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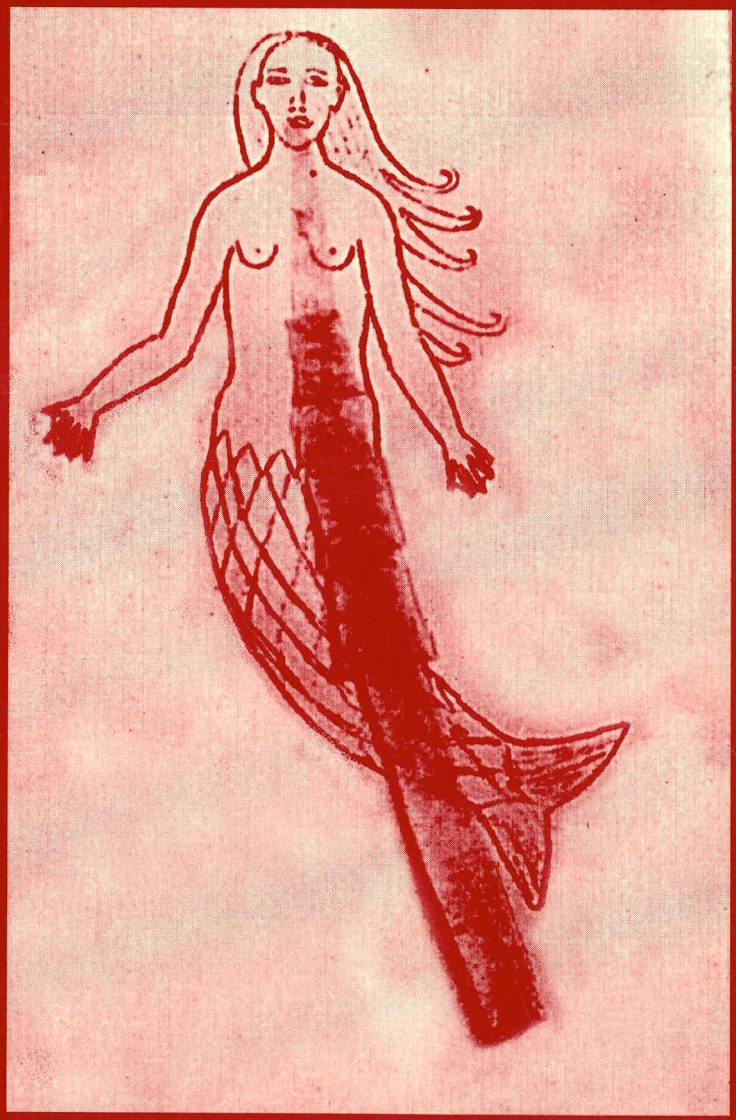
Art Criticism



Inside: the Mermaid's Call (fall in new york)

also... Modernism — American and Chinese

Art Criticism

Art Department
State University of New York at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794-5400

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On the cover:

Detail, Kiki Smith, *Mermaid Drawing,* 1994; collage, xerox transfer and pencil on paper, 19x26-1/2. Photo by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein. For reviews of selected fall shows in New York, see page 107.

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Facture, Painting, and Norman Bryson

Michael Peglau

Facture is among the most basic terms in the discussion of painting as it denotes the fundamental indexical register of a painting's making. It is also among the most far reaching of terms. On one side it ties artmaking to established and learned procedures of paint handling and the conventions those procedures carry and so points to the attitudes and critical traditions which undergird most manners of painting. It is thus the occasion for historical insight into the relationship between the ordering of an individual image and those traditions and conventions of making from which a painting derives or with which it has important affiliations. On the other side of facture opens a most intimate interface between the construction of a particular image and uniquely telling aspects of that image's surface. That is, facture substantiates and controls the structure and variation in the paint surface, as well as controlling and ordering the touched character of the under layers, and so provides the most evident basis for discussing the individuated aspects of a painter's working.

Understood as touch, facture opens an especially suggestive metaphorical dimension in a painting's making, one that involves both the most innate and most idiosyncratic aspects of paint application in the construction of what might be called the architecture of illusion. This metaphoricity, which is generally important in the painterly traditions of Western naturalism,[1] is an issue of high significance to certain painters within these traditions, for example, Titian, Velazquez, Rembrandt or Courbet. And understood as touch, facture also counters the simplistic assumptions generally ruling the term representation, and its usually clumsy application to painting. Facture further can help support the historical reconstruction of economic and social contexts relevant to an image, a series of paintings, or a tradition. On occasion, facture has figured importantly in broad and determining stylistic categorizations, as with those of Riegl and Wölfflin. Recently facture has served as the basis of Norman Bryson's highly interesting and influential polarities for European and Asian painting: aoristic and deictic, and the Gaze and the Glance. These polarities, particularly the latter, have already figured in

contexts as varied as recent literary criticism as well as in Martin Jay's ambitious and useful *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought.*[2] The reach and accessibility of these terms aside, their implications for art history require a careful critical discussion.

In "The Gaze and the Glance," the penultimate chapter of *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*,[3] Bryson raises the basic issue of how facture informs the temporal structure of the apprehending of a painting. That facture introduces a durational quality to the beholding of a painting, and that it introduces aspects of experienced time into the tissue and weave of an image has been too little discussed and Bryson deserves great credit for placing it on the agenda of contemporary theory. While there is some acute writing on the durational implications of the work of particular painters, the absence of the discussion of duration as a general problem is, as Bryson suggests, in part the product of existing critical vocabularies and the expectations and interpretive conventions shaped by those vocabularies. Bryson introduces the terms aoristic and deictic to correct this state of affairs and more broadly to further his project of informing art history with literary theory. Aoristic and deictic distinguish between two broad classes of utterance: the aoristic (as with the French simple, imperfect, and pluperfect) sets forth an action which was completed before its description and without the implication of involvement on the part of the author:

> The aoristic tenses ... are characteristically those of the historian, reciting the events of the past impersonally and without reference to his own position. The events, since presented neutrally, in 'bardic' disengagement, essentially have no narrator, having no narrator they address no present or nearby audience ...[4]

The deictic (the present and all compounds of the present) presents an action to which the speaker claims proximity, if not outright witness:

> The deictic tenses ... create and refer to their own perspective. The wider class of deixis therefore includes all those particles and forms of speech where the utterance incorporates into itself information about its own spatial position relative to its content (here, there, near, far off), and its own relative temporality (yesterday, today, tomorrow, sooner, later, long ago). Deixis is utterance in carnal form and points back directly (deiknonei) to the body of the speaker ...[5]

Were these terms conceived primarily to indicate general trends within particular traditions, or to indicate traits specific to individual groups of paintings, they would join with a long and useful importation of rhetorical

terms into the understanding of painting. Or, were they understood as laying out a broad field between two opposing realms of possibility and thus suggesting that most instances could never be absolute or methodically pure examples of one possibility or the other, they would join with the practical domestication of terms like "haptic" and "optic" or "linear" and "painterly." However, as Bryson states, aoristic and deictic cleave absolutely between European painting and that of the Far East. They indicate a bifurcation between the two oldest and imagistically complex traditions of what may be loosely called representational painting. They demarcate an essentially absolute dichotomy and in language which is nearly moralistic in its verve:

> Western painting is predicated on *the disavowal of deictic reference,* on the disappearance of the body as site of the image; and this twice over: for the painter, and for the viewing subject.[6]

The term "predicated," so incautious in its sweep, coupled with the equally incautious "disavowal," places Bryson in the awkward position of reducing the diverse and fluctuating traditions of Western naturalism to a single principle. Similarly the notion of the human body as a site, however fashionable such language may be, cleaves the artist or beholder into a disembodied intelligence on one side and a mere spatial locale on the other. This mind-in-a-jar fantasy is at odds with the basic conditions of theory and practice which gave rise to Western naturalism.

Such hard, formal generalizations are the lineament of "The Gaze and the Glance." And the assertion that Western naturalism is intrinsically aoristic is so broad that it makes the famous and problematic pairs of Wölfflin seem carefully historical by comparison for at least linear and painterly have some rough symmetry with the *disegno colore* debate. By contrast, Bryson strips Western painting of a range or reference which is common within certain "painterly" traditions. In the present balkanized and 'multi-cultural' climate it is only seen as acceptable to offer such bald and negatively toned generalizations about Western art. Were such a sweeping and implicitly negative generalization advanced about say, Haida art, or were the many and multifarious Native American traditions rolled into however well-intentioned and seemingly neutral generalization derived from Western linguistics (let alone were those traditions viewed through terms like "disavowal" or notions like "the disappearance of the body" with their existentialist suggestions) the author might find her or his professional prospects under sharp attack. In fact, recently Bryson and Mieke Bal offered a critique of some of the grounding assumptions of such linguistic imperatives, albeit with the object of preserving some of the basic terrain of such endeavors.[7] However, "Semiotics and Art

History" stands as a recent instance of what seems Bryson's progressively diminishing radicality, where the terse, bracing methodological introductions to *Word and Image* and *Vision and Painting* stand as his strongest challenges to the conventions of art history.[8]

Bryson's radicality, while perhaps not so harsh as in the assertion of Western painting's "disavowal of deictic reference," is also clear in his framing of Chinese painting through the "deictic":

> Painting in China is predicated on the acknowledgement and indeed the cultivation of deictic markers: at least as early as the Six Canons of Hsieh Ho the greatest stricture for painting, after 'animation through spirit consonance,' is said to be 'the building of structure through brushwork'; and in terms of its classical subject-matter, Chinese painting has always selected forms that permit a maximum of integrity and visibility to the constitutive strokes of the brush: foliage, bamboo, the ridges of boulder and mountain formations, the patterns of fur, feathers, reeds, branches, in the 'boned' styles of the image; and forms whose lack of outline (mist, aerial distance, the themes of still and moving water, of the pool and the waterfall) allows the brush to express to the full the liquidity and immediate flow of the ink, in the 'boneless' styles ... The work of production is constantly displayed in the wake of its traces; in this tradition the body of labor is on constant display, just as it is judged in terms, which, in the West, would apply only to a *performing* art.[9]

Whatever the merits of this summary of Chinese painting it is by no means evident that Western painting, and certainly much Western drawing, are simply precluded from making deictic references. As two passages Bryson later quotes from the Goncourts help him realize, some of the same kinds of subject matter are treated 'deictically' by Fragonard and Chardin.[10] Or, were he aware of a fundamental Western critical tradition in which painting, music, and poetry are understood as being related in terms of invention and reception he might have avoided the assumption that the critical vocabulary of performing art is of no relevance to Western painting. In any case that assumption is easily refuted by turning to the critical vocabulary of Italian Renaissance art where the terms for the performative aspects of rhetoric are understood as basic to painting or by noting the omnipresence of a performative vocabulary in nineteenth-or 20th-century criticism. However, Bryson is either innocent of the language of Renaissance criticism or unwilling to admit it into his discussion of the 'aorist' condition of Western painting. Rather, after his summary of Asian painting as deictic, he turns to an incautious characterization of the processes of Western oil painting, with

their manifold and significantly different technical traditions, dominated by the imperative that oil paint be used to erase itself:

> What it must first erase is the surface of the picture plane; visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which the Western representational image classically works the trace, of ground-to-figure relations: 'ground,' the absence of figure, is never accorded parity, is always the subtractive term.[11]

Bryson clearly wants to involve the prestige of a key term in Derrida, "the trace," and presumably he would like to tie the interfaces between figure and ground in Western painting to some aspect(s) of this important but many-voiced concept. However, because Bryson does not go beyond the suggestive but unspecified parallel hinted in the above quotation—save for calling 'ground' "the absence of figure" and thus recalling the fundamental role of "absence" for Derrida—'erasure' here stands as an attempt to finesse the complexity of figure ground interfaces by implying that they are a special case of writing, or more broadly a special case of textuality.

While it is viable to consider facture in naturalistic painting as textural and in that textural aspect as having some loose, utterly general approximateness to the gridded, necessarily legible allocations of a text, and while it is also possible to modify a text, to camouflage it into a naturalistic pictorial field as Mark Tansey has done,[12] but it does not follow that the individual paint touches, the individual instances within the facture are coded with anything like the highly articulated differences necessary to an alphabet. Nor does it follow that the facture of a painted image obeys the regularized allocation necessary to a printed text, whether calligraphic, block printed, or electronic. Quite the contrary, the painted marks in any tradition of naturalism require an uncoded flexibility to whatever task they may face within the imagistic project of the facture. Thus relatively similar marks, in the rhythm of their application and in their color may in the same image indicate a half-tone on a nose and yet elsewhere in the image depict a half-light on a branch. Such chameleon-like pliancy is as though the letter 'a' could substitute for and articulate every other letter. Similarly the spatial zones in any naturalistic image in no way possess the gridded neutrality necessary to writing, rather they are necessarily the domain of the things to be depicted. What Nelson Goodman has called the "dense," "replete," textures of painting cannot be normed by the strongly coded differentiations which are required by writing.[13] Of course Goodman himself fails to draw the deeper distinctions implicit in such differences and persists in the rather simplistic assumption that there is some fundamental proximity between the reading of texts and the 'reading' of pictures.[14] Thus while Goodman soundly

stresses the importance and richness of convention in painted images, as W.J.T. Mitchell has noted, the absoluteness of his conventionalism places him in the paradoxical position of being unable to differentiate adequately between the interaction of values or critical standard images in one tradition as against another:

> The standard way of representing the Goddess Durga in Bengali ritual is with a clay pot, and this pot is thought of as an "icon" of the Goddess, a symbol that contains the essential reality it denotes. Yet the familiar habitual, and standard way of depicting Durga is not regarded as "realistic" in anything like the way we regard realistic pictures in Western culture. "Realism" cannot simply be equated with the familiar standard of depiction but must be understood as a special project within a tradition of representation, a project that has ideological ties with certain modes of literary, historical, and scientific representation.[15]

While I am very far from certain that the term 'representation' in any way adequately addresses the complex imagistic structures and the special iconography and alliance with fiction necessary to realism, Mitchell's criticism of Goodman is acute. And as David Summers has argued in "Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the 'Conceptual' Image," (which carefully demolishes the notion that substitutive works such as 'Durga' are signs), Western naturalism, of which the various realisms are special cases, in its most basic imagistic structure involves clear and founding substitutive facture for the action of light in real spaces.[16] Goodman's radical conventionalism blocks him from this necessary realization and locks him into a verbocentric position where written texts, almost mimetically, norm all other imagistic structures.

While the passage of Bryson cited above is scarcely so explicit in its conventionalism as Goodman's highly elaborated argument, it is perhaps more radically conventionalist in its reduction of all Western naturalism to a single convention—erasure—and in its imputing that erasure here is a special Derridean example of writing. The presumption of a determining analogy between writing and painting, of reducing painting to a special case of writing which disguises its scriptedness in the interest of claiming some immediate 'representation' of its reference, of erasing its procedures so as to dissemble its translation of some aspect of the world as text, forever blocks close analysis of the conventions structuring a particular tradition or even the differential analysis of conventions which might bear some analogy between disparate traditions. It also forever begs the questions of similitude. Thus, what are the operative interrelationships between a branch painted by van Gogh and one by Tao-Chi, where there are some apparent if general

shared features in facture? Or what are these interrelationships between a flower painting by Monet and one by van Gogh? And how can similitude be accounted for in any of these instances on a verbo-centric model? For while conventions of facture are at work with each instance, and in all naturalistic painting, and while critical schemes of valuation have important interfaces with those factural procedures, neither the procedural conventions nor the schema are finally adequate to the explanation of similitude. Rather, as Umberto Eco has argued, similitude, while certainly inflected by conventions of facture is "more firmly linked to basic mechanisms of perception than to explicit cultural habits."[17]

The textuality of Bryson's position has another and immediately unfortunate consequence. In asserting a figure ground dichotomy, a dichotomy structured by the "absence" of the pictorial ground to what we must call the "presence" of the figure, a dichotomy similar in its basic oppositions to print on a page, Bryson overlooks the fundamental task of facture in Western naturalism—to create virtual space and virtual light. In traditions of direct painting where glazes and carefully articulated underdrawing and underpainting are avoided, as for example in Impressionism, the role of the ground becomes dialectical with the first touches of color. In Monet's work in the 1870's, where color is understood as informed by light and atmosphere, the ground color immediately becomes a real and positive term in the evolution of the image with the first marks Monet made. Indeed, in the practical coloristic and factural problems of achieving luminosity and atmosphere, the ground held its voice throughout the evolution of the work. The radical French naturalist tradition to which Monet belongs, which runs from Barbizon to Corot and has roots reaching back to Titian, stands generally in manifest contradiction to Bryson's dictum that Western naturalism is aoristic. In that radical French tradition facture is understood as the actual record of felt perception, a record made in the real time of working on the image in the locale to which the image refers. As the term 'motif' implies, the choice of subject was complexly interwoven with the 'deictic' project of making the image; not only were the landscapes or other subjects set forth in relationship to declaredly evident processes of painting, they were understood as necessarily collaborative in the subjectivity and declared temporality of those processes. And while the specific conditions of 'on the motif' may have been partially or even principally fictive in many instances, the paintings remain decidedly deictic in their address to the beholder. The images in fact depend for their effects on the immediate freshness of the facture and the facture invites the beholder into the evident temporality of its laid out process. The embodied sensuousness of touch, perception, and feeling of Monet's work, or of van Gogh's could well be thought to norm deictic.

In other painterly processes of greater complexity the role of the ground is also dialectical. For example, recent microscopic and chemical analyses of Titian's work make the notion that his painting procedures were erasive absurdly simplistic.[18] Between 1510 and 1542, Titian frequently applied glazes over ground colors in order to intensify those underlying colors. In some instances opaque, semi-opaque and transparent paint layers are in interplay with one another and in general there are indications of constant experimentation with relatively transparent over-lays. For example in the *St Mark Enthroned with Saints Cosmos and Damian*:

> ... in this painting Titian experimented as he proceeded; it is almost as if the tones of the paints while they were on his palette did not convince him and that he felt he had to apply them directly onto the panel where the interaction with the primer or the color that already had been applied was different and called for continual adjustment. This was particularly apparent when the structure of the garments of Saints Rocco and Sebastian was examined; it is too simple to say that they were painted over the sky and the column respectively, since they have been done with a number of different applications almost as if he intended that they should minutely influence the visible blue.[19]

Similar analytic samplings of Titian's later work point to yet more improvisational procedures which combine elements of direct painting in opaque and semi-opaque broken touches with complex layered glazes. For example in the depiction of the flesh of Christ in the *Pietà* in the Accademia, a ground of lead white and carbon black,[20] with no charcoal underdrawing, is overlaid with successive layers of cinnabar and lead white, lead white, a red lacquer glaze, lead white and red ochre and carbon black. This vertical sampling of pigment layers suggests how Titian achieved the awful, luminous pallor of the dead Christ's flesh where the cold greenish-yellow layer of cinnabar and lead white works as a foil both over the initial drawing in carbon black and lead white and to the successive overlays of broken tones in blanched yellowish pinks and dusky pinkish browns. It points as well to the complex open network of overlayed and broken touches of color so typical of Titian's late manner. The sampling also substantiates Vasari's well known remarks that Titian's later work is "often repainted, gone over and touched repeatedly and that" the broad and bold strokes and smudges make "the pictures seem to come alive ...."[21] It thus points to the remarkable salience and substantiality of the individual paint marks in the loose highly improvised facture which characterize other late Titians, such as *The Death of Acteon*. There the broad patches of light goldish ochre that indicate the tensing muscles of Acteon's shoulder also mark the suffusing effulgent

light on him and so link him to his pouncing dogs, the nearby bushes and the surrounding landscape. The variously touched marks which constitute this linkage not only tie Acteon to the vegetative world he will shortly join but place the moment of his fate on the cusp of the imminent light fall. In their vivid rapidity, these final light marks are set over and against the graver rhythms of the variously brushed, pooled and smudged darks that ground Acteon and in the wood, and in their brevity they counterpoise the imminent and enveloping darkness. These broken and fitful light touches, which never simply describe form but carry the effulgence of the sunset over and through form, holding it momentarily against the reservoirs of darkness, present light as something carnal, fragile, and transient. In their palpability and kinesis these touches also, as has been noted starting with Dolce and Vasari, invite the participation of the beholder in the scheme they help to embody and so interlace the imaginary world of the *poesia* with the engaged awareness of the beholder.[22] There is nothing 'erasive' about these vocative marks and their deictic address. Bryson not only overlooks such engagement of the beholder through facture but, as these examples show, he overlooks how such complex layerings in the facture of Titian integrate aoristic practice, such as glazing, into building an overwhelming deictic presence.

In ignoring the possibility of using the aoristic in the service of deixis Bryson avoids engaging the pictorial complexity and power of paintings like those of the late Titian or later Rembrandt. He avoids as well having to account for the construction of such sensuous believability for light and flesh, or just what such sensuosity might structure in the relation of the work to the beholder, or imply about intention. Bryson in fact would likely prefer to deny such complex realization of deixis as a possibility and so preserve the purity of his categories. However he does discretely acknowledge that some exceptions to the dominion of the aoristic exist:

> The temporality of Western representational painting is rarely the deictic time of the painting as process; that time is usurped and cancelled by the aoristic time of the event.[23]

As we have seen the radical naturalism of Monet, van Gogh and others stands outside such aoristic demands, an exception Bryson's caveat "rarely" perhaps acknowledges. And under this caveat he might also admit that the painterly address of these late Titians to the beholder has evident deictic features; however, he presumably would claim that the 'events' structured in the image are aoristic in implication. The proximateness of the *Pietà* to familiar conventions in the pose of Mary and Christ might support the aorist label were it not for the self-portrait of Titian as the kneeling old man and a second self-portrait along with a portrait of his son, Orazio, in the votive panel depicted in the lower right

corner. Both figures kneel in prayer to the Virgin as if to ask her intercession in the plague of 1576, which in fact killed Titian and his son. Coupled with the pathos of the painting's color and the evocative power of the touch, such first person invocations make it clear that Titian made *The Pieta* with more than a little deictic urgency.

Relative to 16th-century practice, *The Death of Acteon*, is deictic in its spatial organization and treatment. The cropped figure of Diana, her loosed bow, the dogs clambering for Acteon's throat, and his panic all are charged and immediate. The sudden spatial ellipsis between the towering Diana and Acteon shortens and intensifies the space separating them as does the rushing left to right movement of the dogs and white-capped water. Similar remarks are invited about the Vienna *Tarquin and Lucretia* or *The Flaying of Marsyas.* In the *Marsyas,* Guilio Romano's rather static image of the theme, which is a major compositional source for Titian's painting, is transformed into something cyclic and dynamic.[24] This transformation is evident in the vividly counterpoised figures, from the surgically focused Apollo, parting Marsyas' hide from his chest muscles, to the avid, almost dancing figures of the bucket carrying Satyr, (who may well be Pan and who brings water to better expedite the flaying by rinsing off blood), from the hard Phrygian-capped hunter to the introspective Midas, so close in appearance to Titian. In their juxtapositions they challenge any one reaction to the situation and demand that the beholder move through the cycle of their acts around the stunned, brutalized figure of Marsyas. Thus the beholder must shift back and forth through the various *contropposti* of the figures and between the tiny, drole dog lapping Marsyas' blood and the large, excited and drooling hunting dog held by the child-satyr. In short the *contropposti* undermine any unity of experience for the beholder save an omnipresent agitation and horror. That horror is held vividly in the dull shock which glazes Marsyas' one visible eye as it is also held in the precise fluent incision made by Apollo. And the agitation of the scene, set against the quiescence of Midas, or the rapt, heavenward gaze of Olympus, (or Orpheus perhaps),[25] is everywhere manifest in the immutably physical and emotionally fraught facture. Indeed, it is febrilely present from the incandescent handling of the foliage to the fresh spill of Marsyas' blood.

To take another example from a century later, Velazquez's *Mercury and Argus* places an iconography which might have invited an aoristic decorum in a disturbing, transitive present. As Mercury stealthily readies his sword, Argus is collapsed in sleep, his chin on his chest and his legs sprawled. The flow of facture, almost like smoke, spills over Argus' legs and onto his shirt and quietly yet palpably carries Mercury's imminent act—as though one just sleepily rubbed ones eyes and saw all this, half-awake. Many other paintings by Velazquez invite related analyses, for

example any of the *Philosophers* or *The Tapestry Weavers*, or the remarkable *Mars* holds that hard god's aoristic qualities in ironic abeyance. Similar discussions could easily be advanced about any number of works by Hals, Rembrandt, Rubens and Goya, or many other painters. Such counter examples to 'the aoristic condition' of Western naturalism do not void the potential usefulness of aoristic or deictic as descriptive terms but they do throw open to question the soundness of the binary opposition Bryson hopes to establish through aoristic and deictic.

