems undecidable, the proper relationship between inner and outer worlds. From this point of view, mainstream art is either overly concerned to communicate with others and insufficiently meditative, or has a preconceived sense of the proper balance between inner and outer worlds, that is, predetermines the pattern of their relationship.

<sup>4</sup>D. W. Winnicott, "The Deprived Child and How He Can Be Compensated for Loss of Family Life," *The Family and Individual Development* (London: Tavistock, 1964), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>D. W. Winnicott, "Aggression in Relation to Emotional Development" (1950), *ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup>John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.



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