This opposition as Bryson frames it is also an odd occasion for his invocation of Derrida. Not only has such binarism, with its implication of originary conditions or transcendent categories been a prime target for Derrida, but the metaphor for deictic painting—that it is utterance or speech informed by a presence—is the key metaphysical presumption that Derrida would unravel in *Of Grammatology*.[26] In fact any reading of Derrida might well locate support for the complex, multilayered and evident *bricolâge* of the facture in paintings like those of Titian we have considered. It might also suggest strong validations for the powerfully achieved and formally aoristic quality of other Western naturalisms, for example the precise, thoroughly 'inscripted' iconography of Poussin. Against the near hypostasis Bryson makes of the 'spoken' quality of deixis it is revealing to quote Derrida:

> Representation mingles with what it represents, to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representor. A dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically. In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring.[27]

Bryson would avoid these interfaces of reflection and reference, of the reach into multiple images and tiers of fantasy built through a work like *The Flaying of Marsyas*. As we have seen, he goes so far as to assert a false view of painting procedure to make Western naturalism simplistic and univocal, which it seldom ever is. Likewise, as we will see in section II, he imposes through the concepts of the Gaze and The Founding Perception an unsupportable myth of origin on the naturalism of the Italian Renaissance and especially on Titian. While this myth serves his argument it bears little relationship to Renaissance practice, Renaissance theory or Titian's practice. And while it might manifest an attempt on Bryson's part of a Nietzschean *Vergessenheit* and so mark what may be Derrida's most damaging influence on art history, an issue central to

Summers' recent paper on Panofsky,[28] it might also suggest how heuristic a searching reading of Panofsky could be for art history. Yet despite Derrida, Bryson significantly recognizes the importance of 'present' or 'presence' as necessary terms. In painting the 'presentness' of the facture, beyond indicating a maker, also marks or tracks and so substitutes for something absent, something elsewhere. In this it is the tracery of that absent presence and so stands as a threshold or a 'reflecting pool' for that elsewhere which it brings to the beholder.

II

For Bryson the opposed factural orders of the aoristic and the deictic are themselves founded in two antithetical modes of visuality, the Gaze and the Glance, terms he attempts to relate to conditionalities in the practice of vision. Thus if aoristic and deictic formally demarcate a vast cultural divide, they do so by the perfect inherence within them of polar visual practices, each with its absolutely legible time signature. Thus the aoristic avoids indications of "duration, practice, of the body," by exactly transferring "the transcendent temporality of the Gaze" to the image, and by completely reflecting the originary imagistic manifestation of the Gaze, The Founding Perception.[29] To stave off the naivete implicit in the notion of the aoristic's perfect referral to the Gaze and The Founding Perception, Bryson attempts to ground the Gaze and the Glance in a discussion of the locus of these terms in two different languages with the evident strategy of disguising the transparent relationship between the formal aoristic (or deictic) and the encultured Gaze (or the Glance). However, he strangely chooses to place his discussion in considering French and English usages, as though these languages norm all relevant others. As we will see, the rather exclusive usages which Bryson presents scarcely make for a convincing argument in even contemporary English—let alone any relevant historical usage. Nor does this discussion do anything other than delay Bryson's assertion of a transparent, isometric inherence of the Gaze, through the Founding Perception, in the aoristic. He begins by considering some meanings of the French terms, *le regard* and *coup d'oeil* which roughly correspond to gaze and glance:

> ... vision is portrayed under two aspects one vigilant, masterful, 'spiritual,' and the other subversive, random, disorderly. The etymology of the word *regard* points to a persevering drive which looks outward with mistrust (*reprendre sous garde*, to re-arrest) and actively seeks to continue what is always on the point of escaping or slipping out of bounds. The *regard* attempts to extract the enduring form from fleeting process, its epithets tend towards a certain violence (penetrating, piercing, fixing), and its overall purpose seems to

> be the discovery of a second (re-)surface standing behind the first, the mask of appearances.[30]

Bryson goes on to suggest that both *le regard* and *coup d'oeil* have an inherently violent aspect, as both imply a vigilance and a certain aggressiveness.[31] He also points out that there is a hierarchy suspended between the 'aristocratic' *le regard* and the plebian *coup d' oeil.*[32] Thus *le regard* "belongs to the protocols of the court" and a structure of visuality where the subject is vulnerable to having the piercing trajectory of *le regard* reverse itself and focus on the subject as though a target.[33] The *coup d'oeil* by contrast is "vision off duty ... its brief raid into the out world" is succeeded by "a return to a natural intransitiveness and repose."[34] The problematic implications of "a natural intransitiveness" seem not to trouble Bryson for whom the evidently "natural" mode of vision is passive, and structured through an inherent introversion and retirement from a world outside the subject. Bryson, of course, is a canny and practiced critic of just such uses of "natural,"[35] but such unexamined uses of "natural," and of unexamined and seemingly *a priori* conditions inform his understanding of the Gaze. Clearly the loose, informal consideration of common uses of these terms is just such a "natural" and uncritical procedure, and a procedure which he continues in considering the English terms, "gaze" and "glance."

After stating that in English "gaze" indicates a mode of viewing which is prolonged and contemplative, Bryson makes the seemingly "natural" inference that "gaze" is touched with aloofness, disengagement and tranquility.[36] While English usage of the term certainly has those aspects, it also has uses where intense and interested focus is indicated, or as in 'fond gaze' where intimate and warmly emotional involvement is the point. It is surprising therefore that a sophisticated post-structuralist would suggest that there is some prime, or normative sense to a term and so remove it from its various roles and developments in the unfolding complexes of usage. However, against such caveats Bryson intends to center "gaze" on a limited denotation with few connotations and similarly to circumscribe the equally various senses of "glance":

> ... a furtive or sideways look whose attention is always elsewhere, which shifts to conceal its own existence, and which is capable of carrying unofficial, *sub rosa* messages of hostility, collusion, rebellion, and lust.[37]

This highly interested definition again selects some usages and suppresses others in implying a polarity between the terms. It also deftly introduces *le regard* as a connotation to "gaze" by tying "glance" to "unofficial" and so juxtaposing the formalities of *le regard.* Yet the importation of the troubled connotations of the French terms into English

is not without hazard for the English terms scarcely stand in such a distressed relationship to visuality. Thus in English, one can gaze, or glance happily, or in friendly bemusement. While one's gaze may be a stare, it may also be loving. Similarly one may glance with hostility or with shy, romantic hope, and so on. Equally beyond "gaze" and "glance" there are modes of visuality housed under other terms which are fully as significant. To look, to see, to watch, to search, to find, to notice, to observe, (and so forth) are all distinct and equally basic modes of visuality with their own temporal implications. As such they throw into doubt the exclusivity behind Bryson's bold assertion of the special cultural significance of "gaze" and "glance." These other modes of visuality also are all potentially crucial in the various tasks, moments, and problems that go into making a painting, even as the painter through hand, arm, back, neck, and legs moves fluently between various modes without considering such terms—and just as the painter might speak while painting without concern for etymology.

What one might call the pragmatic implications of the many terms in English for various modes of visuality, so at odds with the constricted and fraught meanings Bryson allows for *le regard* and *coup d'oeil*, open to question the universality Bryson intends for his terms, a universality declared perhaps too grandly in his capitalizing of the Gaze and the Glance. Thus while gracefully written, his argument is simply a presentation of some selected definitions and few slender inferences on French and English visuality. In short, it is interested in the extreme and insubstantial in the extreme. Bryson somehow seems to hope that it will effectively camouflage his naked assertion of the geographical dominion of the Gaze and the Glance, which is his next and immediate move.[39] With no argument beyond these sallies into selective definitions and connotations Bryson posits "the painting of the Glance," which is Asian, and "painting of the Glaze," which of course is Western naturalism.[39] For Bryson, therefore, the Gaze and the Glance are not merely normative and alternative modes of visuality, but rather absolutely bifurcate and determine painting West and East. Superseding all other terms and modes of visuality, in whatever linguistic contexts, local, or merely relevant in iconographic or theoretical concerns, they are claimed to shape the making of however many diverse works in widely differing social, economic and religious contexts. Thus, the Gaze holds both unqualified necessity as the first cause for the aoristic condition of Western naturalism and, as we will see, an unqualified authorial role for particular works. Similarly, the Glance provides the essential key to the comprehension of Asian painting beyond all conditionalities of tradition, quotation, or medium.[41] The explanatory authority and scope claimed for the Gaze is clear in Bryson's discussion of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* of 1523, a

painting he treats as the unconditional epitome of Western naturalism.

Bryson's discussion of *Bacchus and Ariadne* hinges on the claim that the image is shaped by and "subject to a fundamental figure of Arrest ..." as through "the aoristic gaze,"[42] which "contemplates the drama of Ariadne's encounter with Bacchus from the perspective of the last act,"[43] is actually responsible for having made the painting. For Bryson the figures in *Bacchus and Ariadne* are caught in sudden, seemingly strobe-lighted instants of motion, instants which in their artificiality and improbability are constituted by "the Gaze:"

> What is removed from the world is its duration: the bodily postures and gestures are frozen at points which can never be seen by the glance; a maximum of distance is introduced between the disorderly, rhythmical, Dionysian vision of the dancers, of Bacchus, of Ariadne, and the cold, synchronic, omniscient gaze of the painting's founding perception. The term shed in that separation is precisely the body, as source of a possibly troubling of the panoptic, split-second clarity the image seeks: vision as it unfolds before the participants in the scene is the corporal, spasmodic vibrancy of flux; vision as it is presented to the viewer is that of the Gaze victorious over the Glance, vision disembodied, vision decarnalized. The mode of the image is emphatically aorist. Where in deixis the utterance is continuous, temporally, with the event it describes, here the image aims at a discontinuity between itself and the scene it represents, discontinuity so extreme that the origin of the image (this is its fascination) in fact becomes irrational.[44]

While relative to *The Flaying of Marsyas, Bacchus and Ariadne* may be called 'aoristic,' on another scale directed toward central Italian painting in the 1520's its facture certainly is not without deictic qualities, the fiction that the deictic is continuous with the event described notwithstanding. Bryson's claim that the image intends a radical discontinuity between itself and its references is unsupportable. In no small part the recklessness of that claim is driven by Bryson's assertion of the Gaze's authorial role but it is also formed in Bryson's unwillingness to temper his discussion of *Bacchus and Ariadne* with scholarship on Titian, the painting itself or scholarship relevant to the conventions underlying the painting. For example, Bryson's description of the painting seems more informed by a common vocabulary of film and photography than by any knowledge of Titian's pictorial and compositional practice. Phrases like "split-second" and notions like gestures being "frozen" and figures being immobilized in postures outside the scope of "normal vision" seem borrowed from the clichés of a common discussion of high-speed photography. In any case such phrases and the surpassing authorial control

of the Gaze might have seemed less supportable to Bryson had he read Panofsky's brief but illuminating discussion of Bacchus' leap, for in the face of the actual painting the astounding figure of Bacchus does leap.[45] As Panofsky demonstrates, Titian, far from creating a fissure between the image and its reference, found both utterly vivid embodiments for the most telling passages in the relevant texts and also embellished and interpreted those texts.[46] And as Panofsky further shows, the leaping Bacchus is thoroughly reimagined and a stunning reinvention of its source in the *Orestes Relief*, much deepening the pathos of the *Pathosformen*.[47] Were Bryson familiar with 16th-century criticism on Titian, even Vasari, he should have realized that to present him as the avatar of the 'disembodied' tendencies of Western painting is to reverse all criticism contemporary to Titian where he is exactly the painter of an embodied sensuously life-like naturalism.[48] Indeed there are few other instances in painting anywhere in the world which approach that vividness of flesh and of light. Bryson however seems driven not merely to skew whatever painting to the peculiarities of his terms but by the imperative to establish a new and universally applicable formal language. He is clearly willing to hazard whatever ahistorical fantasy about Titian or the Renaissance to that end.

Such disregard for historically relevant material is evident in Bryson's discussion of movement in *Bacchus and Ariadne*, in particular in his clear ignorance of the conventions through which movement was shown in the Renaissance and in his apparent unfamiliarity with critical language relevant to movement. As David Summers' fundamental discussions make clear,[49] the Renaissance understanding of movement depended upon the rhetorical idea of contraposition, *contrappasto*, where the articulation of oppositions created vividness, variety and occasion for embellishment.[50] In painting *contropposti* could range from the *figura serpentinata* to the oppositions in chiaroscuro or the antithesis of young and old.[51] In depicting movement there were a number of solutions all generally involving contraposition of limbs one side of the body to the other, and a degree of axial twisting of the shoulders and hips.[52] In *Bacchus and Ariadne* both the figures of Ariadne and Bacchus in their individual counterpositions and in the reversal of back (Ariadne) and front (Bacchus) along with all five nearby figures present vigorously memorable examples of movement as *contrapposto*. In fact, as Bryson might have observed had he looked at the painting more closely, the leaping Bacchus not only stands as one of the most striking figures in the early phases of Titian's work, and as such is intended as a challenge to central Italian painters in general and Michelangelo in particular, but the subtlety of its atmospheric modeling and especially of the atmospheric slippage of its silhouetted contours were, until Rubens and Velazquez, qualities which no other artist could realize with such conviction and force.

This sense of slippage, beyond enhancing the figure's quality of movement, again specifically raises the issue of the appropriateness of Bryson's categorically absolute use of aoristic in describing the work. Relative to the work of other contemporary painters, Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* already implies the increasingly 'deictic' direction of his facture. Thus while Bryson is partly correct in stressing the technical achievement of Titian he seriously misconstrues the work in relationship to what might be viable applications of his terms "aoristic" and "diectic." In part this seems a product of Bryson overlooking differences between Titian's use of the Venetian idiom and the 16th century Italian traditions. It is also grounded in his apparent ill ease and manifest unfamiliarity with Titian's work, and with his evident lack of knowledge of oil painting processes and the structuring of facture. Finally, this misconstrual of *Bacchus and Ariadne* is propelled by Bryson's claim that the painting manifests "the two great laws" of the Gaze:

> On one side, process has been eliminated from the world: everything that was in rhythm is arrested and everything that had been mobile is petrified. On the other, process has been eliminated from the painting: the stroke does not exist in itself, except to transmit the perception alleged to precede it; the oil-medium does not exist, except to erase its own production. The logic of the Gaze is therefore subject to two great laws: the body (of the painter, of the viewer) is reduced to a single point, the *macula* of the retinal surface; and the moment of the Gaze (for the painter, for the viewer) is placed outside duration. Spatially and temporally, the act of viewing is constructed as the removal of the dimensions of space and time, as the disappearance of the body: the construction of an *acies mentis*, the punctual viewing subject.[53]

Far from demonstrating two great laws, Bryson's reduction of *Bacchus and Ariadne* misrepresents the understanding of vision during the Renaissance. In asserting that the painter-viewer is reduced to "a single point, the macula of the retinal surface," Bryson overlooks the fact that in Renaissance practice and theory the painter was considered far more complex in apprehension, invention and realization than to be somehow identical with the viewing point of a perspectival diagram or a narrow circumcision of the back of the eye.[54] He also overlooks the fact that the painter in practice was understood as absolutely embodied and that perspective similarly belonged to a theoretical understanding of the beholder as embodied and possessing a rich sensibility.[55] He also ignores Venetian spatial practice as Titian inherited it and certainly Titian's own practice. As David Rosand has shown, Titian's spatial practice, while familiar with perspective, was in no sense normed by it.[56] Rather it is far

more involved with light and dark and an implicitly theatrical organization of space than in the narrow opticality Bryson would impute.[57]And as Summers has suggested to me, perspective generally in Renaissance practice was more normed by theater than by optics. Optics merely seconded the importance of point of view, an issue which had many other significant determinants. While perspective as an optical structure was one of establishing point of view an organization of figures and the other relevant scenic material based on theatrical practice was a more telling and powerful procedure toward the same end.[58] Therefore, as Summers has shown, for the Renaissance point of view cannot be reduced to perspective *per se*.[59] As the Renaissance discussion of the use of perspective, or the treatment of embellishment all show, 'point of view' involved far broader concerns than strictly speaking, the purely optical.[60] Crucially 'point of view' always implied a unique sensibility on the part of both the painter and the beholder.[61] For the painter 'point of view' was closely tied to key critical ideas like *maniera* and *aria* and in general stood in relationship to the complex critical language articulating *phantasia*,[62] the basic psychological category underlying Renaissance painting. In practice 'point of view' asked that particular situations be found to the pictorial problems inherent in the invention and realization of any one image.[63]

In *Bacchus and Ariadne,* Titian does not employ anything like linear perspective beyond the simple orientation of the various personages' feet in the near foreground. This orientation in fact may well have been empirical as the ground upon which they stand is scarcely depicted as level and perspective becomes rather needlessly cumbersome as a spatial ordering device outside of architectonic situations. Thus Titian simply avoids it in setting out the deeper spaces of the painting, where, as is typical of his work, a clear recessional ground plane is avoided and space instead is achieved through an alteration of different zones articulated through plays of light against dark and warm against cool. Indeed the overall spatiality of the painting, which exceeds anything achieved to this time, is established first and foremost atmospherically through the enveloping dominant of the blues and blue grays of the sky and deep spaces. Against the range of warmer colors setting forth the flesh of the figures and in play with the lights and shadows these blues and grays create an encompassing ambient space. In concert with the atmospheric edges of Bacchus, edges which appear to involve semi-transparent touches over a relatively dark, Giorgionesque underpainting, the blues and grays open a trajectory implied by the tilt of his arms and shoulders.

That tilt, part of the *contrapposto* of the figure, is indicative of how for the Renaissance movement involved individual solutions to any figure. As Summers states, that meant that " ... knowledge of anatomy might guide the eye, but in the work the eye finds more than the mind knows, and the

hand draws more than the mind knows ... proportions are only proportions if they seem to be. In the work, proportion comes not so much from the heavens downward as from the senses upward."[64] The crucial importance of the hand in realizing a foreshortening points to a basic aspect of Renaissance thinking on art, that artistic judgment necessarily involves the body. Proportion, for example, is not merely seen but as Summers points out it is also informed by the sense of touch,[65] and also one might add by a sense of the body as a whole.

So while artistic judgment may importantly involve the eye it is not simply seated there but also reaches into other senses, and into the body, and, no less significantly out into the world. Moreover, artistic judgment beyond asking that the hand bring, as it were, the body to the eye in the realization of a foreshortening, also asked corroboration in a corresponding sense of judgment in the beholder, and one no less intertwined with the body. Thus the realization of movement in a Renaissance painting not only requires on the part of the painter the crucial intervention of the hand, and of senses other than sight, it also implies the somatic as well as the psychological comprehension of the image on the part of the beholder—as the somatic was understood as closely depending onto the soul.[66] Furthermore, in Aristotle's vastly influential treatment of sensate judgment, which structures the Renaissance understanding of the depiction of motion and magnitude, time was presented in close perceptual alliance with motion, and in proximity to the perception of magnitude.[67] This intersection in the perception of time to motion indicates that for the Renaissance time is implied in images of movement. For example, in *Bacchus and Ariadne* duration is implied by the closing gap between the two principal figures and to follow Panofsky it is also indicated in the iconography as Ariadne has been wandering on the coast, while Bacchus, returned from India and having followed her from behind, announces himself with a leap.[68]

While Bryson's designation of Titian as an example of the "cold, synchronic, and omniscient gaze," and as the examples of "vision disembodied, vision decarnalized" would have astonished Titian's contemporaries, or anyone familiar with the artist's work, Bryson is not trying to write defensible history or believable criticism about Titian. Rather, *Bacchus and Ariadne* is chosen to illustrate the character of the Gaze because of Titian's central position in the unfolding of Western oil painting and the image itself is construed to such an unlikely reading because for Bryson the Gaze is the real and final agent of Western painting not an aspect of some modes of visuality. Bryson is looking at Titian and Western naturalism through a reification of the Gaze. That reification overrides both the 16th-century understanding of Titian and virtually all subsequent scholarship. It also overrides the manifold array of traditions, procedures, and

patterns of organizing meaning which make Western naturalism so prolix and rich. Thus when Bryson attempts to align the Gaze with a historically significant pictorial structure, as with perspective in the Renaissance, his attempt founders not only because of his evident unfamiliarity with the role of perspective in Renaissance theory and practice, but also because the substantiation he makes of the Gaze scarcely admits any qualification. It is finally a synchronic, ahistorical condition as his linking of the term "panoptic" to *Bacchus and Ariadne* indicates.

Yet despite its substantial agency, its authorial efficacy, the Gaze for Bryson is marked by an evident ideality. Indeed, it functions with a greater than Platonic efficiency, exactly informing the making of an image above and beyond all other experiences to its 'aoristic' specifications, as with his reading of *Bacchus and Ariadne.* This ideality is further signaled through an allied concept, "The Founding Perception," which Bryson posits in support of the authorial role of the Gaze. The Founding Perception is intended to explicate the conformity of the image in Bryson's scheme to a prior, perfectly realizable moment of epiphany, where the Gaze condenses the transformative array of the visible into an immediately legible, coherent and complete icon:

> Suppression of deixis in the West operates by abstracting from the physical practice of painting and of viewing a valorized moment where the eye contemplates the world alone, in severance from the material body of labor: the body is reduced (as in Gombrich as in Albert, or in Leonardo) to its optical anatomy, the minimal diagram of monocular perspective. In the Founding Perception, the gaze of the painter arrests the flux of phenomena, contemplates the visual field from a vantage point outside the mobility of duration, in an eternal moment of disclosed presence; while in the moment of viewing, the viewing subject unites his gaze with the Founding Perception, in a perfect recreation of that first epiphany. Elimination of the diachronic movement of deixis creates, or at least seeks, a synchronic instant of viewing that will eclipse the body, and the glance, in an infinitely extended Gaze of the image as pure idea, the image as *eidolon.*[69]

The aoristic so problematical when expanded to a governing formal principle, is argued here to depend upon a higher and more general condition, the Gaze as Platonic idea. In this argument the aoristic is achieved by the withdrawal of the image from all contingencies of making save that the image perfectly and transparently enact "an eternal moment of disclosed presence." This epiphanic moment, with its notable conjunction of "eternal" with "disclosed," ties the idea of the aoristic as being without evident indexes of duration to the Platonic notion of *eidos*, a

pristine and unchanging appearance. In Bryson's scheme then, *eidos* is superordinate to the image and located in The Founding Perception, which is evidently unconditionally capacious and endlessly mutable in its ideality. The Founding Perception, which must anticipate and correct all conventions, problems, and intuitions in making, requires that the image be ordered to an absolute and crystalline decorum, where both the artist and beholder submit to an etiquette of uncompromising communion with the reflected *eidos*. That reflectedness, which makes of the image, an *eidolon*, literally, a little appearance should trouble Bryson who in *Vision and Painting*, as well as else where, has been a significant critic of just such thinking.[70] However, here he would have it both ways. He proposes that Western naturalism be reduced in its many competing traditions with their complex structures ordering their virtuality, and their equally complex addressings of their fictive references (for all naturalism is fundamentally fictive and allusive) to the kind of simplism he has been at pains to attack. Under the Gaze and The Founding Perception, Western naturalism is an "Essential Copy" where the painter focuses the image on The Founding Perception of which it is the presumed unsullied recreation, a super-Platonic snapshot. That is, "the gaze of the painter" is adequate with no mediation other than perspective, which for Bryson here is simply the optical manifestation of the Gaze, to arrest "the flux of phenomena" and to recreate The Founding Perception. The descent of the Gaze through The Founding Perception to the painting is absolutely transparent and specular.

In reducing Western naturalism to a far too simple idealism, a simplification that utterly misrepresents the deeply rhetorical and allusive character of many traditions within Western naturalism, and to a simplism he would otherwise oppose, Bryson evidently would like to make Western naturalism into something dimissively simple. Such simplification however has its cost. For even those aspects of Western naturalism which have an idealist basis are degenerated as problems and the way is cleared for an art history which can be compressed into one or another interpretative strategy borrowed from the now familiar iconoclasms typical of post-structuralism.[71] Bryson's project in "the Gaze and the Glance" in its overarching generality, its dependence on superordinate registers of explanation and in the credulity which thoroughly color his understanding of its central terms, has clear parallels to prior formalisms. In fact Bryson cannot keep an injudicious essentialism out of his basic terms. Thus the cardinal position and determining role of The Founding Perception in the hierarchy issuing from the Gaze clearly echoes other essentialist concepts which have troubled art history.[72] That recall is also declared in the grandiosity set forth in the capitalization of each term and in the clarion declaration marked in combining "The" with the bold claim of "Founding." This grandiosity

suffuses the tone and issue of the entire passage cited above: all Western naturalism is asserted to take its form from The Founding Perception and to precede from the hypostasis of the Gaze as first and prime cause. Moreover, that passage is not only intended to supersede any prior discussions of Western naturalism but rather the Gaze and The Founding Perspective are intended to supplant any prior principles of art historical explanation. The passage asks that we rehabilitate those discredited habits of idealist explanation where terms like *Zeitgeist*, *Weltanschauung*, and *Kunstwollen* are central, and where each seems circumspect and local by comparison.

III

Bryson, of course, scarcely intends "The Gaze and the Glance" to advocate an idealist art history but in making the Gaze a principle of sweeping ahistorical universality, he paradoxically repeats just the kind of move earlier generations of idealist art historians considered necessary and desirable. Recently Bryson has softened the strong verbocentric position which characterized his earlier writing. This modification is particularly evident in "Chardin and the Text of Still Life" where, without proclaiming it, he clearly indicates that the problem of similitude has a perceptual dimension.[73] Indeed, as I will lay out below, Bryson admits a surprising and considerable quotient of 'perceptualism' into his argument. Nowhere is this more evident than in one of the key terms, the Medusal, he employs in this essay.

The Medusal depends upon the heightened illusion typical of some still life traditions which establishes "the appearance the world might have without a subject to perceive it, the world minus human consciousness," and upon "the power to immobilize, to petrify appearances, and to objectify everything in the visual field."[74] The Medusal also involves a related and corollary condition where the beholder is made to feel "no bond of continuous life with the objects that fill the scene ... as though the living connection between the human self and the world of things had been broken."[75] These conditions recall the aoristic immobilization claimed of the figures in Bacchus and Ariadne and the assertion of dislocation of any bodily connectedness for the painter or beholder to the image. Thus the Medusal approximates key aspects of the aoristic without Bryson acknowledging any connection, as though his earlier essay fell from the horizon of his concerns without a trace.[76] The Medusal is also part of a polarity, whose other term is anti-Medusal, thus recalling the aoristic/deictic polarity—albeit within a Western context which for Bryson might disqualify any fully deictic quality.

The anti–Medusal, which Bryson identifies with Chardin, undoes the estrangement of the Medusal through an "informality of attention" which

levels conventional hierarchies of composition in the interest of a democracy of attention and through a blurring of forms induces a "homecoming of the subject into the ground of being."[77] This phrase, odd in Bryson's vocabulary, which recalls in its sense much previous writing on Chardin,[78] clearly echoes Heidegger. And it suggests that Bryson might have done well to turn from Lacan and Derrida to perhaps their most informing predecessor. For as with the aoristic and the deictic and the Gaze and the Glance, Heideggerian analysis appears to be in the background of Bryson's work.[79] In this instance Heidegger's deep concern over the conditionalities of objects of use in Being and Time seem manifestly the background of this phrase, and might have provided Bryson with possible tracks and insights into the complex and often opaque implications of still life.[80] In any case, the quiet, nuanced images of Chardin recall those metaphors of habitation underlying the deictic, and the informality of Chardin's technique carries a manifest deictic integrity with its evidence of touch and process.[81] So, while the anti–Medusal centers on the apt phrase for Chardin, "the homecoming of the subject into the ground of being"; the Medusal in its intensification of appearance, its close resolution of the particular and potentially endless array of surface incidents, variations in color or topography or texture tends toward an "atomic solitude in vision, and towards a split between the inner self–enclosed subject and the objectified nature morte that spreads out before it."[82] In no small part for Bryson this split is given in the absolute focus of qualities which ordinarily are not consciously considered. That is, still life creates a strangeness and casts the beholder into estrangement by rendering to utter attention the individuality of appearance in things which are usually at hand, or underfoot and seldom elevated as being individual and so unique.[83] The Medusal therefore places the beholder in a tranced alienation, crossed with both a dislocation from the familiar and at hand and under the obliquely disguised but immutably inscribed facture of a "killing objectification."84

For Bryson the prime instance of such objectification is trompe l'oeil where the tautness of appearance threatens "the subject, who looks at the world as though from the standpoint of personal annihilation."[85] In a facing footnote he refers the Medusal to "the issue of castration in the visual field" and invites his readers to consider Lacan's seminars "Of the Gaze as Object Petit a."[86] Although Lacanian language is common to all of Bryson's discussions of the gaze and this phrase suggests several passages in those seminars, Bryson does not develop the issue.[87] He prefers, it seems, to call on Lacan's authority much as earlier in "The Gaze and the Glance" he called on Derrida's through the term "trace," rather than take on the problem of how Lacan's therapeutic concerns with the gaze, beyond pointing to a fundamental psychological ground for

painting,[88] might be directed to the Medusal. Indeed, other than apparently choosing to tie the Medusal to Lacan's symbolic order through the matter of Lacan's view of castration anxiety rather than to Lacan's Imaginary—where it would be better fitted,[89] Bryson here leaves few hints of how he might pursue the problems inherent in such a project. However, this is not surprising for the Medusal involves a psychological language of empathy and perception rather than one of symptom.

The Medusal, as I mentioned above, recasts the aoristic in perceptual and expressive terms. This is evident in the conclusions Bryson draws from a consideration of Cotán's *Quince, Melon and Cucumber* where he lays out what he calls the defamiliarization of the Medusal:

Defamiliarization confers on these things a dramatic objecthood, but the intensity of the perception at work makes for such a surplus of appearances that the image and its objects seem not quite of this world. In the routine spaces still life explores, habit makes one see through a glass, darkly; but when the object is revealed face to face, the departure from the habitual blurs, and entropies of vision can be so drastic that the objects seem unreal, unfamiliar, uncreatural. Still life's project of 'returning' the objectified field to the human subject aims to establish a warm and companionable dwelling for the subject, and this encourages it to seek out abiding forms and familiar shapes. And in order to bring these consoling and familiar things into view, the quality of attention must switch from habit to defamiliarization. Yet pushed too far, defamiliarization starts to run against the whole movement of 'return.' The objects depicted by Cotán look unheimlich, and belong less to the cocoon of nearness than to a kind of eerie outer space.[90]

This passage repeats some key features of the aoristic but instead of relating those features to a semiotic meta–language, it returns them to a familiar art critical procedure: the acutely observed and personally felt account is housed within a general expressive category and treated as though it were essential. This general expressive category, defamiliarization, is understood moreover as a corollary of a quality of vision held to be equally general and essential, the Medusal. The empathetic language tied here to the notion of still life as authoring its own project indicate how closely Bryson's treatment of the Medusal resembles the essentialist language that Gombrich criticized over thirty years ago in, "On Physiognomic Perception,"[91] and that Bryson himself criticized with considerable force in "Perceptualism" from Vision and Painting.[92] As both recognize, the key assumptions in all such arguments on expression are that a symmetry exists between the felt experience of the beholder and the 'expressive nature' of the image, and that the pictorial organization of the image is efficiently and transparently affective. Through the Medusal, Bryson in fact is attempting to link a

thoroughly depleted cliché of modern criticism, the alienating and unempathetic character of highly focused optical naturalism, to earlier and historically significant developments in naturalism which may well not jibe with that cliché. Bryson's use of the Medusal therefore places him in precisely the kind of position he erstwhile attacked in "Perceptualism."

The problems undermining the Gaze, The Founding Perception, the aoristic and the Medusal go beyond the structural simplisms given in Bryson's assumption of the perfectly isometric interrelations among the aoristic and its causes and the absolute transparency of reference and reception assumed in the Medusal. Each term, along with the deictic and the Glance, is not only vastly over general but is fundamentally synchronic and so ahistorical. (While entirely synchronic, the anti–Medusal, as Bryson locates it to Chardin, is specific enough to be useful.) The other terms enjoy their greatest efficiency in obscuring just those diachronic and contextual issues which are germane to the appearance of a painting and to how related series of paintings might have evolved and they all point away from an adequately critical reading of the stylistic and theoretical matters relevant to a series or the other broadly historical material significant to a series. These terms would help to inaugurate not just an art history informed with literary theory but one where a Nietzschean *Vergessenheit* would be an overriding condition and where the sweeping interpretive exclusiveness of terms like the Gaze would necessarily arbitrate and distort any prior historical context, or any other methodology.

Art history conditioned by the Gaze would be also marked with a Lacanian hermeneutic of suspicion where Western naturalism would be supposed to conceal under the disguise of 'naturalness' an unconscious voracity and drive for domination. The simplistic iconoclasm implicit here is of course now unfortunately commonplace and there is nothing in Bryson's terms which would inhibit other similar barbarisms. In fact as Bryson frames them, The Gaze and The Founding Perception assert that Western naturalism is unequivocally problematic and thus they invite alliances with other more nakedly ideological attacks on Western painting. Such alliances are also invited by the paragon Bryson establishes between Western naturalism and East Asian painting and Bryson cannot stop himself from naively valorizing East Asian painting and from imputing to Western naturalism an existential deficiency.[93]

Finally Bryson's terms are marked by an evident essentialism. As we have seen, his monolithic enframing of Western naturalism posits an originary condition for Western naturalism which is naively neo–platonic in that the Gaze not only institutes all Western naturalism but through The Founding Perception inheres perfectly in the aoristic. While Bryson hopes to establish the Gaze as a prime term in a new "materialist art history," its function in relationship to the other terms simply revives the

old and presumably discredited mechanisms of idealist stylistic description: essence is perfectly reflected in appearance. With identical notions of transparent referral troubling the Medusal, the Glance, and the deictic, it is not hard to see that Bryson, despite himself, is contributing to an art history which while claiming to be "materialist" is actually conditioned by a covert and unacknowledged idealism. It is also an art history whose overriding principle is a leveling reductiveness where the diversity and differences of complex independent traditions of painting are effaced under the demand of bringing all Western naturalism to stand frozen under a single paradigm. Thus it is an art history whose overriding procedure is the constriction of all difference to a few essential terms. So while Bryson remains among the most significant and provocative critics of art history, and while much of his criticism is valuable, "The Gaze and the Glance" and its terms or the Medusal must be rejected. Indeed the present influence and reach of terms like the Gaze, or the aoristic suggest that their "weak formalism," to borrow a felicitous phrase from Summers,[94] has proven all too pedagogically effective. This efficacy calls to mind an issue in de Man's critique of I.A. Richards, that Richard's formalist critical language sponsored easily taught analytic techniques which leveled poetic language to a language of communication.[95] Bryson's terms flatten the vivid, broad reach of Western naturalism into the a priori conditions of his terms and strip naturalistic painting of its engagement in its references, of its allusiveness. The methods allied with those terms threaten once again to make art history into various strategies for filling in the gaps of what are essentialist and formally determined arguments. Yet, while Bryson's terms lack sufficient precision for rigorous art history and in fact carry an unfortunate ideological taint, the interposition of precisely crafted critical terms and method allied with such terms into scholarly projects should not be gainsaid. Criticality over method is basic, for nothing in painting is quite as it seems and perhaps no where is the allusiveness greater between the depicted and its depiction than in certain naturalisms, as in Titian, or as in Velazquez.

Notes

1 By Western naturalism I mean those traditions and styles, which arising in the Renaissance and continuing through the present, that depend on constructing through tonality, color, and facture virtually convincing images for the action of light in real spaces. Western naturalism therefore is specifically optical, as Ernst Gombrich and David Summers have pointed out (see the end of this note for references). It structurally depends on finding virtual equivalents within what I term the architecture of illusion of an image which will satisfy expectations of a community of agreement related both to the experience and practice of vision and to the conventions operating within the multitude of painting problems attendant to virtuality and to the parameters of the relevant critical traditions. Within various traditions the stress may seem greater on one

or the other of these domains but inevitably all have import and are interrelated in other more generally cultural ways. Just as with the practice of virtuality in painting much about vision is learned and intertwined informally, or formally, with other discourses. However, both, I would suggest, have their epiphanies as any number of episodes and moments in Western naturalism indicate. As Summers has persuasively argued in *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Western naturalism while optical is also rhetorical and deeply intertwined with discourses which range from poetics to the science of optics *per se.* As I suggested above, Western naturalism is also most diverse for it is comprised of many significant traditions and an enormous number of significant differences between traditions and distinguishing individual manners. See also: Ernst Gombrich, *The Heritage of Apelles: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance.* (Ithaca: Phaidon, 1976).

2 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993). See especially, 56-57 and note 116. See also: Kathleen O'Gorman, 'so that people would stare' : The Gaze and the Glance in Beckett's *Not I,*" *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3, (Summer, 1993): 32-44.

3 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 87-131.

4 Ibid.., 88.

5 Ibid.., 88.

6 Ibid.., 89.

7 Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin,* LXXIII, June 1991, 174-208. The term "linguistic imperative" is W.J.T. Mitchell's. His *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986) is most interesting and useful.

8 Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancient Regime* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press,1981). See, "Discourse, figure," 1-28. I discuss this essay of Bryson's in, "On Mimesis and Painting, *Art Criticism,* Vol. 4, No. 3, 1-25.

9 Bryson, *Vision,* 91-92.

10 Ibid, 130-131.

11 Ibid, 92.

12 Tansey is incidentally a practiced and thoughtful reader not only of Derrida but of other significant post-structuralist writers.

13 Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1976). By "density" Goodman means that pictorial images differ from written language through the lack of differentiation among the components of their systems of depiction. See 226. By "replete" Goodman means that the lack of differentiation requires that we take into account uncalibrated nuances in the pictorial system. See 159.

14 Goodman of course would disclaim this but his well known example of comparing written texts to a graduated thermanter and a pictorial image to an ungraduated thermanter belies the disclaimer. See 159.

15 Mitchell, *Iconology*, 72-73.

16 David Summers, "Real Metaphor: Towards a Redefinition of the 'Conceptual' Image" in N. Bryson, M.A. Holly, and K. Moxey eds., *Visual Theory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 231-259.

17 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1976), These remarks are housed within a general critique of iconicity and of the notion of the iconic sign. Eco develops an important and still too little read argument that iconicity depends on a complex set of phenomena, some of which are not properly semiotic, and for which the "notion of sign ... is untenable," 216, and 191-224.

18 Lorenzo Lazzarini, "A study of Various Works from the Period 1510-1542," in *Titian,* (catalogue in conjunction with the exhibitions of the same name in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice and the National Gallery of Art, Washington with

contributions from: Francesco Valcanorer, Gino Benzoni, et al) (Munich: 1990) 378-384.

19 Ibid., 378-379.

20 Giovanna Bortolaso, "A Study of various Works from the Period 1540-1576," in *Titian,* 385-386.

21 This translation is David Rosand's, see Rosand, "Titian and Pictorial Space," in *Titian,* 94-100, especially 98-100.

22 On these issues see, D. Rosand, "Titian and the Critical Traditions," in *Titian: His World and Legacy,* ed. D. Rosand (New York: 1982) 1-39, and D. Rosand, *The Meaning of the Mark: Leonardo and Titian, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures* (Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Arts, 1988) especially 49-93.

23 Bryson, *Vision,* 92.

24 For the principle bibliography on the *Marsyas.* See the catalog entry in *Titian,* 370-372.

25 Again for bibliography on these iconographic matters and a brief discussion see *Titian,* 370-372.

26 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). See especially, "Writing Before the Letter," 1-93.

27 Ibid., 36.

28 Derrida, who is certainly not the only source for such a position but simply in Bryson's the case the most likely, derives such a strategy from both Nietzsche and Heidegger who each treat the history of philosophy with what might be called extraordinary rhetorical inventiveness and interpretive freedom. Indeed Nietzsche anticipates Derrida's subversive procedure of reading through a philosophical problem as one might through a dream or fantasy. Summers in his as yet unpublished, "Meaning in the Visual Arts as a Humanistic Discipline," (A paper presented at the Institute for Advanced Study's Symposium on Panofsky, on October 1, 1993) does an admirable job of framing this issue. He both identifies some of the most germane texts of Nietzsche and Heidegger and carefully reconstructs Panofsky's position in the dispute between Ernst Cassirer and Heidegger over Heidegger's reading of Kant *in Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics,* a dispute which centered on the interpretive violence or force (*Gewalt*) of Heidegger's radical reading of Kant as a precursor of Heidegger's own ontology of Being. While acknowledging that a certain violence of interpretation was inevitably given in the personal and historical situation of the interpreter, Panofsky argued that if Dasein was primordiality historical as Heidegger said, then the particular instances of Dasein's historical existence require the reconstruction of the actual relevant historical relationships. As Summers sketches Panofsky's argument: "Interpretations are 'violent,'or most violent, and not historical, when they disregard the actual historical relations that complete any human existence. Without the resistance and distance offered by a sense of other worlds sustaining other persons we commit violence on the past, and, more generally, upon the unfamiliar."

For the text of Panofsky's lecture, "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenen Kunst," delivered at the Kantgesellschaft, Kiel, 1931. See: Erwin Panofsky, *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft,* ed. Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen (Berlin: 1980), 85-97.

29 Bryson, *Vision,* 93.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 93-94.

33 Ibid., 94.

34 Ibid.

35 See Bryson, *Vision,* "The Natural Attitude," 1-12. Bryson, following Husserl

writes a trenchant critique of just such assumptions of 'natural' in various texts relevant to art history.

36 Ibid., 94.

37 Ibid.

38 On this issue of camouflage I have profited from reading an unpublished paper by Abigail C. Geiger, "Regarding Norman Bryson and Still Life," presented in David Summer's Method Seminar, fall 1992. Ms. Geiger presents a subtle reading of Bryson's prose style and discusses certain debts Bryson owes Stephen Heath and through Heath to Barthes and Brecht. (See especially for the purposes of this essay the relationship between "The Gaze and the Glance" and Heath's "Lessons from Brecht," *Screen,* Vol. 15, no. 2, Seminar 1974, 103-127 and Brecht's "Über die Malerie der Chinesen," in Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 18, (Frankfurt: 1967). Ms. Geiger is currently reworking and expanding her essay for her Masters thesis.

39 Bryson, *Vision,* 94.

40 Ibid., 94-95.

41 Ibid., 94. Bryson curiously overlooks the basic matter of quotation in his stress on deixis, thus avoiding the question of how the evocation, or quotation of an earlier style, or image might be fully deictic in his sense of the term.

42 Ibid., 94-95.

43 Ibid., 95.

44 Ibid.

45 Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic.* (New York: New York University Press, 1969) 143.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 142-143.

48 See again D. Rosand, "Titian and the Critical Tradition," especially, 13-25.

49 David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). See, "Movement I," 71-96.

50 Ibid., 76.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 77.

53 Note 3, 96.

54 Summers, *The Judgment of Sense.* See in particularly "Optics and the Common Sense," 151-181, and "Naturalism and Point of View," 3-9.

55 Ibid., especially "The Light of the Piazza," 125-150.

56 See, D. Rosand, "Titian and Pictorial Space," 95-97.

57 Ibid., 98-100.

58 Summers has done a considerable amount of as yet unpublished work on perspective in the Renaissance.

59 Summers, *Judgment of Sense*, see "Leonardo on the Judgment of Sense," 170-176.

60 Ibid., 311-322.

61 Ibid., 321.

62 Ibid., "Aria and Mariera," 117-124.

63 Ibid., 321.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., "Spirtus," 110-124.

67 Ibid., "Aristotle's Common Sense," 78-89, especially 83-84.

68 Panofsky, *Problems in Titian.*

69 Bryson, *Vision*, 94.

70 Ibid., especially "The Essential Copy," 13-35, and more recently, Bryson and Bal, *Semiotics*, especially 174-188.

71 On this issue see again Jay's recent and illuminating book, *Downcast Eyes.*

72 See Summers, "'Form,' Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical description," *Critical Inquiry 15, no. 2, (*Winter 1989) 372-406.

73 Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life," 227-252.

74 Ibid., 230-234.
75 Ibid., 233.
76 Bryson adduces a parallel to the aoristic in *Tradition and Desire* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983) where his introduction summarizes some of the principle themes of *Vision and Painting,* and where his discussion of David's *Oath of the Horatii* is specifically concerned with a 'medusal' and Lacanian reading of the Horatii. See, 1-31, and especially 63-80.
77 Ibid., 241-243.
78 See Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin* (exhibition catalogue) (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1979). See especially "Conservation," 89-91.
79 The Gaze and the Glance can be compared to the distinction Heidegger draws in *Being and Time* between staring and circumspection. Enacted through the aoristic and the deictic the Gaze and the Glance also call to mind the more basic distinction between present-to-hand and ready-to-hand. the Medusal and the anti-Medusal echo these parallels and add the tellingly Heideggerian phrase, "homecoming of the subject into the ground of being," which raises the basic Heideggerian idea of dwelling. Division I of *Being and Time* houses these themes particularly, 91-244. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (New York: Harper, 1962).
80 The Medusal and the Gaze place Bryson, albeit informally, in the continuing tradition of Heidegger's attack on the Cartesian 'world picture' where both the separate and inviolably clear domain of mental representations and the layed out, measurable homogeneity of a demonstrated material reality are subject to critiques of great power and ingenuity. Merleau-Ponty and Derrida are prime figures in this tradition but within Bryson's purview Lacan is of equally great significance. However, Bryson's casting of Western naturalism into the simplistic and ill-fitting frame of the Gaze, the Founding Perception, and the aoristic clearly invites a Heideggerian critique. Bryson in fact treats Western naturalism with just the kind of procedure as *vorstellen*, of fixing, and bringing to standing that which is changeable and changing, that Heidegger attacks. In this he is scarcely alone for in general the gaze has become a concept of unfortunate crudity and generality, depending on unsupportable notions of representation.

Heidegger's attack on the project of Cartesian representation is a most significant theme in *Being and Time*, for example see 122-134 and 246-50. It is also a theme he returns to repeatedly. For example his vastly influential, "The Age of the World Picture," develops a far ranging critique of Cartesean representation in relation to scientific representation. "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 115-154.

David Michael Levin discusses these Heideggerian themes and related issues of visuality in: *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York: Rutledge, 1988). See especially, "Das Ge-Stell: The Empire of Everyday Seeing," 51-166.
81 These very interesting and telling matters for Chardin again lead toward Heidegger where Division I of *Being and Time* and the discussion of intentionality and especially comportment and ready-to-hand are called to mind. No less the issues of dwelling and care are crucial in considering Chardin, see *Being and Time*, 95-107 and 235-244. The theme of dwelling, which is of great importance in the later Heidegger, certainly has a place in the background of Bryson's notion of the deictic. For example see, " ... Poetically Man Dwells ... ," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) 211-229.
82 Bryson, *Chardin and the Text of Still Life*, 238.
83 Ibid., 239.
84 Ibid., 234.
85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 235.
87 See Jacques Lacan, "Of the Gaze as Object Petit a," in: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Hogarth Press, 1987) See for example, 75-77; 86-89; 100-103; and 114-116.
88 On this issue see my, "On Painting, The Gaze, and Lacan," *Art Criticism,* Vol. 6, No. 3, 1990, 1-17.
89 On the problem of the gaze and Lacan's orders see: Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan the Absolute Master,* trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) especially 227-239. Borch-Jacobsen is also illuminating on Lacan's deep indebtedness to Heidegger.
90 Bryson, *Chardin and the Text of Still Life,* 239.
91 Ernst Gombrich, "On Physiognomic Perception," in: *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1963), 45-55.
92 Bryson, *Vision,* 37-66.
93 Bryson continues this most questionable *pagaron albeit* with a specifically Heideggerian infusion in "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in: *Vision and Visuality,* ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 87-108.
94 Summers, "Form," 377.
95 Paul de Man, "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism," in: *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 229-245, especially 234.

Lee Krasner and the Decorative Impulse in Modern Art

Trisha Laughlin

Lee Krasner is an American abstract artist whose prolific production was not given significant critical attention until late in her career. She was one of the earliest abstract painters in New York, working in a non-representational, cubist style in the late thirties, and exhibiting with the American Abstract Artists in the early forties. While married to Jackson Pollock, from 1945 until his death in 1956, Krasner was Pollock's strongest supporter and managed to produce a significant body of her own work as well. Despite minimal critical recognition and the obstacles involved with being Pollock's widow, Krasner continued to paint from the late fifties until her death in 1984.

The simple explanation for the latency of Krasner's commercial and critical success is that she was overpowered by Pollock's reputation and status as the hero of the first American avant-garde movement, called Abstract Expressionism. While her proximity to Pollock and the fact of being a female in the male-dominated art milieu of post-war New York were certainly contributing factors, there are other issues to be considered. Despite the similarities between Krasner's paintings and that of other Abstract Expressionists, her work has been described as derivative, feminine and decorative at various times by various critics. [1] Because the decorative impulse in modern art has been undervalued and misunderstood, to be called decorative in the context of modernism implied that the work fell short of the station of high art, that it was somehow less significant for affecting the viewer on a merely sensual level of visual pleasure. Krasner did not receive the critical support she could have had from Clement Greenberg; in the late fifties they had a difference of opinion about her work which caused her to cancel a show he had arranged for her.[2] In part, Krasner was simply more interested in creating than in creating a reputation for herself.

Attitudes toward the decorative, both positive and negative, have had a

significant impact in determining esthetic theory and stylistic shifts in twentieth-century art. By the mid-twentieth century modern art had come to define itself in contradistinction to decoration. In the words of one critic, "it is decorativeness which has propelled art through a series of negations to destroy the part of itself not completely inhabiting its realm."[3] In late twentieth-century art, it is more difficult than ever to point out precisely the actual differences between art and decoration. The intended function of the object and its context—in an art museum or not—are usually the determining factors, rather than categorical differences in the appearance of the object.

Rather than attempting an all-encompassing definition, at this point it will be helpful to note some of the basic characteristics by which the decorative has been defined. A flat, shallow pictorial space is one of the most significant aspects of decoration; in most mural paintings, for example, little attempt has been made to create a deep sense of receding space. This shallow use of space is evident in the intricate designs of Oriental carpets, and the stylized, frontal quality of tapestry, wallpaper and fabric designs. Another important aspect that has traditionally been used to define decoration is a de-emphasized subject matter. The surface of a decorative object creates above all else a pleasing appearance of forms and patterns; if one considers a finely painted tea cup, hand made rug or other decorative object, it must be admitted that its design appeals more to the eye than the intellect. Decoration, therefore, is defined by an almost exclusively sensual, perceptual experience of colors and forms, rather than the perception of an illusionistic or symbolic narrative, typical of an artistic composition.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the distinction between easel painting and decoration was still quite clear. Decorative painting was generally defined by its size and its intended inclusion in a specific architectural setting. In easel painting from the Renaissance onward, the flat surface of the canvas had been transformed by the artist into a deeply receding space through linear perspective, chiaroscuro and other illusionistic devices:

> An easel painting is an aspect of nature captured and framed in order to isolate it as a precious thing in itself whereas a decorative picture is arranged *not so much for its own sake as to fill a space and to produce a harmony of color with its surroundings.*[4](my italics)

Decoration was not intended to draw the viewer in psychologically with its realistic and narrative appearance, but rather to "present itself immediately to the eye." [5]

With the shift to total abstraction in the twentieth century the

unprecedented situation arose in which painting began to resemble decorative pattern. For the first time since its advent in the Italian Renaissance, easel painting deserted its function of creating an illusion of nature; abstract painting took on a dramatically different non-narrative, more purely visual aspect which, like decoration, was not based on the imitation of nature. To ensure that the similarity of appearances did not result in an uncomfortable union of fine and decorative art, critical literature began to define art and decoration as distinctly different from one another. These distinctions led to value judgments, and thus a negative view of decoration became accepted in modern art theory and in practice.

The dialectical drama that continues to be played out around the issue of decoration becomes clear when one contrasts the intentions of minimalist abstraction with that of the pattern and decoration movement.[6] The former has attempted to pare down the decorative qualities of the art object, boldly declaring art's separation from other more ordinary objects and the mundane function of decorating. Post-modern artists who fall into the vague category of the pattern and decoration movement, on the other hand, use decorative techniques and materials to assert their rootedness in the life-world continuum. To trace the evolution of these late twentieth-century attitudes, a brief historiography of the critical literature on the decorative will be useful.

Socially oriented art theorists of the latter nineteenth century such as William Morris promoted the appreciation and production of decorative and applied arts. The problem, as Morris saw it, was that an unfortunate rift between fine and decorative art had left both ineffective, bereft of meaning and inspiration.

> For as the arts sundered into the greater and the lesser, contempt on one side, carelessness on the other arose ... The artist came out from the handicraftsman, and left them without hope of elevation, while he himself was left without the help of intelligent, industrious sympathy ... It is with art as it fares with a company of soldiers before a redoubt, when the captain runs forward full of hope and energy, but looks not behind him to see if his men are following .... The captain's life is spent for nothing, and his men are sullen prisoners in the redoubt of Unhappiness and Brutality.[7]

Morris considered the physical ugliness of the newly industrialized cities of England to have a dehumanizing effect on people, and felt that art had become inaccessible to the masses of humanity.

In his conviction that the redemption of art lay in reasserting its role as a source of pleasure and amusement, Morris was assigning fine art a specific, utilitarian function: improving the quality of modern life. This perspective,

which brings art into close proximity with decoration and is the opposite of the notion of art for art's sake, was promoted as well by another important late-nineteenth-century theorist, the playwright, poet and essayist Oscar Wilde. Although Wilde asserted that "all art is quite useless,"[8] an estheticist perspective in apparent contrast to Morris' practical aspirations, Wilde valued artifice and imagination over imitation of nature, and praised decorative and applied arts for their beauty.

> Nor, in looking at a work of art, should we be dreaming of what it symbolizes, but rather loving it for what it is. *Indeed, the transcendental spirit is alien to the spirit of art* ... Nor .... has a painting ... any more spiritual message or meaning for us than a blue tile from the wall of Damascus, or a Hitzen vase. It is beautifully coloured surface, nothing more, and affects us by no suggestion stolen from philosophy, no pathos pilfered from literature, no feeling filched from a poet, but by its own incommunicable artistic essence .... the arabesque of the design, the splendour of the color.[9] (my italics)

The language that Wilde uses is significant—particularly his choice of verbs; art has stolen, pilfered and filched its intellectual sophistication from literature and philosophy. Wilde's statements that the transcendental is alien to art, that art should be appreciated for what it is in itself rather than for its allusion, reveal clearly his enthusiastic endorsement of the decorative.

In France the pervasive sentiment among the avant-garde artists was similarly that traditional easel painting had lost its inspiration, and needed rejuvenation. In 1891 the French critic Albert Aurier expressed the growing interest in the decorative and condemned the tradition of easel painting. "Decorative painting is, strictly speaking, the true art of painting. Painting can be created only to decorate with thoughts, dreams, and ideas the banal walls of human edifices. The easel picture is nothing but an illogical refinement invented to satisfy the fantasy or the commercial spirit in decadent civilizations."[10] Maurice Denis' "Definition of Neo-traditionalism" was published in 1890 and opens with a statement that Joseph Masheck marks as the herald of a decisive reversal of traditional pictorial space. "Remember that a painting—before it is a battlehorse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."[11] With such a statement Denis places the sensual experience of visual perception over the intellectual experience of reading a painting in a literary or narrative sense.

As further evidence that fine art was drawing on decorative sources, Joseph Masheck notes that the arabesque, a common motif in Persian carpets and Islamic architectural ornamentation, was a preeminent theme in

art theory and criticism around 1890.[12] The nineteenth century art historian Alois Riegl wrote extensively on the arabesque in Islamic, Greco-Roman and Byzantine art. At the same time, the arabesque seems to have had special importance for Denis and Paul Signac. Masheck points out Denis' quasi-biblical phraseology: "in the beginning was a pure arabesque, as little tromp l'oeil as possible."[13]

The art of Henri Matisse provides the clearest examples of the arabesque as a motif in modern art. Stylized, curvilinear lines and flat shapes in a shallow picture plane appear with more or less consistency throughout all phases of Matisse's production, from his renderings of nudes to the patterned interiors and still lifes. Matisse's statements on the arabesque make clear the expressive potential of the arabesque. "It [the arabesque] translates the totality of things with a sign. It makes all the phrases into a single phrase .... You find it in the general outline of certain cave drawings. It is the impassioned impulse which swells these drawings."[14] Thus Matisse saw the arabesque as symbolic of basic human experience, unifying forms in nature and the artist's perception of the experience of the sensual world.[15]

Matisse's use of and praise for the arabesque reflect his proclivity for an intuitive, sensory esthetic experience, one closer to decoration than to art as it was becoming defined in the period of early modernism. The arabesque is one of the characteristics that connects Matisse's work with Krasner's; arabesque is a term often used to describe the rhythmic, curvilinear, calligraphic line that characterizes much of Krasner's work. This is not to suggest that she consciously used the arabesque because it was popular among late-nineteenth-century advocates of the decorative, nor that she intentionally imitated this aspect of Matisse's style. The arabesque as a motif is one indicator of the decorative impulse at work in modern art.

The arabesque is one of many aspects that align Matisse's work to decorative sources. John Neff points out ideas about decoration from the early 1900s which very likely had an impact on Matisse, who studied drawing at the Ecoles des Arts Décoratifs from 1893-94. Henry Havard's *La Decoration* of 1892 states that the aim of decoration was

> above all to create a pleasure for the eyes at the same time that it creates a repose for the mind .... *The duty of the decorator ... is not to provoke feelings of fear or of enthusiasm, but simply to adorn and embellish.* One must interest the spectator but never move him.[16](my italics)

Havard's view of the duty of the decorator is strikingly similar to Matisse's famous statement on the purpose of art, from his "Notes d'un Peintre" published in 1908.

> What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity, of tranquility, without disquieting or troubling subject matter, which could be .... a soother, a mental balm, something analogous to a good armchair which relaxes him (man) from his physical fatigue.[17]

Such a position indicates that Matisse rejected the dichotomy between art and life that was already being established as a basic premise of early modernist art theory. The influence of Denis and other advocates of the decorative is evident in Matisse's paintings of still lifes and interiors, which are characterized by extremely flat spaces and colorful, patterned surfaces that are given the same emphasis as the human figure.

This points out another departure that Matisse made from traditional easel painting, which was to give all areas of the canvas equal emphasis. In traditional easel painting the deep, illusionistic effects of linear perspective created a centripetal effect; the importance of specific figures or objects in a composition could be understood by their proximity to the center of the canvas. Leonardo's use of a central pyramid configuration in his Renaissance compositions set a standard which was incorporated into religious and history paintings well into the nineteenth century. In Matisse's paintings, by contrast, the margins contain as much interesting detail as the center; the viewer's attention is diffused evenly over the entire surface rather than focused on the center of the composition. This creates a non-hierarchical, all-over effect like that of carpet designs and other decorative patterns. One late twentieth century critic described this process as "the progressive drawing-off of interest from subject matter and the simultaneous concentration on the flat, colored surface and other formal properties."[18]

It is clear at this point that the concept of the decorative was far from pejorative at the turn of the century in Europe. The Jugendstil movement in Germany and the use of applied art by artists in the Russian avant-garde are evidence that the positive acceptance of decorative and applied arts extended beyond national and cultural borders. In an article titled "Abstraction, Decoration and Collage," Nancy Troy tries to locate the historical moment when the makers of high art began to disassociate their work from decorative art. She suggests that the very popularity of Art Nouveau in the last decade of the nineteenth century, "during which decoration was apotheosized"[19] and popularized, caused a corresponding reaction against decoration in the early twentieth century. Troy quotes the 1912 essay "Du Cubisme" by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger: "The decorative work of art exists only by virtue of its destination .... Essentially dependent, necessarily incomplete ... it is an organ." True painting, on the other hand, is described as independent and complete, an organism in harmony with the universe rather than with a particular environment.[20]

Piet Mondrian, influenced by Cubism, was another significant early

modernist who defined art in opposition to decoration. Writing in 1919 about the future he envisioned for painting, Mondrian described a contrast between a superior higher form of art and decorative art. "In its real being, and in its expression, it will not be an ornamental art. Such an art fills, covers, decorates; the new plasticism ... is beauty as a living reality."[21] These early claims against the decorative—that it is less of a "complete organism" and "living reality " than art, that it is essentially less important because of its particular function of ornamentation—had a powerful influence on the arbiters of taste (avant-garde artists and their theorizing advocates) as modernism evolved.

The flattening of pictorial space and the tendency towards decorative surface thrust the previously well-established boundaries between art and decoration into question. As Clement Greenberg pointed out, "in Renaissance and pre-Impressionist pictorial space the depicted object always stood, in Aristotelian distinction from everything not itself, in front of or behind something else."[22] Practitioners and advocates of the new style were put in the position of having to define exactly what the differences were between art and decoration. Clement Greenberg made successive attempts to do so, all the while insisting on the inherent ambiguity of the decorative. In his essay "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" written in 1948, Greenberg expresses well the tension that arose in modern painting between art and decoration.

> Though the "all-over" picture will, when successful, still hang dramatically on a wall, it comes very close to decoration—to the kind seen in wallpaper patterns that can be repeated indefinitely—and insofar as the "all-over" picture remains an easel picture, which somehow it does, it infects the notion of the genre with a fatal ambiguity.[23]

For Greenberg a work is decorative if it is strictly presentational and free of any illusionism.[24] The all-over paintings of Abstract Expressionism represent the full realization of decorative structure; in paintings by Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey, for example, in which there is no center or periphery, the subject is the entire surface of the canvas and the potential of the paint itself. As one critic describes it, the painting "seems too obviously what it is in itself" and too concerned with the nature of its medium to be concerned with imitating nature. The flatness of the space in a decentered, all-over painting emphasizes the flatness of the canvas and of the wall behind the canvas, rather than "plunging through the wall" to an imaginary world of recreated nature.[25]

The Western tradition of picture making has subordinated decorative to dramatic effect, which relies upon hierarchical distinctions for its impact.

Greenberg saw potential for the undramatic, non-hierarchical decorative picture to reflect the modern sentiment that "hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted." The problem with relinquishing the old format, as Donald Kuspit points out, is that "aesthetic experience presupposes perception of contrast."[26] In other words, for centuries of Western art history the eye has been trained to seek out the sort of tensions and contrasts that have always been present in painting, just as they are present in the natural world, with objects in the foreground in focus and those receding in diminishing focus. Without the tension created by narrative or compositional drama, esthetic experience "goes slack"; the decorative painting may have a totally innocuous effect.

Greenberg's way of expressing this potential problem with decorative painting was to state that the decorative could be used in painting either as the means of self-transcendence or as a falsification of artistic experience. Because very few artists were able to use the decorative impulse successfully, more often than not Greenberg uses the term "decorative" pejoratively.[27] In Greenberg's view it is much easier to "fall flat" with decorative painting than to fail at illusionistic painting. If one fails at creating a believable illusion of nature, some aspect of nature is still conveyed. There is much more at stake in attempting a decorative surface; if it is mechanically repetitive or derivative the decorative painting has nothing by which to redeem itself.

Matisse was one of the artists that Greenberg acknowledged for successfully using decorative means for non-decorative ends; the main way in which Matisse succeeds is by his use of scale. As Greenberg points out "a large picture can give us images of things, but a relatively small one can best recreate the instantaneous unity of nature as a view—the unity of that which the eyes take in at a single glance."[28] Thus a large format is better suited to a non-representational and decorative painting than is a small format. Moreover, scale is an important element for the dialectical conversion of the decorative. "Scale stretches the decorative to its limits, tensing it so that it seems to transcend itself."[29]

For Greenberg the only way that the decorative painting can succeed is to create its own dramatic tension by working against itself; "decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting, and part of the latter's formal mission is to find ways of using the decorative against itself."[30] In other words the decorative surface must some how convey a dramatic tension without resorting to the traditional illusionistic and narrative devices to do so.

The negativity of the image of decoration as a haunting specter suggests the extreme of negative potential that Greenberg assigned to the decorative. Beyond the possibility that a decorative surface will fail to achieve its own drama, and a surface that "breathes," lies the more serious charge that decorative art is often a falsification of artistic experience and of life

experience.[31] The conversion of art into decoration, of original style into stylization, is analogous to the relationship of avant-garde art to kitsch. "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas .... (it) is vicarious and faked sensation ... the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times."[32]

Like kitsch decorative art reproduces the look of true art without incorporating the struggle through which the original style was created. In Greenberg's view decorative art insinuates that art and life are felicitous and without struggle. Decorative art does not acknowledge the important fact of life's disequilibrium because the decorative artist does not understand or honor the conflict and suffering of life. Rather, decoration focuses on the rare moments of equilibrium in human experience; it represents a naive sense of reconciliation between art and life.[33]

Greenberg insists that the importance of art lies in its conception rather than its physical finish, in the in-depth exploration of medium rather than a pleasing product. The decorative artist is a specialist in creating the appearance of style as though no labor had gone into its creation. Because it is so easy for style to be imitated and over-stylized, Greenberg sees most artists as lacking independent identity and doomed to being naively decorative; most artists are at best socially acceptable promoters of good taste. In Greenberg's view, Stuart Davis turned Cubism into a decorative facade and Robert Motherwell overrefined the Abstract Expressionist style. The decorative artist thus shows a disrespect for the medium by simulating an authentic, engaged exploration of its potential.

To Greenberg's credit, he does lament the absence of decorative qualities that the modern "logic of purity" has excluded; "functionalism" and "essentialism" have stripped art of its decorativeness.[34] Decoration inevitably had to be sacrificed to the higher aim of purity. As Greenberg points out, "modern art has tended on the whole towards lightness and openness,"[35] impulses that run counter to the crowded *horreur vaccui* composition of most decoration. This tendency has contributed as well to an aversion to decorative and ornamental qualities in the twentieth century. Greenberg's theory of the transcendent dialectical drama of the decorative is by his own estimation ambiguous, paradoxical and rarely achieved in modern abstract painting. Perhaps because his pejorative conception of the decorative is easier to grasp, with its parallel in the concept of kitsch, popular critical opinion and the evolution of style focused on and amplified his extremely negative notion of decoration as derivative, facile and false.

Lee Krasner's work meets Greenberg's criteria of a successfully dramatic decorativeness in several respects. The large scale in which she primarily worked from the late fifties onward is one way in which she, like Matisse, suggested the extension of her non-representational fields to the seemingly infinite. Like Greenberg, Krasner insisted that a canvas must breathe. In an

interview in 1973, she said an esthetic definition of space "is a matter of whether the canvas allows me to breathe or not—if the canvas soars into space or it if is earthbound."[36] In a work such as *Blue Level* (1955) a tension is created between monumentality and weightlessness. A series of vertical elements, painted bars of blue and brown with white highlights, carries the eye beyond the limits of the large scale canvas. At the same time the verticals become a field in which organic forms appear to be hovering, as if cast about by a light wind. Bright fragments of red and royal blue (painted paper collaged to the surface) and highly textural strips of burlap stand out energetically against larger black forms; the latter, which are rounded and vaguely reminiscent of leaf shapes, serve to balance the vertical thrust of the composition. Finally, Krasner's choice to allow areas of the white canvas to appear intermittently throughout the composition furthers the sensation that this canvas is not weighted down or over-worked; rather it is organic and stimulating to perceive—in short, it breathes.

Krasner always spoke of the relationship of her work to nature; not the replicating of nature, but the recreation of her experience of nature. She spoke of a painting evolving as organically as a lettuce leaf[37]and she never forced herself to control the duration of a cycle of works. Her respect for the internal, intuitive source of her art prevented Krasner from ever forcing a style or exhausting a particular motif to the point of over-stylization. Greenberg said of Milton Avery that he approached nature not as an object but as a subject; while he uses decorative means—bright color and neutral surfaces—the intensity of his experience of nature prevents his paintings from being decorative in the negative sense.[38] The same can be said of Krasner's work, particularly in her series of large scale collage paintings done in 1955. In *Bald Eagle* (1955), shapes that suggest wings flapping and floral forms are arranged in a compressed, shallow space. Patches of orange, crimson and mauve interlock with black and earth tone fragments to create an all-over, unifying pattern. Krasner sets up a tension between references to natural forms and ornamental pattern that is simultaneously active and restrained, tense and voluptuous.

Greenberg acknowledged, albeit after the fact, that Krasner's collages shown at the 1955 Stable Gallery exhibition were "a major addition to the American art scene of that era."[39] In their relatively simplified, minimal compositions and emphasis on verticality, *Blue Level, Milk Weed, Lame Shadow* and *Shooting Gold* achieve a balance between decorative surface and modernist tendencies toward openness and lightness. They are all relatively large in scale; approximately 7 feet by 5 feet. The color schemes of crisp, organic shapes in lyrical relationships are quite similar in sentiment and in format to Matisse's late cut-outs.

While Krasner's all-over surfaces often have a patterned quality, she never allowed the design to become uniform or mechanical; this is the

failing of many attempts at the decorative, according to Greenberg. *Shattered Light* (1954) and *Collage* (1955) are examples of the rich variety of intricately patterned surfaces Krasner achieved through her collage technique; all of these works are somewhat smaller (approximately 3 feet by 4 feet) and are made up of extremely tiny strips of painted paper and dabs of paint. As the title suggests, *Shattered Light* is a brilliant, kaleidoscopic pattern of what appear to be shards of colored stone, bark or other natural substance the color of soil, and glass or ice. The surface appears to be shattering under one's view, like a view into a leaf covered pond through a layer of breaking ice. By contrast *Collage* has an entirely different sensual quality. It too is an all-over, irregularly patterned surface, but the paint has been applied more loosely, perhaps with a drier brush than was used in *Shattered Light.* The result is a misty, feathery effect that is enhanced by the warm palate: shades of orange and earth tones with highlights of teal and white.

The positive aspects of the decorative impulse in modern art were brought into much clearer focus by the writings of Amy Goldin. Goldin made a significant contribution to the literature on the decorative in several articles published during the 1970s, a time of renewed interest in decoration and its relationship to art. She asserted that although decoration employs different strategies for a different end than that of art, it should not be viewed as aspiring to the same station as art. When viewed dispassionately, decoration has many desirable qualities that are not available to art. Goldin unapologetically accepts the "mereness" of decoration as inherent, and asserts that it is precisely because decoration is intellectually vapid that it can fulfill certain needs that art inhibits. Being non-intimate and conceptually bland, decoration demands a low-level of emotional involvement from the viewer. "Perhaps it can elicit and sustain its own artistic range all the better for limiting itself to the immediacy of the present moment."[40] In other words, because it doesn't have any pretense of evoking psychological tension or any sort of metaphysical experience, it is better able to have a concerted impact visually. This accords with decoration's long established aim of being exclusively a pleasure to the senses.

Goldin finds a progression in Matisse's body of work, that began with an impulse towards the decorative from the beginning and culminates in sheer decoration with the late cut-outs:

> ... he detached his art from the expression of self and from the drama of human existence, with its implications of struggle, pain and death .... In order to *keep visual pleasure unalloyed, Matisse had to undercut his subject matter, separating it from recurrent human occasions* and turning it into studio furniture .... This is why his women are neither sex objects nor individualized people but models, studio furniture ....nothing truly exists except light,

materials and art.[41] (my italics)

Here as in other passages, Goldin aligns Matisse with an Eastern philosophical spirit of detachment from the cycle of human suffering;[42] only through such indifference to emotion could Matisse achieve the true estheticization of art as purely visual experience. She compares the chapel at Vence with a Turkish mosque, which has a plain exterior and a colorful interior. Unlike the Christian conception of a church as a consecrated symbol of God's house, Vence is more like a mosque in that it aspires to be only a decorative space. It doesn't impose a religious experience through a dramatic setting; the atmosphere inside is abstract and sensuous. "Matisse could easily jam together the Stations of the Cross, obscuring the cosmic drama that Barnett Newman found irresistible ... [At Vence] narration and extension are virtually obliterated. He illustrates no story, provides no visual climax."[43] Goldin points out how Matisse avoided the elevated psychological involvement that became accepted as the intention of avant-garde art.

In discussing the significant differences between the flat, decorative, all-over surface and traditional easel painting, Goldin addresses many concerns that are similar to Greenberg's positive conception of the decorative. While a composition is typically hierarchical, focusing the viewer's attention on one element in contrast to others, the grid, the abstract basis of all-over painting, diffuses attention and directs the eye to the entire surface.[44] The focus in a decorative field is on the unity of the texture and color , not on the subject. "Pattern is basically antithetical to the iconic image, for the nature of pattern implicitly denies the importance of singularity, purity and absolute precision ... [Composition is] a deliberately engineered reprise of ordinary looking."[45] Goldin thus divides painting into two general categories: that which employs a composition, whether illusionistic or not, and that which uses the grid as its organizing principle. Whether it is abstract or naturalistic, a composition evokes a subject, a center, a foreground, a hierarchical organization.

Reiterating Greenberg's distaste for mechanical repetition of a motif, Goldin warns against using an actual, rigidly structured grid. The grid is the underlying structure that gives a pattern resilience; it ought to be rendered with some variation of stress and accent. "The toughness of patterns, in which the grid is normally unstated, is utterly reversed by actual grids ... Few things on earth are more pointless than a grid seen through a temperament."[46] Goldin addressed the potential difficulty of reading a decorative surface. "Our esthetic vocabulary was built for unique forms and closed aggregates, and in pattern nothing is unique or closed. Orchestration is all."[47] While a traditional composition is centripetal, drawing the viewer into its imaginary microcosm, a decorative surface is centrifugal. The viewer tends to scan a decorative surface and to perceive it extending beyond its

actual limits. In choosing either a grid or a composition, the artist establishes one or the other of two inherently different relationships with the viewer. "Compositions breed involvement, intimacy and references to the self.. Grids generate a greater emotional distance."[48]

With these insights, it is somewhat paradoxical that the Abstract Expressionists employed large scale, decorative fields of pattern and color to evoke an intense psychological involvement. The expression of the sublime, the embodiment of profound and universal human emotions is one of the stated aims of the Abstract Expressionists, rather than unalloyed visual pleasure. "The painter of the new movement ... is not concerned with geometric forms *per se* but in creating forms which by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content .... His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is concerned with the sublime."[49]

The concept of a transcendentally meaningful art object, separate from the continuum of daily life and created for contemplation in the context of a museum, is particular to Western culture; the flat, non-narrative patterning of Abstract Expressionism comes from decorative, thus more universal, sources. By claiming to efface the decorative, sensual function of painting for a higher metaphysical purpose, the Abstract Expressionists denied that aspect of their work which does in fact have a cross-cultural, universal significance. Despite the heroic aim and the high art intention of Abstract Expressionist painters, the paintings are, finally, still engaging because of the decorative, sensuous quality of the surfaces rather than because of philosophies, personal or universal, that motivated their production. There is a tension between the inherently esthetic, emotionally neutral force of the decorative surfaces and the transcendent psychological potency assigned to the paintings of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, for example.

Lee Krasner alluded to the problems inherent to the rhetorical guise of modern art in an interview with John Bernard Myers. Asked whether certain abstract paintings are made deliberately obfuscating by their titles, her response was the following:

> The most sensational example would be Barney Newman's *Stations of the Cross.* Such a title can imply nothing but the Christian belief in the agony of Jesus Christ's torture, his mortification and then the resurrection ... Newman, painting vertical bars and allowing no horizontals, destroys the potency of the symbol; the cross disappears along with the crucifixion. Thus the title becomes meaningless and the paintings pretentious.[50]

With this statement Krasner separates herself from the heroic aspirations

of many of the Abstract Expressionists; regardless of the similarities between hers and other Abstract Expressionist paintings, Krasner's attitude towards her own work was pragmatic, sensual and anti-metaphysical.

While Newman's work is similar to Krasner's in format, being also non-representational and abstract with an emphasis on the flat, mural size surface, his intention was notably different from Krasner's. For Newman "the central issue of painting is subject matter .... It would be easy for me now to talk about the transcendental, the self, revelation, etc. All painting worth anything has all this."[51] The experience which Newman intends for his viewer is one which provokes inward speculation and intense feelings of confronting the sublime. In Krasner's view "the sublime will take care of itself."[52] She tempers the psychological force of the feelings that motivate her art works, naturally tending to create decorative surfaces which are sensuously presentational rather than vehicles of self-revelation or dramatic confrontation with the viewer.

While Krasner admitted that the source of her paintings was internal and unconscious, she often insisted that her paintings had no special philosophical or mystical significance. "Artists are not philosophers and can only afford small doses of introspection."[53] Asked if some of her titles, particularly the *Solstice* series done in the early 1980s, could be perceived as esoteric by her viewers, Krasner responded "come, come. I've spent at least half my life in the country, near the ocean. I still sit on my back porch observing sky and water ... I can observe when the water is high and when it is low. I notice the colors of spring and fall; hence *Vernal Yellow* and *Automnal Red, High Tide* and *Lowest Tide*—to mention more titles—are daily experiences for me."[54]

Krasner also disclaimed that the images in her paintings were archetypal symbols; about Jungian concepts she stated "I was somewhat sympathetic, but it was a fringe interest."[55] She was interested in psychology and had read Jung; she underwent analysis for a year herself, in 1956,[56] the same year in which Pollock died. By contrast Pollock's work was so intimately linked to his personal struggles that while he was in the care of a Jungian psychoanalyst, the doctor was able to use Pollock's drawings for insight, since Pollock had difficulty expressing himself verbally.[57] It is worth noting that many of the least expressionistic and non-intellectual of Krasner's works are the colorful collages created in 1955, a year before Pollock's death. These works do not disclose Krasner's psychic state, despite the fact that this was a emotionally turbulent period for her.[58] In this respect Krasner, like Matisse, remained aloof from the vicissitudes of her personal, internal experience while expressing herself in her art.

Krasner produced her most expressionistic works in the late 1950s and in the 1960s; the titles suggest the bursting energy that comes forth in these canvases: *Upstream, Sun Woman I, The Seasons, Uncaged* and *Celebration* to

name just a few. The paintings from these years, such as *The Seasons* (1957) are extremely active and gestural, combining swooping arabesque lines and rhythmic, loose swaths of color; in some cases areas of canvas left unpainted emphasize spontaneity and improvisation. They have a sense of unbridled physicality and relinquished control that seems to erupt from the controlled geometricity of her *Little Image* paintings from the late 1940s.

Barbara Rose points out that the cycle of paintings begun with *Prophecy* of 1956 are characterized by a prevalence of flesh tones and accents of red; these elements combined with anthropomorphic forms represent the pain and turmoil that Krasner experienced in the wake of Pollock's abrupt and tragic death. Rose notes that in these paintings "she [Krasner] never gives ... the sense that inner organs are exposed as in an autopsy; figures may 'bleed' but they remain intact and upright, on guard like wounded soldiers." Furthermore, "the disorienting quality of Pollock's churning, swirling imagery ... .is not found in Krasner's work. No matter how turbulent or agitated her imagery becomes, her images are always securely anchored to the top and bottom edges of her canvas."[59]

Even when her psyche is revealed in its most raw state, Krasner was still conscious of formal concerns, controlling the expressive force of her paintings. While making these important qualifications, Rose focuses more of her attention on the agonistic elements of Krasner's paintings that can be interpreted as autobiographical.. "Her expressionistic paintings of the late fifties are as clear a record of profound pain as Gorky's anguished works of the late forties."[60] Contrary to this general statement, there are many works produced in close proximity to the *personnage* cycle which do not vent the anger and pain that Rose sees as the hallmark of Krasner's production of the late fifties. *Listen* (1957) is one of many works from the late fifties that do not express profound pain, anger and violence. A warm palette of pinks and reds, loosely scumbled, is overlaid with circular and petal shaped forms described sketchily by sporadic black lines. Krasner herself commented on the ironic disjunction between the emotions that motivate certain works and the appearance of the final product. "I can remember that while I was painting *Listen,* which is so highly keyed in color ... it looks like such a happy painting .... While I was painting it I almost didn't see it because tears were literally pouring down .... What I feel at the moment is not necessarily what is being brought forth in the painting."[61]

By choosing to emphasize the tortured and cataclysmic aspects of Krasner's life and art, Rose perpetuates the stereotypical image of the heroically suffering avant-garde artist. This is not helpful to her larger project, which is to present Krasner as an important artist in her own right. Rose appears to be working within the same set of established criteria for assigning aesthetic worth that excluded Krasner in the first place. She suggests that it took the tragedy of Pollock's death to allow Krasner to

relinquish the control she had imposed on herself while living with Pollock,[62] and describes Krasner's work as evolving from academic realism to Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, progressing "toward an art more and more free of the restraints of convention."[63] Rose's directly causal view of life's events determining Krasner's art presents Krasner as a blank slate, either the passive foil or the mirror for the innovations of the great male influences controlling her life and art.

A linear progression of styles culminating in a dramatic "break through" and a release of previously repressed energy coincident with Pollock's death is incongruous with the spirit of Krasner's art in several respects. It diminishes the fact that Krasner defied convention—artistic and social—from the very beginning and throughout her life as an artist. She heartily resisted the academic standards and social realism that were the accepted style in her early career. She was working in a non-objective style long before her male contemporaries, and her life drawings from her years at the Hoffman school show her advanced, unconventional use of total abstraction, before even Hoffman himself had made such a break with tradition.

Moreover, the notion that the expressionistic works of the late 1950s and 1960s represents a "breakthrough" or culmination of style throws the quality of Krasner's work from the 1970s and '80s in to question. Krasner had prolific periods of production in the last 15 years of her life, and her style returns for the most part to a more linear, cool and restrained interaction of color and forms in the 1970s. The artist's hand is not visible in the evenly applied arabesques of color that fill these canvases. In their placid, "mere" presentation of spacious, luxurious color and lyrical forms, these paintings cannot be connected with emotional states or elevated psychological subjects. In Rose's description "the last two decades of her [Krasner's] life have been spent creating post-Cubist revisions of the art of her revered masters, Matisse, Picasso and Mondrian."[64] The term "post-Cubist revisions" does not adequately describe the variety of Krasner's late production. The collages *Vernal Yellow* (1980) *Twelve hour Crossing* and *March Twenty-first* (1981) are as highly energetic, painterly and as expressionistic as the work from her middle career, further defying the logic of linear stylistic development.

Krasner said that her collages "have to do with time and change";[65] the fact is that by reincorporating entire periods of her production, Krasner makes an assessment of the passage of time and a traditional progression of styles nearly impossible. For instance, almost all of the canvases from her exhibition at Betty Parsons gallery in 1951 were recycled, as well as many of the drawings she did in Hoffman's classes in the late 1930s. There will therefore be obvious gaps in the catalogue raisonné of Krasner's work, which is currently being written by Ellen Landau at Case-Western University. This would undoubtedly please Krasner, since she did not believe that time and

progress were directly related.

> I think for every level you go higher, you slip down one or two levels and then come back up again. When I say slip back, I don't mean that detrimentally ... it is like the swing of a pendulum rather than better or back ... If you think of it in terms of time, in relation to past, present and future, and think of them all as a oneness, you will find that you will swing the pendulum constantly to be with now[66]

An important aspect of all of Krasner's collages is her recycling of old drawings and paintings, cut or torn beyond recognition and incorporated into abstract patterns. The psychological significance of such an act of "deconstructing" the record of one's past ought not be overlooked; however, as Goldin points out, repetition depletes the representational meaning of an image. It turns a subject into a motif. The effect of this transition from subject to motif is to undercut an image's emotional impact. "Pattern is lethal and can kill the power of any image."[67] Because of the frequency with which the recycled fragments appear in Krasner's collages, they become a motif that runs throughout the cycles of her work; the fragments thus have a less dramatic effect than they do when considered as individual indices of self-destruction.

Another important collage series came in the late seventies; these works came out of Krasner's rediscovery of works on paper from the late thirties. She cut sections away from these charcoal drawings—Cubist studies of nudes done at the Hoffman school—and pieced them together again on large canvases. The fitting together of many of these sketches and fragments of sketches creates a screen-like, gridded pattern that unifies the whole arrangement. Krasner turned the early studies, done in an avant-garde style, into a motif of a decorative, patterned whole.

In spite of the precision with which the artist cut up her drawings, the fragments in this series are much more recognizable as disembodied pieces of the artist's own work; the series from the fifties used smaller fragments that are subordinated to the larger painted forms. Krasner admitted her reservations about the process of recycling earlier works. "How could I help thinking it might be a mistake slicing them up? Why destroy perfectly good drawings?" She explains that the titles of these collages reflect her gradual confidence in the process she had started.

> The first collage ... is called *Imperative* [1976]—meaning I experienced the need not just to examine these drawings but a peremptory desire to change them; a command ... to make them new. *Past Conditional* [1976] describes a pause ... I am asking

> myself, is there a precedent which must be fulfilled? What kind of bargain am I trying to strike? ... *Imperfect Indicative* [1976] is replete with the past; you can see quite clearly much of how I worked in the early days.[68]

This series of collages is autobiographical in the sense that the artist reflects on her early work, relating them to her present situation; still, they are executed with a neutrality that undercuts their expressive potential. Color is entirely absent from many, while others use a minimum of color as accent. These works are more concerned with line and geometric interactions of space than any other of Krasner's mature works. The edges of the individual pieces of paper are not torn but carefully and precisely cut. The white areas where the drawings have been cut away alternate between being negative spaces and becoming the positive structure of the design, with the charcoal drawings becoming the space in between the more abstract slashes. Krasner orchestrates a tension between the flatness of these surfaces, emphasized by the pattern of white slashes and the suggestion of a grid, and the cubist interpretation of space which seems deep when contrasted with the absolute flatness of the blank spaces.

These collages are the artist's somewhat ironic assessment of her own artistic production and of the relationship of modern to more contemporary style. The cubist drawings are both icons and indices of the earnest young artist, serious and thorough in her dedication to principles of Cubism— still a radically new, avant-garde approach at the time and place of their production. The mature artist irreverently turned these symbols of her past into units of a large decorative field. The new works have a subtle relationship to quilts and the process of quilting; many quilt designs are based on grids of similar proportions. Krasner seems to have emphasized the action of piecing together by keeping the painterly accents to a minimum; in earlier collages she integrated the collaged elements with the painted ground by overlapping the whole surface with painterly brush strokes.

Working from Goldin's premise that repetition diffuses the expressive power of an image and based on the above survey of Krasner's production, it can be argued that through her collage works in particular Lee Krasner significantly furthered the decorative aims of visual pleasure and psychological detachment. While some recent critics have found commonalities between collage and decoration,[69] the historical use of and accepted notions about collage make it an unlikely medium for the expression of the decorative impulse. In short, collage was first employed by Cubism, an avant-garde art movement; it was adopted and exploited for its expressive potential by successive avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Futurism. The decorative, on the other hand, as exemplified by the sensuous, detached style of Matisse, was something the same avant-

garde movements revolted against throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Critics and historians have typically considered collage within the art movements that exploited the medium the most, such as Dada and Surrealism. The very presence of a "real" object affixed to a canvas, traditionally the stage for reinterpreting nature, is in itself a comment on the falseness of the rendered image. This element of mockery or parody, seemingly endemic to collage, is contested by Krasner's collages. She used the collage technique to create works which have little interest in conveying irony or commenting on the situation of contemporary culture.

Harold Rosenberg saw the works of the early collagists as provocations to a revolution in the creation of works that, in their very nature, align themselves against a classical, coherent or harmonizing esthetic. In "Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers", written in 1975, Rosenberg expresses anxiety over the rise of collage and assemblage, calling them the adversary of modern art. "Collage changed the relation between painting and the world outside painting. The combining of formal qualities with crude fact in Cubist collage contained the seeds of anti-art that have flourished in the half century that has followed ... "[70] Rosenberg disliked collage because it appeared to mock the most elemental aspects of the plastic art tradition from whence it came, and in doing so, to flippantly dismiss any concern for formal integrity. It is precisely in their extreme attention to formal concerns and in their careful tempering of the expressive potential of collaged materials that Krasner's collages stand out in contrast to that of her predecessors and her contemporaries.

Unlike the Surrealists who worked with the element of chance in creating their collages, Krasner's process was slow and methodical. She carefully arranged fragments of paper, canvas and burlap and reworked them until she achieved a balanced overall composition. While many of her contemporaries collaged found and detrital objects onto their canvases, Krasner always limited herself to using fragments of her own earlier works, strips of painted paper and burlap. Pollock used nails, keys, coins and tacks in his collages; De Kooning used images torn from magazine advertisements, and Franz Kline used pages from phone books. Krasner's choice to restrain the allusions to urban experience and commercial culture allow the viewer to concentrate on the relationships of shape, color and texture within the works.

Another artist of the New York School who used collage extensively is Robert Motherwell. In his 1972 essay for the exhibition "The Collages of Robert Motherwell," E. A. Carmean Jr. praises Motherwell hyperbolically. "Over the last thirty years only one artist may be said to have explored as well as advanced the art of collage and *papier colle;* he is Robert Motherwell."[71] Carmean is vague about exactly what criteria he used in

selecting Motherwell as the only significant collagist in thirty years. While Motherwell did create an impressive array of collage works, on the whole he did not maintain the same fidelity to the formal concerns of Abstract Expressionism as Krasner did in her collages.

Most of Motherwell's collages carry over similar formal concerns as are found in his Abstract Expressionist paintings, but in many others the ironic content brought into play by his choice of materials is the dominant force of the work. One such example is *The French Line* of 1960. As with many of his collages, Motherwell himself described this work as a multiple pun, as well as a bit of autobiography. At the center of the composition is a label from a box of French diet toast; he explains that the French talk about the figure in terms of line. Also present is the blue horizon of the Riviera, and the connotation of the railroad line Motherwell took to get there.[72]

With *The French Line* and other of Motherwell's collages that are consciously autobiographical or witty, the complex narrative allusions swing the work in the direction of ironic punning, the historical use of the collage technique. Motherwell's first intention may have been to create a non-objective image through a painterly use of collage elements, but he went about the collage process in a chance manner, using mostly what he found around the studio; in this aspect he had much in common with the Surrealists. Carmean quotes John I. H. Baur on Motherwell's intention. "Certain critical deductions from the materials used in his collages annoy Motherwell because they ignore the much simpler truth of the matter. Thus the prevalence of Gauloises cigarette wrappers does not testify to either a love of France or a susceptibility to French influence; he likes their ultramarine blue."[73]

Just as every artist is held accountable for the symbols they choose to incorporate, neither John Baur nor Motherwell himself can deactivate what has been semiotically activated by inclusion in a collage. In discussing the semiotics of collage, Wendy Holmes explains how a substance which is in one context semiotically inert becomes full of new connotations once it has been placed into a collage. She uses the example of a wallpaper sample that has one set of bland meanings in a wallpaper sample book which, once removed, takes on new meanings, such as "wallpaperness."[74]

In Motherwell's collage the fact that the toast label is situated in the center of the composition and is the main compositional element gives it an elevated, iconic significance. In this respect the structure of *The French Line* works to harness the expressive potential of the medium, what William Seitz called "the disconcertingly centrifugal potentialities"[75] of collage. Returning to Goldin's criteria, Motherwell's collage has a definite subject, while in Krasner's collages the subject becomes a motif by repetition. The choice to isolate the collaged element, rather than placing it in a less noticeable context with other collaged elements, encourages the viewer to

consider its expansive meaning.

This format of isolating a single collaged element in a painted field was not the only type of collage that Motherwell produced, but it does appear frequently throughout the many cycles of collages he produced. Series such as *Gauloises on Scarlet* and *Gauloises on Grey* are representative examples from the seventies, when he produced a great number of collages; they all have similar centralized compositions In his earlier collages, such as *View From a High Tower* of 1944, the collaged elements are much more integrated with the entire surface of the canvas. Pieces of torn, painted paper and a section of neatly cut map have less impact in this all-over composition, where they compete with geometric fields of color and dynamic black lines that direct the eye. This sort of complex and powerful overall composition is not found in Motherwell's later collages.

Because of the choices Krasner made—to refrain from using detrital or found objects and to create patterns from repeated motifs—she managed to rein in the expressive potential of the collage medium. By curtailing the impulse to expression inherent to her medium, she enhanced the capacity of her collages to effect the viewer on a level of pure visual sensation. This marks an original use of collage as a means to a decorative, non-metaphysical end; Greenberg pointed out, in 1959, that those artists who took up collage after Braque and Picasso "exploited it largely for its shock value"[76]; he neglected to discuss Krasner as an exception to this general rule. William Seitz said of collage that "it could almost be said that a constellation of meanings can exist independently of the colors, textures, and forms which are its carriers."[77] Krasner must have been instinctively wary of this potential for expanded meaning, as she carefully manipulated her materials to create collages that have a decorative, purely esthetic impact—and as she said herself, the sublime takes care of itself.

Notes

1 One review of her 1965 retrospective at Whitechapel Gallery in London illustrates the common assessment of Krasner at that time: "Not one of the really major creative figures whose emergence makes a noticeable dent in the path of art but a considerable and often enjoyable follower, synthesizer, adapter and recreator of elements that have been presented by others." Norbert Lynton, "London Letter," *Art International* 9 (November 20, 1965): 8.

2 Greenberg was then director of French and Company and had scheduled a show for Krasner to take place in November of 1959. Asked in an interview about her falling out with Greenberg Krasner replied "Let's put it this way. I didn't like his response to my new painting, and when I asked him on what basis he scheduled a show, he said 'on the basis of what I thought you would do.' 'As of this second my show is cancelled' was my response. Now I daresay if this show had come about my 'career' would have moved in a different direction." Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation With Lee Krasner," *Arts* 47 (April 1973): 47.

3 Jeff Perrone, "Fore-, Four, For, etc," *Arts* 54 (March 1980):85.

4 Audley Mackworth, "The Relation of the Easel Picture to Decorative Art," *The Art Journal* (London, 1901):120.

5 John Neff, "Matisse and Decoration: an Introduction," *Arts* 49 (May 1975):60.

6 For a detailed discussion of this type of art and the artists involved see Carrie Rickey, "Decoration, Ornament, Pattern and Utility: Four Tendencies in Search of a Movement," *Flash Art* 90-91 (June 1979):19-23.
7 William Morris, *The Decorative Arts their Relation to Modern Life and Progress,* (London: Ellis and White, 1878):11.
8 Oscar Wilde,. Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) in Melvin Rader, ed., *A Modern Book of Esthetics,* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 32.
9 Oscar Wilde. "L'Envoi An Introduction to *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* by Rennell Rodd" in John Wyse Jackson, ed., *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea the Rare Oscar Wilde*, (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1991), 198.
10 Albert Aurier,. "Symbolism In Painting: Paul Gauguin" in Hershel Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art,* 92.
11 Maurice Denis "A Definition of NeoTraditionalism" in Linda Nochlin, ed., *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874-1904,* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 187.
12 Masheck, "Carpet Paradigm," 88.
13 Ibid., 94.
14 Matisse, "Interview with Verdet, 1952" in *Matisse on Art* (New York: Phaidon, 1973), 142, 143.
15 Jack Flam discusses the prevalence of the arabesque in Art Nouveau decoration and the likelihood that this turn of the century aesthetic also influenced Matisse. This is interesting because Flam considers the symbolic dimensions of the arabesque in Art Nouveau. *Matisse on Art*, 21.
16 Henry Havard, *La Decoration* (Paris, 2nd ed. 1892), 19.
17 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" in Flam, *Matisse on Art,* 38.
18 Amy Goldin, "Matisse and Decoration: the Late Cut-Outs," *Art in America* 63 (July 1975): 58.
19 Nancy Troy, "Abstraction, Decoration and Collage," *Arts* 54 (June 1980): 54.
20 Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, "Du Cubisme" in Robert Herbert, ed., *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Hills: Prentice Hall, 1964), 5.
21 Piet Mondrian in *Piet Mondrian His Life and Work,* Michael Seuphor, ed.(New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1957), 343.
22 Clement Greenberg "Master Leger" in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 98.
23 Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture" in *Art and Culture*, 155.
24 Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg Art Critic*, (Madison:University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 57-59.
25 Ibid., 59.
26 Ibid., 66.
28 Greenberg, "Milton Avery" in *Art and Culture,* 201.
29 Kuspit, 63.
30 Greenberg, "Milton Avery" in *Art and Culture,* 200.
31 Kuspit, 70.
32 Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in *Art and Culture,* 10.
33 Kuspit, 71, 80-82.
34 Greenberg, "Detached Observations,", 88.
35 Ibid.
36 Lee Krasner in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975): 103.
37 Lee Krasner papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm frame #703.
38 Greenberg, "Milton Avery" *Art and Culture*, 198, 201.
39 B.H. Friedman quoting Greenberg, introduction to "Lee Krasner, Paintings, Drawings and Collages," catalogue of retrospective at Whitechapel Gallery, London. Archives of American Art, Frame #804.
40 Ibid., 50, 51.
41 Ibid., 58.
42 Goldin doesn't make such a specific connection but her language in this passage is reminiscent of the Buddhist doctrine of seeking refuge from cyclic suffering of existence. She does quote Matisse saying he found inspiration in the Orient.
43 Goldin, "Matisse and Decoration," 58.

44 Ibid.,51.
45 Amy Goldin, "Patterns Grids and Painting," *Artforum* 14 (Sept 1975):51, 52.
46 Ibid.,53.
47 Ibid.,51.
48 Ibid.,52.
49 Barnett Newman, "The Plastic Image 1943-45," in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 125.
50 Lee Krasner quoted in "Naming Pictures: Conversations Between Lee Krasner and John Bernard Myers", *Artforum* 23 (November 1984), 71.
51 Barnett Newman in a 1962 interview in Ross, *Abstract Expressionism*, 134, 135.
52 Lee Krasner quoted in Myers, "Naming Pictures," 71.
53 Ibid.,71.
54 Ibid.,73.
55 Lee Krasner in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk Conversation with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 96.
56 Ibid.,96. About her analysis Krasner said: "it was a splinter group from the Sullivan school ... if one must separate Jung and Freud this would be in the direction of Freud."
57 From 1939 to 1940 Pollock submitted 69 drawings and one gouache to Dr. Joseph Henderson, the Jungian psychoanalyst he was seeing at that time. See Claude Cernushi, *Jackson Pollock: Psychoanalytic Drawings* (Chapel Hill:Duke University Press, 1992).
58 Pollock was drinking heavily during this period, and traveling into the city to spend time with his colleagues at the Cedar Bar; Krasner strongly disliked the attitude towards women of the group at the Cedar Bar and would not accompany Pollock. See "Lee Krasner: the Long View," a documentary film by Barbara Rose.
59 Barbara Rose. *Lee Krasner a Retrospective*, (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, and New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 98 and 104.
60 Ibid. 104.
61 Unpublished interview, Archives of American Art, Lee Krasner papers, microfilm frame #s. 452-453.
62 "As long as Pollock was alive, Krasner could not afford to enter the world of trancelike 'otherness' in which he operated when he painted. Her feet, at least, had to be securely planted on the ground." Rose, *Lee Krasner A Retrospective*, 98.
63 Ibid., 97-98.
64 Ibid., 139.
65 Krasner in Myers, "Naming Pictures," 73.
66 Krasner in Nemser, *Art Talk* , 95.
67 Goldin, "Patterns Grids and Painting," 51.
68 Krasner in Myers, "Naming Pictures," 71.
69 Marjorie Welish calls collage the material equivalent of pattern in "Pattern Painting: A New Flowering of the Decorative?" *Art Criticism* (Spring 1980). Jeff Perrone calls art that employs decorative motifs metaphorical collage because the formal characteristics of such a work have been borrowed (from decoration and ornamentation), thus decontextualized and juxtaposed. In "Approaching the Decorative," *Artforum* 15 (December 1976), 26.
70 Harold Rosenberg, "Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers" in Hoffman, *Collage,* 63.
71 E.A. Carmean, Jr., *The Collages of Robert Motherwell* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), 10.
72 Robert Motherwell, quoted in Carmean, 69.
73 John I.H. Baur, quoted in Carmean, 32.
74 Wendy Holmes, "Decoding Collage: Signs and Surfaces" in Hoffman, *Collage*, 200.
75 William Seitz, "The Realism and Poetry of Assemblage" in *The Art of Assemblage*, (New York: Plantin Press, 1961), 84.
76 Clement Greenberg, "Collage" in *Hoffman, Collage*, 74-75.
77 Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, 83.

As Stupid as a Painter: Jackson Pollock and the Politics of Self

Ross Neher

Max Kozloff, in his essay "American Painting During the Cold War," relates how

> here [in America], at least, the artist was allowed, if only through indifference, to be at liberty and to pursue the inspired vagaries of his own conscience. Elsewhere in the world, where fascist or communist totalitarianism ruled, or where every energy had been spent in fighting them, the situation was otherwise. Modern American art ... now self-propagandized itself as champion of eternal humanist freedom.[1]

Indifference soon gave way to support as policy makers found in avant-garde art the perfect emblem of individual autonomy. This dual role of free artist and unpaid propagandist for post-war capitalism was troubling to the heroic generation of Abstract Expressionists who believed their art to be untainted by political concerns. Nevertheless, I would argue that paradoxically the roots for the recent politicization of art can be traced to a specific formalist issue as it was defined by the critic Clement Greenberg in New York in the 1940s—the displacement of (European) relational easel painting, typified by Mondrian, by the all-over technique of Jackson Pollock.

There are periods where the "fit" between the esthetic and the political is especially fortuitous, as in the eighteenth century, where "the emergent middle class, in an historic development, is newly defining itself as a universal subject."[2] In political terms, the citizen willingly relinquished narrow self-interest for the good of the whole, while maintaining sufficient personal autonomy to subjectively experience himself as free. Such social configurations find a parallel expression in the art object where "the mystery of the aesthetic object is that each of its sensuous parts, while appearing wholly autonomous, incarnates the 'law' of the totality."[3] The art object's formal likeness to the social matrix, in addition to its subject matter, facilitates communication, as it elicits in the beholder tacit recognition of

community membership. But while an elaboration of a formalist esthetic (as in Kant) was an outgrowth of the general cultural context of the Enlightenment, it was not a stepchild of the eighteenth century. Formal considerations of balance, harmony or "rightness" cannot be restricted to any particular time or place. Indeed, such a modernist as James Joyce invoked Thomas Aquinas when he wrote, " three things are needed for beauty: wholeness, harmony, and radiance."[4] After one has apprehended an object as a single entity, such as a painting is seen to be separate from the outside world by being delimited by the framing edge,

> you pass from point to point, led by its formal lines; you apprehend it as balanced part against part within its limits; you feel the rhythm of its structure. You apprehend it as complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious. That is *consonantia.*[5]

It is doubtful that an esthetic experience can be had from an art object lacking internal organization.

Because the Western world's esthetic heritage has stressed an art of formal relations, it is instructive to follow Greenberg as he grappled with unfolding events in post-war American art. As late as 1947, Greenberg complained that "the American artist ... suffers still from his dependency upon what the School of Paris, Klee, Kandinsky and Mondrian accumulated before 1935."[6] Pollock was the exception to this lament. In 1940 the problem in abstract painting was to achieve a desired flatness. Painting had to rid itself of "*chiaroscuro* and shaded modeling," techniques which have the undesirable effect, from the Modernist point of view, of "holing through" the flat picture plane to create a representation of three dimensional space—"representation" and "three dimensional space" being properties of literature and sculpture, respectively, and therefore not relevant to the Modernist project of painting.[7]

There were at least two painters by 1940 whose pictures were undeniably flat according to the above criteria—Mondrian and Stuart Davis. Davis, however, was plagued by "that eminent capacity of provincials for tasteful adaptation ... There is not hint of great force behind [his paintings], for they rely on hints from almost every contemporary member of the School of Paris—yet they are of their kind perfect." Greenberg even admits, in this 1945 review, that while "minor, ... they will remain."[8] It is interesting to note that "force" becomes for Greenberg a positive esthetic term. After all, Pollock, too, availed himself of "hints" from Paris (Picasso), as well as Mexico (Orozco), and was not considered the worse for it. Pollock, however, brutalized his sources, roughed them up in an authentically American "forceful" way. For Greenberg, the culturally derivative cancels out the artistically perfect.

During the 1940s, Greenberg is inclined to endorse the value of originality as such. However, by the '60s, once his authority had been successfully challenged by the forces of Neo-Dada (as variously represented by Jasper Johns, Joseph Kosuth and the Minimalist-Conceptualist movement), he opposed such a notion.

Before World War II, Greenberg's writings tended to be pan-Western. After the Allied victory, it is "American type" painting which occupies his attention. For Greenberg, the military war informed an esthetic one, allowing for the victory of culture, American culture, over art itself. Given Greenberg's profound grasp of the nature of art, his collaboration in such a victory seems almost Faustian.

In 1943, occasioned by the Museum of Modern Art's acquisition of Mondrian's *New York Boogie Woogie* (as it was then titled), Greenberg wrote that,

> something of the harmony of the original white square of canvas should be restored in the finished painting. But harmony a thousand times more intense, because it is the result of the successful resolution of a difficult struggle. The simplest way almost of accounting for a great work of art is to say that is is a thing possessing simultaneously the maximum of diversity and the maximum of unity possible to that diversity.[9]

Here, for the first time, Greenberg alludes to "the original white square of canvas," which, by 1962, will exist "as a picture—though not necessarily a *successful* one."[10] It is clear that in 1943 this unaltered, monochrome readymade is not yet a picture. Harmony is present but it is an easy, automatic one. To make art, the artist must struggle to reconcile contradictory elements and forge them into a whole whose harmony is "a thousand times more intense" than the original white canvas. Put another way, for a work of art to *be* a work of art, it must consist of parts that relate to each other and to the whole they comprise. Judgments of quality are determined by an informed assessment of how well (or poorly) elements are organized in a relationship expressive of the work's theme. Conversely, a work lacking parts, or whose parts are not "successfully resolved" in the context of the whole, is not yet a work of art.

For Greenberg, Jackson Pollock was a dream come true. "Radically American" in feeling, "a Gothic, morbid and extreme disciple of Picasso's cubism and Miro's post-cubism," comparable to Faulkner and Melville in the "nativeness of such violence, exasperation and stridency,"[11] Greenberg's enthusiasm was genuine, but not unalloyed. He was without peer in his lucid critiques of older, relational art, but with the advent of uniform "allover" painting, a crucial change in criteria took place. "Uniformity—the notion is antiaesthetic," he wrote," and then, as if to buoy his sinking spirits, said:

> this very uniformity ... seems to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility. It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other.[12]

For a critic whose livelihood depends on distinguishing orders of art experience this is very nearly a fatal admission. But we are on *political*, not esthetic, soil now. The *raison d'être* of a critic may be to make discriminations, but "discrimination" takes on heavy ideological freight in a society that fetishizes equality (but thwarts actual social justice). Greenberg, in acceding to the uniform, the all-over (the very words suggest a grey, undifferentiated mass) succumbs, in part, to the politically and culturally inevitable. For, in spite of the incongruity of judgments of taste being passed on works increasingly resistant to them, Greenberg vigorously asserts the critic's responsibility to do just that.

The irony is that Greenberg finds himself squarely in Duchamp's camp. "Not skill, training, or anything else having to do with the execution or performance, but conception alone ... is the ultimate source of value or quality in art,"[13] writes Greenberg, astonishingly oblivious to the subversive import of his own words. Such a statement nevertheless is descriptive of Greenberg's view of Pollock who, despite only mediocre traditional drawing and painting skills, found a technical solution in the classic drip paintings which eradicated the distinction between the "what" of expression and the "how." (It is amusing to note Greenberg's fondness for Duchamp's phrase, "as stupid as a painter," which Greenberg used as a general expression of opprobrium, reserving to disparage in private, with more tailored insults, those painters he might otherwise praise in print.)[14]

Pollock's greatness depends on his status as a cultural icon, not on any specific formal issue of "quality." Indeed, the "allover" method militates against the possibility of quality ever becoming a substantive issue, as Richard Hennesy has pointed out:

> His settling for a single effect could be compared with the naive uses to which the lesser masters of the Renaissance put perspective. Yes, they get our attention. But does it then develop into absorbing interest? ... Composition is a complicating factor. No painting can possess absorbing interest without it, but then, no painting can be "understood" because of it. The purpose of the composition is to create inexhaustible ambiguity. The Pollocks of the allover phase can be "gotten."[15]

Looking at an all-over Pollock is like looking through an Alan Saret sculpture of balled wire and the experience is just as literal. The "atmosphere" created by successive layers of linear splatterings gives off

little or no light; Pollock's penchant for metallic, reflective enamels is an inexpensive (and literal) solution to this problem. With illusionism rooted out in this way, a Pollock painting remains just an object. The rhythm obtained by the subtle shifting from more to less clotted areas finally fails to provide sufficient structural support. Part of the ominous aspect of a Pollock is that it appears susceptible to imminent collapse. Nor is the color (always Pollock's weakest suit, even for Greenberg) sophisticated or varied enough to maintain interest, as it is in Monet's "allover" paintings. Moreover, while the "accidental" method of the drip technique insures that no two areas of a Pollock are ever exactly the same, it paradoxically guarantees their fundamental sameness. The unity of a classic Pollock drip painting is a built in, automatic unity, not a hard won unity achieved by the fusing of disparate elements.

While some Pollock paintings may be better than others, the range between the best and worst is minimal compared to "composed pictures" where the very diversity of elements promises the likelihood of failure and makes success all the more remarkable. Ultimately, the issue of connoisseurship with respect to Pollock is a desperate camouflage. Esthetic judgements may be rendered on any object or event but mere ascription cannot in itself give the object or event its art status. For a painting to be art, a certain constellation of elements is necessary; a "convention" must already be present. The difference in artistic quality between a great Ingres portrait and one by a mediocre salon artist is the "added" genius of Ingres. Rather than negate existing convention, Ingres transcends it; he makes more of it. Pollock conveniently eradicates convention. The drip technique is meant, ironically, to reaffirm the primal void of the blank canvas—to enhance its emptiness. Nothingness, emptiness, and void are familiar epithets. Peter Busa recalls that "Pollock could pull a painting out of nothing,"[16] but as Lear castigated Cordelia, "Nothing will come of nothing." Pollock's all-over drip paintings remain formally insufficient regardless of any superficial beauty.

If Pollock's immense stature is not based on formal considerations (as is de Kooning's, where comparison to past masterpieces seems justified) then we must look elsewhere. Though Pollock's greatness depends on his status as a cultural icon, and his outscale paintings have come to symbolize post-war America's insatiable ambition and unprecedented military and economic prowess, the more immediate source of Pollock's allure is psychological. Many of our infantile yearnings and frustrations find voice in Pollock's art. Specifically, a Pollock painting embodies a notion of the self as a transcendent entity, a narcissistically irresistible notion that is as culturally valorized as it is riddled with contradiction.

In "The Cybernetics of 'Self:' A Theory of Alcoholism," Gregory Bateson analyzes the premises upon which Occidental concepts of the "self" are

built. The theory is difficult to generalize, but crucial to an understanding of Pollock and the subsequent history of American art.

In Occidental culture, a Cartesian dualism seeks to oppose mind to matter and conscious will or "self" to the remainder of the personality. This (falsely) reified "self," often found in an antagonistic relationship to the body as well as to the outside world, "is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding."[17] This is a "*system* whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries of the body or of what is popularly called the 'self' or 'consciousness.'"[18] Bateson affirms that a self-correcting system will show mental characteristics—it will *compare* information and be responsive to *difference* (i.e., the mental characteristics will be immanent, not in some part, but in the system as a *whole*). He emphasizes that in such an interactive system, no part can have unilateral control over any other part(s). By way of illustration, Bateson asks us to consider what happens when a man cuts down a tree with an axe. In performing this action, the man will modify his stroke in response to the configuration the previous stroke has made upon the tree:

> This self-corrective (i.e., mental) process is brought about by a total system, trees-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree; and it is this total system that has the characteristics of immanent mind. But this is *not* how the average Occidental sees the event of tree felling. He says, "I cut down the tree" and he even believes that there is a delimited agent, the "self," which performed a delimited "purposive" action upon a delimited object.[19]

Bateson emphasizes that the "'system' will usually *not* have the same limits as the 'self'—as this term is commonly (and variously) understood."[20] In reality (as opposed to fantasy) neither the "self" nor the "mind" is transcendent. Hence to equate the "self" with the "system" (or to power) is to engage in a most dangerous delusion.

A Grand Delusion, if you will. We might recall a bit of well known bravado on Pollock's part when, in response to Hans Hoffman's suggestion that he work from nature, he proclaimed, "I am nature." While it is difficult to separate the artist's egotistical boasting from the alcoholic's ranting, it is clear that a desire for omnipotence is typical of the alcoholic who often feels powerless. With Pollock, the artistic is indistinguishable from the alcoholic personality and the issue of power is central. Pollock, like most alcoholics, was pathetically dependent, as his relationship with Lee Krasner amply shows.

Power is a function of relationships. Bateson classifies human relationships as either symmetrical or complementary. Symmetrical relationships occur when two persons (families, teams, nations, etc.) engage

in competing behaviors—as in boxing matches, keeping up with the Joneses, and baseball pennant races. Complementary relationships occur when the behaviors of two parties are dissimilar but symbiotic (dominance-submission, nurturance-dependency, spectatorship-exhibitionism, etc.). At the risk of oversimplifying Bateson's thesis, the alcoholic vainly attempts to maintain symmetrical relationships (i.e., deluded self sufficiency) when the situation calls for complementarity (i.e., cooperative interdependence). "His symmetrical 'pride' can tolerate no complementary role."[21] The alcoholic is "saved" when the "self," after repeated symmetrical battles with the "bottle," finally loses. The alcoholic then "hits bottom," admits defeat, and surrenders:

> To be defeated by the bottle and to know it is the first "spiritual experience." The myth of self-power is therefore broken by the demonstration of a greater power.[22]

The Alcoholics Anonymous maxim that "there is a Power greater than the self" is taken to mean that a person's relationship to power (i.e., the larger *system* of which he is a part) is necessarily complementary, as is the relationship of the citizen to a democracy. "In sum, the relationship of each individual to the 'Power' is best defined in the words *is part of*."[23] And with the words "is part of" we are back to traditional esthetics, to Joyce's *consonantia.* Bateson is cognizant of the esthetic implications of his thesis, citing as an example the "beauty" of the woods as a recognition of both individual trees and the ecology of the woods as a system. Art, then, could be considered a distillation of a larger "parts to the whole" experience. If so, we might wish to linger a bit on Greenberg's "hierarchical distinctions." It was popular in the '60s to accuse hierarchically ordered, relational art (a Mondrian, say) of representing and abetting societal oppression, as if such art were a visual analogue to feudal caste systems, rather than being an abstract embodiment of the individual-in-the-world.

It may be hypothesized that "what is deep-seated in contemporary sensibility" is not just a yearning for democratic leveling, but a concept of self that took on new meaning in a post-war consumerist America. Earlier in America's history, the New England Transcendentalist preached a Self-Reliance that was practiced by his counterpart on the Western frontier of necessity. However, the ethos of individualism was balanced by a commitment to the community (as it was for the ancient Greek "citizen"). Barn raising, after all, is not a solitary activity. "Today," says Berkeley sociologist Robert N. Bellah, "we have an ideology of individualism that simply encourages people to maximize personal advantage. This leads to a consumer politics in which 'What's in it for me?' is all that matters, while considerations of the common good are increasingly irrelevant."[24] But we need not wait for the excesses of the '80s to note that already in the '40s

significant change had taken place in American culture which would impact on the arts.

By the end of World War II, as Serge Guilbaut points out,

> an enormous quantity of money stood idle, awaiting the advent of the consumers' paradise that business and industries were promising in their advertising. As a hedge against inflation and for relief from the thirst caused by ten years of scarcity, many Americans began to invest in diamonds and painting.
>
> The art world ... experienced a sharp upturn. Beginning in 1944, at a time when French art was no longer being exported and European sources of art had dried up, ... we find a number of articles reporting that the art market is bustling and that a golden age is about to begin for the artist. The "art boom" followed the "economic boom." The number of art galleries in New York grew from 40 at the beginning of the war to 150 by 1946. Private gallery sales for 1945 were up forty to three hundred percent compared with sales for 1944.[25]

While initially little of this money found its way into the pockets of avant-garde painters, this changed as dealers gained expertise in marketing the new work. Certainly the public's interest was piqued, as evidenced by Pollock's 1949 *Life* magazine spread. Of greater import was the March 1, 1951 issue of *Vogue,* which published four pages of photographs by Cecil Beaton in which models were posed in front of recent Pollock paintings. While the art ostensibly is used merely as a backdrop for fashion, its fashionability is nevertheless affirmed. Fashion addresses the reified self as nothing else does; it is a drug administered through the syringe of advertising. And when it came to advertising, Pollock was no untutored naif:

> Pollock had a reputation for working the media (Rothko to Newman in 1946: "Pollock is a self-contained and sustained advertising concern.")[26]

Into the equation of "contemporary sensibility" of the'40s must be factored the embryonic alliance of fashion, media, and advanced art.

America's unparalleled military and economic might underwrites the transcendent self—that power is demonstrably real. Given Pollock's association with Jungian psychotherapy, a simile with a Jungian flavor may be appropriate—America's power is the sun and a Pollock painting the moon; reflective, but unable to provide any light of its own. Basking in the pale glow of our culture's supremacy, the viewer may feel infused with the Warholian bliss that comes from seeing himself as a potential Pollock. Bateson suggests that the alcoholic's delusional "pride" is not based on past achievement: "The emphasis is not upon 'I succeed,' but rather upon 'I can

...."[27] The message is that we can all be great artists (just as we, as Americans, can become presidents or millionaires). After all, anybody can drip paint. On this technical point, Pollock's fame is in inverse proportion to his method. Thus to deny Pollock his exalted place in the artistic firmament is to deny ourselves the possibility of being similarly recognized. It is a magnificent psychological gambit. And it works.

Or at least it seems destined to work for as long as this culture retains its power. How future generations will view Pollock and kindred artists is, of course, impossible to predict. What seems clear is that art dependent primarily upon cultural contextualization is problematic. To be sure, all art reflects the time in which it was produced, but art that survives historical vicissitudes must have other virtues. A Michelangelo sculpture is not diminished with the passing of papal authority; its power resides in its form, not in its institutional context.

That form and art are equivalent is tacitly acknowledged by Greenberg when he says that the uniform is anti-esthetic, that is, the uniform proscribes the formal diversity necessary to art. According to Greenberg's reading of Modernism, Pollock's "alloverness," initially considered anti- or non-art, *becomes* art when a consensus grants it art status, at which time the new "form" becomes another convention. In the early part of the century a Matisse would, on initial viewing, appear ugly or strange, even as anti-art, its very originality blinding its reception until, after repeated viewings, its similarity to established art is deemed greater than its difference. It then takes its proper place in the tradition.

While the mechanism of Pollock's public reception and eventual acceptance resembles Matisse's, it differs in important respects. The European built on tradition, mastering prior painting idioms. Pollock mastered virtually nothing of the past (Thomas Hart Benton initially thought him talentless) and the drip technique was an inspired end run around history. But then Pollock, as the prototypical American artist, had sought a decisive break with the Old World as with so much excess baggage. The "original white square of canvas" is a *tabula rasa,* and Pollock was the first artist to confront it.

Or perhaps the blank canvas constitutes a mirror with which to view the reified self. Pollock said "what interests me is that today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within."[28] The subject matter is the transcendent self and the singular, all-over painting is the pictorial *sine qua non* of self-involvement. Moreover, not only does the self here view the other as unimportant and unnecessary, obviating commitment, but the implicit narcissism, bound as it is to an eternal present, precludes any meaningful investigation of historical antecedents. This fits nicely with the notion of an America itself unfettered by history:

> The break with Europe, the abolition of primogeniture, and the looseness of family ties gave substance to their belief (even if it was finally an illusion) that Americans, alone among the people of the world, could escape the entangling influence of the past.[29]

The mechanism of consensus formation in advanced American art from Pollock to the present differs from the earlier European model in that it is *conscious.* By exposing its workings, Greenberg allowed for its manipulation so that by the '80s, four Neo-Geo artists from the East Village could "do lunch" with a powerful Soho art dealer and orchestrate their subsequent fame. Significantly, Greenberg's blunder in providing a blueprint for success for those artists with whom he fundamentally disagreed is due to his reading of modernist painting as being essentially defined by the issue of flatness.

In 1965, Greenberg defines modernist painting by what property it (painting) alone possesses.[30] This turns out to be flatness; other properties—three dimensionality, representation—belong to other art forms (i.e., sculpture and literature). But Greenberg, in a futile attempt to protect himself from the Minimalists' onslaught, says that flatness "can never be an utter flatness." Painting might not be able to provide us with old-style *tromp l'oeil* illusionism, but it can, indeed *must,* permit optical illusion, or else it threatens to become an arbitrary object. Disregarding the fact that all illusion in painting is optical, Greenberg used this distinction in 1965 to differentiate an Olitski spray painting (genuine illusionistic atmosphere here) from a Stella "black" painting (genuine flat object here). Jumping back to the '40s, we have seen how problematic an all-over Pollock is with respect to optical illusion. At best, Pollock gives us an allusion to an illusion. While the balled wire atmosphere *seems* illusionistic, the eye is never permitted to 'travel through" a fictive infinite space—it hits the canvas support with a thud. The layers of enamel pile up upon the canvas like an ersatz collage; they seem *affixed* to the canvas. All that "seeing through" means here is seeing the cotton duck through the interstices of enamel. The facticity of the drip technique ensures that the painting does not devolve to fictive status. The painting is literal, not metaphoric. We may assume that, given Greenberg's eagerness to regard Pollock as the heir to the tradition of Western painting, the problem of Pollock's literalness was ignored.

In the '40s, Dada and the extra-esthetic literary antics of the Surreal-ists were not considered, from Greenberg's formalist point of view, to be part of the Modernist mainstream. By the mid-'50s, with Rauschenberg and Johns, the back of the Modernist mainstream was effectively broken. While the debt of these two artists to Duchamp is well known, Pollock's influence is inestimable. Just as Pollock's ambiguity, his allusion to illusion, tricked the viewer into seeing an all-over Pollock as a painting, Rauschenberg's uncanny ability to arrange images, and Johns' exquisite "touch," were

"arty" attempts to disguise what was at bottom anti-art. Painting had always been about fictive space but this new art of Johns' and Rauschenberg's was about the literal object. Greenberg himself was not fooled, but it was already too late. Pollock's subversiveness in making painting into a literal object had taken deep root. Greenberg countered with his attempt to promote color-field painting as the Modernist main-stream, a ploy which can be said to have worked at least until the Vietnam era, when the political agenda of anti-art became apparent.

In the '50s the nature of what constitutes consensus in the arts began to shift from one based on esthetics to one based on language. The "connoisseurs" who, after years of looking at art, could see in the Matisse those formal qualities also found in past masterpieces, were replaced by theorists whose arguments for or against the art status of certain objects or events are characterized by mutability as "art," is defined by whatever group is currently empowered. Hence the bewildering proliferation of movements, "isms," and artists. The underlying democratic premise of the Duchampian proposition "anything can be art (if I say it is)," is "I am an artist (if I say I am)," making "being an artist" a simple act of assertion, one no longer based on formal achievement. (Naturally, the "art world" consists largely of those for whom the myth of the transcendent self is a primary act of faith.) It was perhaps inevitable that an art world already politicized in the careerist sense, would embrace overtly socio-political issues once a purely esthetic agenda had been rejected, for a connection exists between self-expression, as exemplified by Pollock, and political expression. Because our brand of democracy makes freedom more of an entitlement than a responsibility, it can resemble the narcissist's demand for instant gratification. And since we have seen how social configurations find a parallel expression in the art object, it is logical that today's "art forms" mirror the larger culture and voice pressing social concerns. However, the paradox remains. While the newer art allows for the direct expression of needs and demands, be they personal or political, it is often restricted as art in the esthetic sense. Art cannot be "open" and have form simultaneously. Take, for example, *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow's description of Karen Finley:

> As a performance artist, she becomes a work of performance art, even to the extent of treating herself as a sculptural object, covering her partly nude body with chocolate to simulate excrement and symbolize the debasement of women. The medium (Ms. Finley) is the message.[31]

(Appropriately, Gussow's article was subtitled "When the Artist is the Art, and Self is the Only Form.") Finley conflates issues of self and gender, openly politicizing what remained implicit in Pollock. But is her performance, in any sense, art? Finley is not an actress; the esthetic

distance required in traditional theater (i.e., the actress' person being separate from her role) is lacking, as are other matters of technique. Finley, by dint of being, as opposed to playing, herself, could only *be* art if we were prepared to accept the dehumanized notion of the reified self as the ultimate Readymade. This may be part of Finley's point—men treat women as objects, etc.—but if the work's intent is political then the criteria for judgment must be its political effectiveness. Given the art world's rather limited impact on the rest of American society, the political efficacy of a Finley performance piece is apt to be small.

Pollock and Finley may have "expanded the boundaries," as the saying goes, but it is unclear what precisely has been expanded. It is certainly not art. Fundamental to an art are the limiting conditions of its conventions, as Greenberg correctly saw. He was also correct to insist upon the separation of the individual arts. It is when Greenberg says that the "limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely" that he runs into big trouble. Greenberg looks at European Modernism and sees a *tendency* which he thinks proceeds apace. He sees the flatness of a Matisse begetting the flatter Mondrian. Hence, the even greater flatness of an all-over Pollock would appear to extend the Modernist tendency. And that might be true if the limiting conditions of painting consisted solely of flatness and and its delimitation (with some residual optical illusion thrown in). But they do not.

Let us look at that supposedly flat Matisse, specifically *Conversation* (1909). It depicts Matisse and his wife. He is standing, wearing pajamas, facing her. She is seated, her head is tilted back. They are in a room of deep cobalt blue. Between them is a window that looks out onto a lawn with a tree and another building. Along the bottom of the window is a black curvilinear grill—pure signature Matisse.

Art historians differ in their interpretations of *Conversation's* narrative but all seem to agree that this is a work of great tension. (As Alfred Barr once noted, it is the only Matisse where the figures confront one another directly.) And tension is a matter of relationships, in this instance, one between husband and wife. In *Conversation*, there is an absolute congruence between the psychological and the formal. But visual tension can be expressed in other ways, say, in the opposing vertical and horizontal lines of a Mondrian. Yet in both cases the interpretation is not as significant as the tension itself, which results only from an exact relationship among all constituent parts. The "art," then, is in getting the tension "right." To view a Matisse or a Mondrian as flat is possible only in the most literal sense. The greatest works of both artists possess amazing depth—*psychological* depth.

While the arts are separated by their mediums, they share metaphorical features. Think of a Brahms symphony without orchestral "color" or architectonic structure, or a Henry James novel without subtle "shadings" of meaning. Music is not simply sound, nor is literature merely words, and

painting is not just surface and support. The human element can be reduced in art, as it is in Beckett, but not eliminated entirely, or else there would be no reason for us to engage in it. It is therefore absurd to discuss works of visual art solely in terms of their physical formal properties, their color, weight, scale, density, texture. To do so is to deny them the very quality that makes them art for the same reason that to discuss people exclusively in terms of their physical attributes robs them of their humanity.

Psychological tension, expressed in formal terms, seems to be the critical component in art, but it must reside in the work itself. In painting, this means within the framing edge. A Mondrian cast unceremoniously on a landfill would retain its structure as art. While a landfill admittedly is not the ideal place to view a work of art, the viewer can "bracket out" the surroundings, and, assuming the painting is undamaged, Mondrian's metaphoric world would remain intact.

Could a Robert Ryman piece be so viewed? Not only is there precious little internal incident to speak of (certainly no internal tension) but the monochrome work, wrenched from the architectural context for which it was designed, must be considered incomplete in a way foreign to the Mondrian. Ryman makes much of the way a "painting" is affixed to the wall, giving the bolts, brackets, etc., equal, if not at times more, prominence than the work it supports. The logical conclusion to this practice was exemplified by his 1989 DIA Foundation retrospective where the artist was given total control over the lighting and design of the interior space, a space in which the pure, all-white paintings functioned as a kind of moral interior decoration. (I recall a lecture in which Greenberg, having been asked his opinion of Ryman, responded, only somewhat facetiously, that Ryman did good paintings but that it was impossible to tell which ones they were.) One could interject that a "parts (paintings) to the whole (room)" relationship exists here, but if so, esthetic discourse must be conducted on architectural rather than on painting grounds.

Perhaps Modernism may be said to have been a strictly European affair and, in painting, to have ended with Mondrian. A Mondrian is as about as reductive as one can get while maintaining pictorial structure. Then a kind of Post-Modernism could be said to have begun in New York around the time of Mondrian's death in 1944. But while the art scene in New York was by no means limited to Abstract Expressionism—representational painting, for example, was particularly strong—"diversity of style" was an esthetic, not a political issue. The problem with so much recent American art (*vide* the 1993 Whitney Biennial) is not the lack of stylistic diversity or "freedom," it is whether it can be accurately defined as art at all.

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The Making of Modernist Art in China

Zhou Ping and Fei Xin Bei

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Mountain and water, flowers and birds, or brush and ink, are the kind of images and concepts that people in the West usually associate with the arts of China. It is true that even until very recently, the traditional Chinese painting, or the brush and ink painting, for which it is best known, had been the dominant form of painting in China. However, a lot of people will probably be surprised if they are told that in the past decade or so, the most dominant form of art in China has been modernist art. In this article, which is introductory in nature, we are going to trace briefly the history of the development of modernism in contemporary China, and discuss some of the concepts or issues which we believe are important for an understanding of this cultural process.

Historical Background

It would, indeed, take a whole book to look into and examine all the social/political/cultural factors which may have been responsible for the rise of modernism in China. However, an understanding of recent art movements in China would be virtually impossible without looking into at least some of the key social and political events that have happened in China during the period of our concern. In this section, we will trace some of the important sociopolitical events which, we believe, are directly responsible for the rise of Chinese modernism.

In 1976, the so-called Great Cultural Revolution, which had lasted for ten years in China, was officially proclaimed to have ended. As is already well known, the Cultural Revolution, originally an effort on the part of Mao Zedong to get rid of largely imaginary political rivals within the Chinese Communist party, resulted in political fanaticism and cultural brutalities of the worst kind. Millions of people were persecuted and almost all pre-revolution cultural heritage was banned. Conducting this

political campaign turned China into a country almost completely isolated from the rest of the world. By the time it ended, China found itself not only at the edge of total economic bankruptcy, but also in the midst of acute social and political crisis. Driven by an urgent need for the very survival of the Communist rule, some more liberal leaders within the Communist party, which came into power shortly after the downfall of the Maoist "Gang of Four," embarked upon an ambitious economic recovery program known as the "Four Modernizations Program," or the "Open Door" policy. Upon the implementation of this program, the doors of China were opened to the outside world again and the acute social and economic problems that had been challenging the Communist leadership were temporarily eased. In fact, some intellectuals in China were so optimistic about the changes taking place at that time that they started dreaming of a speedy arrival of a Western-style democracy. However, as it was quick to prove, the reform program was not without its limits. For one thing, the initiators of the reform were Communist officials themselves who still showed stubborn determination and pride in continuing to stick to the Communist ideology. What they really wanted, as they openly declared from the very outset, was only economic reform, not political reform. This willingness to engage in economic reform and reluctance to change the old political line formed an inner contradiction within the reform program. This would have an important bearing on all the major economic, political and cultural events to occur in the decade to come in China. It is important to bear this in mind when we interpret a contemporary cultural phenomenon in China such as Chinese modernism.

The New Enlightenment Movement

Upon the lifting of the political iron curtain after the Cultural Revolution, China experienced a period of cultural flourishing in the realist tradition, which later came to be known as the New Enlightenment Movement, or the Chinese Renaissance. Just as had happened during the Renaissance in Europe centuries ago, the cultural trends occurring during this period in China were marked by an overwhelming spirit of humanism and rationalism. Old idols were challenged and political evils of the past were exposed and severely criticized. A "spring," symbolic of a spiritual shift from the divine to the secular, and of a rediscovery of man's reason—as opposed to the unconditional belief in the correctness of Mao and Communist ideology—was celebrated. These trends accorded with the so-called "Mind-Emancipation Movement" in the political sphere. As people later found, this was largely only meant to legitimate the newly-

risen power group and consolidate the powers it had gained. In the visual arts, in which the new spirit was crystallized, this cultural trend produced such sensational works in the realist tradition as *My Father*, *The Maple*, and *The Tibetan Series*.[1] However, as the enlightenment movement went deeper to the point where questions such as, "Is there alienation under the socialist system?" were beginning to be asked, it was quickly sensed by the political regime as hazardous to maintaining Communist rule in China. A political crackdown against the movement was in preparation, and it occurred in the fall of 1983. It was known as the Campaign Against Spiritual Contamination. For our purpose, this political event is extremely important. For, to a very large extent, it shaped the course along which subsequent cultural happenings in China developed.

The Debate on Traditional Culture

Between the suppression of the New Enlightenment Movement and the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989, a new cultural trend prevailed in China. It was epitomized in the nationwide and long-lasting debate in cultural circles over the values of traditional Chinese culture. What is representative of this trend deserves special attention, for it was during this period that modernism began to gain ground in China and finally prevailed as perhaps the most dominant form of artistic creation.

Several reasons may account for the rise of this cultural trend. First, as may seem obvious to some people, the shift of interest from criticizing the present social reality to discussing issues concerning cultural history, was actually an effort on the part of Chinese intellectuals to "use the past to criticize the present," and thereby to continue, in a less conspicuous way, the themes explored in the earlier enlightenment movement. After the means by which doubts about the present political reality could be directly expressed were blocked, this approach proved quite effective in fulfilling its hidden purpose.

The second reason, which is more important and profound, was the real need perceived by some leading intellectuals to consider from a cultural perspective the possible disadvantages of the existing cultural tradition for China's modernization. With the widening of the scope of China's opening to the outside world, the real face of the contemporary world was being presented before the eyes of the average Chinese with increasing clarity. After thirty years of being told that China was the most powerful nation in the world, both culturally and economically, it was a terrible shock for the Chinese to find the enormous gap between China and the developed nations of the West. Feeling cheated as they did, they began to think that

what was to blame was not only Communist politics, but also the cultural traditions of China as a whole, which they considered a handicap to the modernization of China. The disillusionment and discontent with Communist politics were thus channeled into the discovery of the negative aspects of China's cultural history. A sense of crisis, so typical of the cultural mood during that period, was sharpened. When confronted with the iron will of Communist politicians determined to continue the old political line, a sense of disillusionment, frustration, and even nihilism and cynicism followed. Such moods in the cultural circles coincided with and were enhanced by the wide availability of modern Western philosophies, which claimed expertise in dealing with such moods. Ironically, they were being allowed into China at an amazing speed, because of their seeming irrelevance to immediate social reality.

The debate over the values of traditional culture also represented an effort on the part of Chinese intellectuals to build a new value system. With the deepening of the Enlightenment Movement, the old values—characterized by the Communist ideology—collapsed; yet new values—urgently needed for the establishment of a new social order—were still very far from being established. This became an urgent problem for Chinese intellectuals to solve. In the debate on the values of traditional culture, the effort to solve this problem made itself heard largely in two voices. One, which was later labeled "national nihilism," made the point that in order to achieve a new kind of personality or the psychic patterns indispensable for embracing modern industrial civilization, an attitude wholly negative toward traditional values was necessary.[2] The other voice, less pessimistic about traditional culture, suggested that instead of discarding everything in tradition, one might be able to make use of what was positive in it, and thus achieve a "creative transformation" of the traditional culture, so that the process of China's modernization could be accelerated rather than hampered.[3] The latter view, known as Neo-Confucianism, later found its expression in a new political theory called the "New Authoritarianism," which was regarded as a political remedy for China by some of China's leading intellectuals.

Behind all the above, there was a direct political and economic rationale. After a period of initial and largely superficial economic reform, there came the inevitable collision between capitalist-oriented economic reform and the generally unchanged political system. A decision had to be made as to whether to continue the reform or to drop it altogether. The official remedy for the difficulty was a curious combination of a market economy and a central-command economy, which was nicely labeled "socialism with Chinese characteristics." It only aggravated the already acute economic and social problems, such as inflation and official corruption, that were caused largely by the clumsy

adoption of some capitalist methods withing a socialist framework. A storm of social discontent fomented, and it surfaced in the summer of 1989, in an event known as the June 4th Incident. As social rebellion ended in bloodshed, the period of our inquiry comes to a full stop.

It is wrong to think that political authority was unaware of the hidden intentions of the debate on traditional culture only at and after the June 4th incident. Back at the beginning of 1987, when a nation-wide student demonstration occurred, the regime had already tried to put an end to the whole process—in the name of fighting against "Bourgeois Liberalization"—but only achieved very limited results. The Chinese Communist party itself knew very clearly that in order to carry on with economic reform, which was vital for its own survival, some degree of "Bourgeois Liberalization" had to be allowed. In this way, it became trapped in the painful vicious circle it created for itself. Awareness of this dilemma of the Chinese Communist leadership is essential for the study of most cultural as well as social and political events in contemporary China.

It may seem absurd that an article about art indulges in so much discussion about politics. Nonetheless, as will be further illustrated below, the relationship between art and politics, or the social conditions as a whole, cannot be overemphasized. This is true at least in the case of contemporary Chinese art. In a totalitarian society like China, almost everything has to do with politics, and so does art. After all, modernism first rose in China primarily as a political protest, and it found itself chased and attacked whenever there was a brainwashing political movement. The contention that social conditions are *a priori* to artistic production will be maintained throughout this attempt to interpret Chinese modernism.

Three Phases of Modernist Art

Having traced some of the important political and cultural events in the historical background against which modernism made its appearance in China, let us now take a closer look at Chinese modernism itself. The development of modernism in China is closely connected with the socio-political climate and is thus imbued with a very rich socio-political content.

Modernism first appeared in contemporary China in April 1979, with a sort of Salon des Refusées art show called the "Star Painting Exhibition," which was held in an ordinary building in Beijing. Participating in it were a group of young artists most of whom would later become very famous avant-garde painters, writers, or political dissidents in China. The show drew a large and curious audience for whom the concept of "modern art," or "modernist art," had hitherto been virtually unknown. They were attracted to the show mainly because of the formal strangeness of the

works displayed and the bold and overt political messages some of the works proclaimed. Nobody, however, expected that this kind of "strange art" would one day take root in China and become one of the dominant modes of artistic creation.

Technically, there was nothing new or creative about the show by the standards of Western modernism. Most of the works, in their technique, were awkward and superficial imitations of Western modernism. Creativity, however, was not yet the main concern of the Star show participants. What they were really concerned about, among other things, was freedom for artists in China to create. Instead of painting works that would be "politically and socially acceptable," they demanded the right of "self-expression"; instead of painting only in the accepted "social realist" tradition, they wanted the freedom to experiment with other means of artistic expression. The Star exhibition, therefore, was primarily a demonstration of a need for artistic freedom.

One thing very important and memorable about the Star show, however, was the fierce political messages it conveyed. Like other painters in the realist tradition who were then active on the "Renaissance" scene, the Star show participants also showed an enthusiasm for exposing the evils of the political past. However, unlike the realist past, the Star painters went much further in perceiving the nature of the old evils, for they wanted to present it in greater depth and with greater boldness. This is another reason why they resorted to the language of modernism.

Compared with most of the then-active realist painters, the Star show participants were much less sure about the wonderful future that everybody in China felt was coming, and were much more alert to a possible return of the old evils. In the foreword to the exhibition guide, they wrote:

> We are living in a world whose complexity is marked by a mixture of the shadows of the past and the twilight of the future. It is our duty to live on bravely, and to bear in mind every lesson we have learned.

To further illustrate the spirit of the show, and, as if to lay down the overtone for the entire Chinese modernist movement in a prophetic manner, they raised the slogan, "Kollwitz is our banner, and Picasso our forerunner."[4]

It was this keen sense of social conscience, which was to be followed by most Chinese modernist artists in one way or another, that qualified the Star show participants as pioneers in Chinese modernism.

Despite the sensations caused by the Star Painting Exhibition, modernism in China as a full-fledged movement was still far from being on its way. After a decade of being a mere handmaid of "proletarian politics," or otherwise banned as a bourgeois luxury, art in the simplest

sense of the word had to start all over again in China, from a very primitive level. Soviet-style realism, which was the only kind of foreign art allowed into China, and which had been widely practiced before the Cultural Revolution, was now the thing to start with. For most Chinese artists in the late '70s and early '80s, the most important task was not to create, but to improve their basic skills—even if they were realistic ones.

Another major task facing the Chinese artists of that time was to overcome the official ideology concerning the creation of art and to liberate it from being a mere servant of politics. Since the Communists came to power, art had been viewed as a useful means to serve the purpose of so-called proletarian politics. To fulfill this task, realism was considered the most adaptable art. Soviet-style realism was meant: content overrode form; and theme and plot were all important. Engels' remark that art involved creation of a typical character in a typical situation—supposedly its greatest achievement— was frequently quoted by the political leaders who wanted to teach the artists the way to make "correct" art.

After the open-door policy was implemented, Western works of art and art theories in the classical and realist traditions were gradually introduced into China. But the process came to a halt with Impressionism, because according to orthodox Leninism, the whole of Western art became decadent after Impressionism, coinciding with the predicted final collapse of capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. To allow Impressionism to be introduced would prove too radical a step away from the orthodox Leninism.

A whole debate over the legitimacy of Impressionism was necessary to overcome the obstacles to introducing Western art, which for Chinese artists meant autonomy of artistic creation. The debate occurred in the early '80s, and centered on a series of articles written by Wu Guanzhong, a famous painter and a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Wu's articles had such titles as, "On the Formal Beauty of a Work of Art," "Should the Form be determined by the Content?" and "Some Thoughts on the Beautifulness of the Abstract."[5] The debate resulted in the reversal of the verdict on Impressionism, and cleared the way for a large-scale introduction of Western modernism.

With an increasing awareness of the autonomy of art and of the spiritual freedom that an artist needed to create, more and more Chinese artists began to pay attention to the formalistic aspects of a work of art. This was a prelude to the rise of Chinese modernism. Nevertheless, it was going to take a major political event before modernism could really become acceptable.

After the crackdown on the Enlightenment Movement, the cultural forces released by the initial consequences of the reform were bound to take a new road. Suddenly, everything cultural became modernist, or at

least anti-traditionalist, as a frequently used term put it. In literature, people started talking about and practicing "obscure poetry" and "stream-of-consciousness" techniques. In art, names hitherto unknown to many Chinese artists—Cézanne, Matisse, Kandinsky, Munch, Mondrian, Duchamp, Dali—suddenly became equivalent to Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo. Modernism in art became fashionable. Realism, which had been so successful and admired for its role in the "Renaissance," was now mocked. Now every artist had to produce "modernist" works of some kind. In fact, unless one was a "modernist," one could hardly be regarded as an artist at all.

However, there were deeper reasons for this change to modernism, however eccentrically understood. Despite the enormous number of independent artists who appeared after the political crackdown of the earlier Enlightenment Movement, the development of modernism in China was far from smooth. It faced the hostile attitude of official authority; it was not clear whether it would be accepted by the public; finally, it had to compete with rival forces within the art world.

Ever since the domination of Soviet-style Marxism in China, Western modernism had been regard as decadent, indicative of bourgeois decline. Thus, it had been vigorously resisted. Even after the ban on it was removed, the political authority in cultural affairs still regarded modernism with antipathy and reservation. The best the authorities could do was, to use a Chinese expression, watch China's invasion by modernism, "with one eye opened and the other eye closed." The entry of modernist works into official art museums was never allowed, at least in the name of an exhibition of modernist work. This explains why, several years later, when an exhibition composed entirely of modernist works found its way into the official China National Gallery of Art in Beijing, the show's organizers felt the event to be a social breakthrough.

The low level of social development in China also raised a question about the development of modernism in the country. Given the kind of backward social and educational environment in which a Chinese artist is brought up, how modern a consciousness could a Chinese artist acquire? Would it be enough to provide a basis for creating a work of modernism? Then, there was the problem of reception. It is hard to imagine how modernism, being basically a product of modern industrialization, could be accepted without difficulty by the Chinese public, whose average educational level was well below that of the people in Western nations before the Enlightenment. Still another, more general question, is whether given the vast cultural differences between China and the West, a thing uniquely Chinese could develop.

The development of modernism in China was also contained by rival forces within art itself. Being a completely new form of art in China,

modernism had to compete, and sometimes even fight, with the more established forms of art in China, such as traditional Chinese painting and Soviet-style realism. In China, most artists are trained in professional art institutions. In the early '80s, the majority of teachers in these art institutes had received their education in the Soviet-realist tradition. They knew little about Western modernism. When the first wave of modernism arrived they viewed it with great antipathy and contempt, and urged the students—who later formed the main body of the Chinese modernists—to stay away from it. Thus for a long time, modernism, as a form of genuine art, was not recognized in academic circles.

Also somewhat in opposition to the development of modernism was the camp of painters who believed that the future of Chinese art lay in a continued commitment to the further development of traditional Chinese art. The fact that traditional Chinese art was being specially favored and protected by official authority—probably because of its irrelevance to contemporary reality and because of its limited subject matter[6]—made it a nuisance for the anti-tradition-minded artist.

For the above reasons, modernism in China was and still is a kind of unorthodox or "wild" art, tolerated only because of the many followers it had attracted. This partly explains why, in 1985, after a period of hard struggle, many Chinese modernist artists felt the need to band together in groups, to demonstrate the strength of Chinese modernism. This "unity movement" of Chinese modernism later came to be called the Trend '85 or New Wave Art Movement. During this period, many modernist art societies and schools emerged, each with a manifesto of its own, and numerous modernist art shows were held.[7] This spectacle, marking the formal appearance of modernist art in China as a powerful creative force, resembled the merging of small rivers from all different directions into the ocean.

The reason modernism in China came to a climax in 1985 also had to do with the overall cultural trends prevalent at the time. As noted, after the crackdown on the Enlightenment Movement, the cultural circle in China shifted its focus from discussing issues relevant to humanism, alienation, and democracy to a debate on the values of traditional Chinese culture, which was a continuation of the Enlightenment Movement in disguise, and thus less subject to political authority. Apart from its hidden purpose of "using the past to criticize the present," the debate represented a deeper understanding by Chinese intellectuals of the acute social problems a reformed China faced, and the attempt to solve these problems by establishing a new set of values to replace the old ones. Trend '85 was a reflection of this new cultural trend at its peak and in all its complexity. When the purpose of the debate was vaguely sensed by the political authorities, it was checked by a new political effort called the Campaign Against Bourgeois Liberalization. This ended the

most spectacular age of Chinese modernism.

Although the development of modernist art was centralized by the official anti-bourgeois liberalization campaign at the beginning of 1987, the status of modernist art as a genuine and powerful mode of art had nevertheless been firmly established by the mighty currents of the New Wave Art Movement. Moreover, the new political movement confirmed the beliefs many modernist artists had developed since the crackdown of the Enlightenment Movement, and enhanced the modern values and consciousness they cherished. Thus Chinese modernism evolved from an experiment into a self-conscious movement. It can be said that since 1987 modernism in China has become more highly developed and certain of itself. Instead of chasing fashions, it began to be marked by a quiet maturity.

It is worth noting that during the third phase of the development of Chinese modernism, numerous works in more traditional veins, yet bearing many modernist features, appeared. Chinese art critics celebrated this phenomenon as a "pluralistic pattern." There was a pluralistic flourish in Chinese art during this period, highlighted by a sensational exhibition of nude art in the National Art Gallery of China. Thus pluralism can be regarded as a major achievement of Chinese modernism.

An important source of inspiration and encouragement for Chinese modernist artists active in the third phase was the one-man show in Beijing of the famous American Neo-Dadaist artist Robert Rauschenberg in 1986. For many Chinese artists, even for those devoted to modernism, it was the first time they had a chance to see original works by a still living Western modernist. The tremendous success of the show greatly inspired and encouraged the Chinese modernists, especially because they discovered that the repeated official rhetoric that modernist art in the West had reached a dead end was anything but true.

The modernist artists next appeared as a collective force in February 1989, when "The First Grand Show of Chinese Modernist Art" appeared in the National Art Gallery of China. As the name suggests, it was the first time Chinese modernism had ever been able to appear in an official gallery. The purpose of the show, according to its organizers, was to review the strength and the achievements of modernism in China, and to promote its further development. However, the show, originally permitted as a good-will gesture from the government, quickly went out of control. Instead of a review of what had been achieved in the past, the show was turned into a political incident. Shocking news from the show ranged from artists spreading condom balloons and selling lobsters to the viewers, to shooting at one of their own works with a pistol. Police had to be installed to protect the show until its closing.

That the exhibition was allowed to take place at all had a lot to do

with the unprecedented free political climate that prevailed in China at the time. Some of the more liberal-minded officials had gradually climbed to the top of the power ladder, so that the government took an unusually lenient attitude towards cultural developments. However, along with the loosening of political control also came ever more serious aggravation of the contradictions between the open-door policy and the stubborn adherence to old ideologies, and between the adoption of capitalistic methods and the unchanged commitment to a socialist system inherent in the reform program. Fomented by an increasing dissatisfaction with Communist politics—it could already be sensed in the mood permeating the Grand Show of Chinese Modernist Art—a new social crisis was on its way. It erupted vehemently in the summer of 1989. As is well known, the rebellion ended in bloodshed. In another campaign against "bourgeois liberalization," in which government hardliners decided to settle all accounts with the cultural elements they believed helped in promoting the pro-democracy movement, modernism and its theories were included as one of the typical manifestations of "bourgeois" liberalization in cultural circles, and were thus severely attacked.

From this sketch of the history of the development of Chinese modernism, one thing is immediately clear: modernism in China did not arise in a vacuum, or from someone's fanciful notion that it would be fun simply to repeat what had been successfully done by Western modernists. Instead, it was closely related to the political and social conditions in China, and has thus had a rich political and social meaning. To put it simply, it is first a socio-political phenomenon and second a cultural phenomenon.

The Avant-Garde in Chinese Modernist Art

To a very large extent, the meaning of Chinese modernism can be interpreted in the light of its close relationship with the political and social situation in contemporary China. Primarily as a protest against the political realities in China—a kind of condensed expression of social conscience—Chinese modernism kept its political character initially embodied in its maxim, "Kollwitz is our banner," from beginning to end.

The Chinese modernism movement, or the New Wave Art Movement, as it is best known in China, is a continuation of the earlier Enlightenment Movement in art. Humanism was of paramount importance for the modern artists, as it was for the Enlightenment artists. For them, the opposite of humanism was the combination of the negative elements in the Chinese feudal tradition mixed with and justified by Communist ideology. It was something that they intended to expose and fight against

in their art. From the Star Painting Exhibition to the First Grand Show of Chinese Modernist Art, there was a sustained mood of political dissidence and protest, direct or indirect, violent or subtle. The modernists were especially sensitive to the political evils in the Chinese society, and more often than not played a leading role in launching attacks against the political realities. This is clearly shown by the fact that prior to each political suppression of a new pro-democracy trend or demonstration, there was usually some kind of modernist activity or movement.

The Chinese modernists also attempted to break the political fetters imposed on artistic creation and to create a situation in China in which artists could freely create. Since the Chinese Communists came into power, art had to serve political goals, which became a criterion for an artist's "achievement." Even after the reformists came into power, when this idea was no longer stated on public occasions, it still remained an implicit demand on the artists. In revolt against such political shackles, the modernists stressed the freedom of self-expression, "art for art's sake," and sometimes deliberately resorted to "anti-art." For some, Duchamp's example of putting a urinal in a museum was the best answer to the official rhetoric of art.

Prospects

With the new campaign against bourgeois liberalization that followed the crackdown of the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations, the New Wave in Art in China as a movement was put to an end. The major art magazines and newspapers advocating and patronizing "new wave art" were all outlawed, and a new wave of official interference in artistic production began. Even before the crackdown, while there was already growing impatience with the political reality by the modernist artists and a desperate cynicism, some critics predicted the impending end of the New Wave Art.[8] The ending of the New Wave Art Movement, however, does not mean the end of modernism in China, as some critics have said. It only means the end of an art of an experimental nature—an art overwhelmingly dominated by foreign influences—and the beginning of a real Chinese modernism. For many, it will be based on the results of the previous experiments and, most importantly, will be characterized by the fully awakened self-consciousness of the Chinese artists.

Full self-consciousness of the artist would mean the dismantling of the movement, which, after all, is what modernism anywhere is all about. The next scene in Chinese art will probably be pluralistic art, and perhaps post-modernism. Despite the new round of political brainwashing, needed to maintain the die-hard old social system, awareness of artistic freedom,

and thus, one hopes, a less imitative or derivative Chinese art, has become deeply rooted in Chinese artists. Because of the efforts made by an awakened China to achieve the goals and values shared by most modern nations, the new trends in Chinese art will undoubtedly continue. Violent movements will probably no longer occur.

Twelve years ago, when commenting on the then trends in Chinese art, one observer remarked, "it is now still early to ascertain whether these trends will enable Chinese art to become one part of the international modernist movement. However, if such trends continue, it is not impossible that it will do so." Now we seem to be able to say, with certainty, that modernism has arrived. Unless there is an examination of the development of modernism in China, the "international modernist movement," cannot be fully understood.

Notes

1 The realist artists included Luo Zhongli, Chen Conglin, He Duoling, Gao Xiaohua, Chen Yiming and Chen Danqing.

2 This position is represented by Liu Xiaobo (Beijing Normal University) and Su SiaoKang (Beijing Teacher's College) as in *A Dialogue with Li Zehhou,* and the television serial *The Legacy of the Yellow River.*

3 Represented by Li Zhehou (Institute for Aesthetics, Chinese Academy for Social Science) and Lin Yusheng (University of Wisconsin) in *An Intellectual History of Modern China* and *The May 4th Movement* respectively.

4 Deng Pingxiang, "The Chinese Young Painters in the Rising and Scudding Waves Produced by the Collision of Two Cultures," *Trends in Contemporary Art and Literature* (Lanzhou), No. 3 (1986).

5 The three articles appeared respectively in the No. 1, (1979); No. 3 (1981); and No. 10 (1980) issues of *The Fine Arts* magazine.

6 See Fei Xinpai and Ahou Ping, ed., Grazia Marchiano, "The Three Major Aesthetic Trends in Contemporary Chinese Art," *The Proceedings of the International Conference on the Major Trends in Twentieth Century Aesthetics*, (Milano, 1991), 177.

7 In 1985 alone, more than 80 art societies or groups in pursuit of modernist art emerged in all parts of the country. The most influential were: The Beijing Youth Painting Society, The Art Group of the North, The Chi Society of Zhejiang, The Surrealist Group of Jiangsu, The O Art Group of Hunan, The Salon of the Southern Artists, The Xiamen Dadaist Group, The South-Western Group for Artistic Research, The Miyang Painting Society of Hebei, the "Tribe, Tribe" Group, and the Hubei Painting Society for Artist Friends. Most of these societies and groups dissolved themselves by the end of the 80s. During 1985-1989, more than 150 art shows sponsored by such organizations were held in all parts of the country, with work entries amounting to more than 10,000 and participants totalling more than 5,000.

8 Ding Fang, "The Ruins of An Ancient City—A Symbol of the Cultural Reflection," *Fine Arts in China*, No. 23 (1985).

Myth-Making and Myth-Breaking: Multiple Meanings in Mel Chin's *Revival Field*

by Sally Kuzma

Revival Field is a repeatable work in which a polluted plot of ground is planted with "hyperaccumulators"—plants that pull heavy metal toxins from the soil, purifying it through a kind of scientific alchemy. The metals can actually be recovered as ore from the plants after they are harvested and burned. The first one was built at Pig's Eye Landfill in Minnesota in 1991 and operated for three years. A second followed in Palmerton, Pennsylvania, where research continues, more had been planned for the Netherlands and Belgium.

Revival Field is the work of sculptor Mel Chin, in collaboration with Dr. Rufus Chaney, a Senior Research Scientist the US Department of Agriculture, and it elaborates on Chaney's research into the detoxifying properties of certain plant species. Chin's work sets the conditions for an experiment by building a temporary structure with a formal aesthetic presence. The 60-square-foot *Revival Field* is set off from the rest of the landfill by chain-link fencing, a circular planting ground within a square control area; it is bisected by two walkways forming a cross or X shape. Sectors of the circle are used for different plants, and are marked and numbered with a series of stakes.

The visual and spatial elements of *Revival Field* are minimal but loaded with references to the mandala, to cosmic diagrams, to agricultural myths from diverse cultural traditions, and to the targeting crosshairs of a rifle-scope. There is a wealth of iconographical material to be mined here. At the same time, the artist maintains that the intended aesthetic is in the invisible work of the plants upon the contaminated soil. This places the work in an indeterminate zone, somewhere between art and science; it can be read and re-read on social, political, and scientific levels. The interplay of these texts leads to an "explosion of meaning," to use Barthes' term,[1] and acts with subversive force on several myths that

operate in our own culture with respect to the proper place of art, science, politics, and activism. Arguably, the power of the work comes from its refusal to compartmentalize ideas and its maintaining that ambiguous position in between categories. The initial rejection of Chin's grant proposal for the piece by the National Endowment for the Arts—for lack of aesthetic content and for troubling political ramifications—highlights its controversial and provocative qualities.

Revival Field operates in remote locations, away from urban centers. The Minnesota Field was sited on the most toxic ground in the landfill, which is off-limits to the general public. For these reasons, most viewers experience the work through documents prepared by the artist and other interested parties. Unlike many earthworks or siteworks that exist primarily through (and for) the act of documentation, *Revival Field* works through and beyond the attendant documents; data continues to be collected and used by the scientists involved, and political repercussions continue to multiply outside the *Fields* themselves.

Documentation of *Revival Field* has been included in several of Chin's recent solo and group shows. The documents vary from exhibit to exhibit, but usually include a maquette and supporting sketches and photos, plus work that has grown out of the initial project, so to speak. The Queens Museum show "Fragile Ecologies" included a series of "studies" which were botanical drawings of the particular species of plants used in the piece (Silene cucubalis, Festuca rubra, Zea mays), documents which are weighty little artworks in themselves. Drawn with "zinc-cadmium point on prepared ground on blotter paper," the materials carry at least as much meaning as the delicately rendered leaves and stems. Zinc and cadmium are two of the metal toxins being harvested in the Revival Field, drawn out of the soil by these particular botanicals. The drawings also bring to mind the historical role of artists as not only scientific illustrators but investigators and researchers in their own right (DaVinci's forays into human anatomy, for example).

Another work that is shown as part of *Revival Field's* documentation[2] is a sculpture juxtaposing a dried ear of corn (one of the hyperaccumulators from the Field), the specimen tagged and caged in a wire mesh container, beneath one of the plot markers. From the wooden stake hangs a tiny jar full of metal counters which was used to number the plots (based on an ancient Mayan counting system; see below). The jar has the aura of a lucky charm in some arcane arrangement of elements. It alludes to "sympathetic magic," a practice in which one ritually enacts a process like what one hopes for (i.e., pouring water to induce rain) on the principle that like attracts like, and the hoped for event might be drawn into being.[3]

Through the photos and site plans, we receive an image of *Revival*

Field as a kind of garden set apart on the grassy plain of landfill. It is divided into quadrants and sections that contain varieties of corn, bladder campion, Alpine pennythrift, and other species, a quirky geometric garden in a metallic holding pen. The orderly configuration might have read as "simplicity and charm" in another location, but this is an eery place, situated under an expanse of sky, on an expanse of grassy ground that is superficially green but deeply sick with industrial waste; the urban Minneapolis skyline rises ominously in the distance. It is no Eden; it is a danger zone, a warning place sprouting barbed wire on its perimeter. The seriousness and simplicity of the task at hand are visible in these forms.

Despite the artist's intention that the real work is invisible and the fences and stakes simply temporary markers, there are many meanings to be drawn from the visual and spatial elements of *Revival Field;* iconographical associations abound. They are not related in a single path toward one true meaning or reading of the work. Instead they are clustered together; it is their co-existence that gives resonance and depth to the work. The Field functions as a "symbolic totality"[4] that incorporates difference.

The circle-in-a-square motif refers to the mandala in eastern religious art, and to its appearance in the cosmic diagrams and maps of cultures across the ancient Middle East.[5] Mandala is the Hindu term for circle. It is a *yantra*, or ritual geometric diagram used for contemplation, concentration, and "to aid the spirit in its evolution" and to "draw down and house the deities."[6] It is generally printed or drawn, sometimes built for festivals. It is essentially analogous to the Aztec Calendar stone, the Buddhist Wheel of the Universe, the wheel that the prophet Ezekiel saw, the lotus flower, the rose window, etc. Indian stupas are built on this plan, Chinese Bronze shields make use of it, as do certain Voodoo cults. Its use in the *Revival Field* does not favor any one of these traditions over others. Rather, in its minimal form and contemporary materials it allows all these possibilities to co-exist in one circle, "to regroup all that is dispersed around a single axis."[7]

The mandala also evokes the urgent nature of the work at hand. The revival of the earth is a healing task, one that requires mental readiness, awareness, concentration, centering.

At the same time, the circling of the experiment is a targeting gesture, the intersecting paths reminiscent of cross-hairs of a rifle scope. These cross-hairs function like the mandala, in that they focus attention on a specific area, and on the metals targeted for removal. They also place science (biochemistry) in the role of weapon: it is the weapon being used upon the targeted toxic area. Positioning science as a weapon highlights the dual possibilities inherent in such technology: it helped bring this industrial mess into being, and it has the potential to remediate it as

well.[8]

Chin may also be referring to science as a cosmological myth of contemporary western culture, one that replaced religion in the course of our history. But science is not religion, and the transhistorical, transcultural spiritual references do not add up to a spiritual art, *per se.* The piece is grounded by a particular, pragmatic goal, and by newly recovered biological facts.[9] In this art, "religious transformations and mythic metamorphosis [function as] metaphors for the possibility of scientific reconstitution of corrupted natural resources."[10]

The plants used in *Revival Field* also have mythological associations. The planting is an agricultural event, the beginning of a new kind of agriculture, a "green remediation" that we need to learn more about (hence, the experiment). There is an ancient Greek account[11] of the origins of agriculture that features Demeter, earth goddess. In celebration of her daughter Persephone's return from Hades (the event that brought about the origin of springtime), Demeter taught the princes of Eleusis her secrets, giving the primal ear of wheat to Triptolemus so that he would spread it over the earth, teaching people how to sow and plant. "Chin's Field may be seen as an ongoing part of the Triptolomean mission of planting the earth. One may say that Chin participates in the Triptolomean archetype by facilitating his mission."[12] In *Revival Field,* ears of corn function in place of ears of wheat, corn being a native New World plant and hyperaccumulator, as well as a remnant of Native American culture, an appropriate plant for heralding the beginning of a new kind of agriculture and revival of the earth.[13] This new agriculture also has potential global significance: pointing the way to a process that may keep humanity from being poisoned by its own waste. There is deep humanism at work here, as well as deep ecology, in the recycling of minerals and the recycling of myths.

Ancient New World culture is referred to again in the details of the planting stakes. Stakes or plot markers are used to number the various field divisions. As mentioned before, an ancient Mayan numbering system is employed, consisting of long and short metal bars, equalling twenty and five respectively, and balls that count for one.

"The appropriate counters—say a long bar, two short bars, and three balls, totalling 33—are cut from industrial rod stock in the target metals, long bars in zinc-cadmium, short bars in copper, and balls in lead. The array is then hung in a little jar from the top of the site-marking stake as if to summon, or lure, the target metals upward form the soil. This invocation of a dead antique culture ... suggests that there is a universal or transhistorical importance to the process of detoxifying the earth, an urgent importance which may unite all human cultures, even past ones, in the spirituality of its pursuit."[14]

The images and stories referred to by visual elements of *Revival Field* belong to the realm of iconography, and are part of how this piece functions as art in a traditional sense. Though it lacks the intricacies of personal and period style, the kinds of factual events an iconographer would look to for meaning, it is full of secondary or conventional meaning, the sort of themes or concepts that give intelligibility to the forms.[15]

Yet while one set of myths—the cosmological or allegorical stories—is being evoked, juxtaposed and rearranged in *Revival Field,* another set of myths—unexamined truisms of our own contemporary culture—is being exposed and subverted by the political and social ramifications of the work.

In a conversation with the artist, he stated that he regards *Revival Field* as a "seed" and as an unfinished work. The work will be done, he said, when the research is completed and a practical, commercially viable detoxification and ore-recovery process is set into motion. In the final stage, the site would be completely remediated and capable of supporting a diversity of plant and animal life In a grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts, Mel Chin wrote:

> Conceptually, this work is envisioned as a sculpture involving the reduction process, a traditional method when carving wood or stone. Here, the material being approached is unseen and the tools will be biochemistry and agriculture. The work, in its most complete incarnation (after the fences are removed and the toxic-laden weeds are harvested) will offer minimal visual and formal effects. For a time an intended invisible aesthetic will exist that can be measured scientifically by the quality of a revitalized earth. Eventually that aesthetic will be revealed in the return of growth to the soil.

NEA chief John Frohnmayer rejected the grant proposal on the grounds that it lacked aesthetic content; i.e., it signalled "science, not art". In a remark later made to *Village Voice* reporter Kim Levin, Chin clarified his aesthetic point of view:

> I'm just tackling something that's under the ground that you can't see, but it's sculptural material; it's heavy metals. I'm going to carve that with this elegant tool: plants... The basic sculpting process is invisible, based on a scientific premise that I thought was extremely poetic and extremely pragmatic[16]

One of the NEA panelists revealed that Chin's work was also politically suspicious to certain "neocons" on the panel; i.e., it signalled "activism."[17] To them, it seemed, the work had leftist or activist

overtones. "I sniff politics," said *American Scholar* editor Joseph Epstein, a politically conservative panel member who urged the rejection of several grant proposals, Chin's included.[18]

While much of Chin's oeuvre deals with political and social issues (human rights abuses throughout the world; racism at home), the absence of rhetoric or strident overtones has been noted by several reviewers.[19] In Chin's own words, his art is "not meant to make anybody do anything; it's meant to present the case, to allow things to happen."[20]

Artist Martha Clark, who was also rejected for funding by the same NEA panel, was working on a piece about endangered species. One wonders what exactly is so threatening about work that comments on ecological issues.

Chin's piece belongs to the genre of earthworks or siteworks that became popular in the seventies. Much of this work, as Robert Morris argues in an essay, "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture," is not only self-serving, but consumer-friendly, and a convenient way to maintain certain aspects of our economical and political status quo. In reviewing land reclamation projects for the Seattle Arts Commission, he points out some irksome points about the function of such pieces in the political economy of the region:[21]

> The selling point was, is, that the art was going to cost less than returning the site to its 'natural condition.' What are the implications of that kind of thinking... that art should be cheaper than nature? Or that siteworks can be supported and seen as relevant by a community only if they fulfill a kind of sanitation service? The most significant implication of art as landscape reclamation is that art can and should be used to wipe away technological guilt. Do those sites scarred by mining or poisoned by chemicals now seem less like the entropic liabilities of ravenous and short-sighted industry and more like long-awaited aesthetic possibilities? Will it be a little easier in the future to rip up the landscape for one last shovelful of non-renewable energy source if an artist can be found (cheap, mind you) to transform the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art? Or anyway, into a fun place to be? Well, at the very least, into a tidy, mugger-free park.[22]

Revival Field avoids some of these conceptual pitfalls, and refuses to be a tool for consumer culture or a palliative for the status quo. The photographs and documentation are more than museum collectibles to be bought and sold, and are not the main fruit of the piece. Though remote and inaccessible, it is not, like De Maria or Smithson's work, a private aesthetic meditation cloistered from the political and economic realities. Nor does it attempt to turn the landfill into an art "amusement park" or

add an aesthetic veneer to the place. Indeed, it's toxicity and danger are emphasized by the configuration of fences and barbed wire.

One of the stronger land reclamation pieces that doesn't seek merely to camouflage land degradation is Nancy Holt's *Sky Mound*, planned for the New Jersey Meadowlands landfill. Holt, coincidentally, also makes use of cosmological references, creating a sort of modern day *Stonehenge* oriented to "align" with certain celestial events. Through a series of mounds, walkways, and vista points, she creates a human use for the landfill as a park, while still allowing it to stand as a colossal mountain of garbage, and a sober reminder to subsequent generations.[23] While she no doubt encountered bureaucratic hassles in getting her plan implemented, *Sky Mound* does not seem to have offended anyone politically or brought charges of activism masquerading as art.

Perhaps the perceived activism in *Revival Field* lies in its quiet insistence on—and demonstration of—alternative processes. The remediation project emphasizes operation more than artifact. The work of the plants is genuinely and disturbingly radical, in the etymological sense of taking place at the roots. It gets to the root of our attitudes toward waste, consumption, resources, and the place of science and art, and it permits a different way of looking at all these things. *Revival Field* treats the toxins as valuable minerals, and it puts them in their place again by putting them back into the biological cycle of minerals. By destroying the myth that the landfill is an intractable toxic ragout, it opens up the possibility of rendering the metals and the soil into some once-again usable form. It is an alchemical, poetic case of recycling.

More than just an illustration of scientific principles, *Revival Field* is an on-going experiment supplying real data for real scientists. What exactly is going on in the science of *Revival Field*? The answer can be found in the history of the project's conception, the obstacles to its implementation, and the subsequent impact of publicity on the science community. It presents a sharp contrast to the prevailing view of science as an objective practice, sheltered from political and economic vagaries.

It took months of negotiations with public officials before the artist, supported by the Walker Art Center, was granted permission to implement *Revival Field* on a 300-acre Minnesota landfill, notes "Fragile Ecologies" curator Barbara Matilsky.[24] In fact, major obstacles were encountered well before that in the initial discussion of the work with Dr. Chaney. His perspective on the artist/scientist collaboration points out some of the real political "threats" inherent in the work (as opposed to those imagined by the NEA).

The story of Mel Chin's and Rufus Chaney's collaboration was told in a panel discussion on artist/scientist collaborators in the "Fragile Ecologies" exhibit.[25] Chin had read about Chaney's work in an alternative

technology magazine, and approached the scientist at the United States Department of Agriculture with his idea. Scientists tend to steer away from anything that hints of environmentalism or activism, Chaney explained, because these non-objective pursuits can do serious damage to one's credibility as a scientist. "The first thing we want to do is protect our professional status—we don't want [an artist] to screw up our science." When Chaney returned Chin's first phone call, he was leery of getting involved in something that might bend science to fit an environmentalist or aesthetic agenda. Ironically, the same project that signalled "science, not art" to NEA chief Frohnmayer, signalled "art, not science" or "activism, not science" to the scientist.

But there were things going on in Chaney's career that made him take a second look at Chin's call to collaborate. Funds for Chaney's research—in fact, funds for most environmental programs in the US research community—were cut off beginning in 1983 during the Reagan and Bush administrations. "People were laid off or reassigned to other projects," said Chaney. "I stopped working on environmental things I'd been researching for 15 years." Chaney had collected seeds of plants reputed to be hyperaccumulators and determined their potential in the laboratory; none of the work had been tested in the field and it didn't seem likely to happen in the near future.

Chaney took another look at the *Revival Field* idea, and satisfied some of his misgivings: that the experiment would be scientifically controlled, and that the data would be respected and not manipulated in any way. They would focus on developing a high-yield crop with ash that contained a concentration of ore high enough to lead to an economically viable, self-funding operation. *Revival Field* then became a way to carry out some of the experiments he had had to abandon because they were incompatible with the politics of the Reagan and-Bush administrations. The set-up was objective enough for him to take the risk of doing something "flaky," something his peers would probably find eccentric, risky and possibly disreputable. Chaney was fed up enough with the politics of research funding to take a chance on Chin.

Revival Field finally got under way, after Frohnmayer reversed his refusal, NEA funding was secured, and after all kinds of permits and safety regulations were met (Chin's workers, for example, were required to complete 40 hours of Hazardous Materials Incident Response Training). An unintended effect of the NEA episode was that it led to an article in *Science Magazine*. The article brought virtually hundreds of phone calls from scientists who were interested in the work and "spread the ideas far wider and far quicker than we could have done if we had been highly successful and written up in a standard journal article," said Chaney.[26] Unexpectedly, art-world attention stimulated scientific interest,

which in turn brought offers of funding from corporations—DuPont, General Electric, and others—who were interested in the economic possibilities of "green remediation."

Revival Field works because it reveals the simple beauty involved in the science of hyperaccumulators,[27] and because it stubbornly holds its ground as an "indecidable," commingling the aesthetic of science and the aesthetic of art. In this case, the beauty of green remediation had been obscured by cultural values that encouraged other less elegant technological solutions to the problem of toxins in the soil. The standard response by the federal Environmental Protection Agency to the sort of toxicity found at Palmerton, for example, would be to dig up the toxic soil and acid-wash it, removing all the organic compounds and leaving essentially a barren moonscape, to use Chaney's words. And there is still toxic residue that must be dumped somewhere else. It doesn't take a genius to realize the problems with this: the toxins are merely isolated and relocated, substituting one hazardous waste site for another. *Revival Field* created a context where the aesthetics of green remediation could be "seen" and appreciated. The question, "Is this art, science, or activism?" becomes moot, or in Chin's words, "The compartmentalization of ideas destroys ideas."[28]

As stated above, there are two kinds of mythic operations going on in *Revival Field*, involving myths as cosmological stories, and myths as unexamined truisms. Cassirer's "The Myth of the State" traces the history of how we've come to view myth in a way that encompasses both these views, beginning with an assertion about its fundamental importance in human culture:

> Language, art, even science are, in their origin and in their evolution, intimately connected with the elements of mythical thought. They cannot free themselves from these elements, they cannot appear in their proper shape before having travelled a long way in their own history ... Myth is ... a common background and a common basis for all the various energies that participate in the construction of our human world.[29]

The rise of ethnography and comparative mythology in the nineteenth century allowed us to see "not only the facts, but the form of mythical thought" as it occurred in different cultures, he argues. As an interpretation, dramatization or animation of natural events, myth connected people to the physical world. As an expression of collective desire (*"le désire collectif personifié,"*)[30] myth presided over the social rites of birth, death, and initiation, maintaining the social fabric, connecting people with each other. Mythography presented

anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists with examples of exotic behavior, as well as analogous stories to analyze and ponder. Alternatively, romanticists embraced myth as coming from the wellspring of the unconscious, "a wild and exuberant stream springing forth from an unknown depth."[31] Both these attitudes positioned myth at a considerable distance from contemporary life. "We were convinced that myth belonged to a cultural and mental stage that has passed once and for all."

For Cassirer, a European Jew living in the States in 1945, this becomes a prologue to an explanation for the rise of German National Socialism. Myth is not a relic of the past but fully operative in the twentieth century, coopted by the totalitarian state.

> That this 'primitive' form would be revivified and that it was bound to play a decisive role in modern political life was a fact that was in strict opposition to our firmest theoretical convictions. The 'myth of the twentieth century' was unparalleled and unprecedented; it came as a reverse of all our principles of thought.[32]

Mythos and logos combine; myth is maniacally constructed and manipulated to present "The Myth of State" and "The Myth of Leader." No longer bound to unconscious or irrational thinking, myth is deliberately and coldly fashioned to promote "the Aryan race" and the deification of its leader, Hitler.

> The twentieth century developed a technique of mythical thought which had no equal in previous history. Henceforth myths were invented and manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as machine guns or airplanes. And they were used for the same purposes, for internal and external warfare. This was an altogether unprecedented fact, a fact which has changed the whole face of our modern political life.[33]

Cassirer did not believe philosophy could overcome these myths by a direct frontal assault. He saw his role, or philosophy's role, as explicator or revealer of pernicious political myths; "know thine enemy and his ways," he charged, that we should not repeat these errors.

The actual dismantling of political myths was taken up by Barthes ten years later, with semiology as his tool, though he later came to realize "that demystification does not eliminate myth, but, paradoxically, gives it a greater freedom."[34] Where Cassirer critiqued the Nazis, Barthes' targets were the delusions and unexamined truisms of "bourgeois" culture, the social stereotypes that are casually passed off as human nature. His Marxist-based critique was carried out in monthly feature articles called

"Mythology of the Month" for *Lettres Nouvelles*, and ran the gamut of topics from literature to laundry.

> The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversation, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the kitchen we dream of, the garments we wear, everything in everyday life is dependent upon the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world ... bourgeois norms are experienced as the self-evident laws of a natural order.[35]

Barthes used semiotics, a study of the relationship of signifiers, signified, and signs, as a way to uncover the second-order meanings of cultural gestures and artifacts. His aim was to expose the "Historical" or political and economic contingents operating in a given situation. Thus he fleshed out Cassirer's insights with a method of analysis for approaching particularly modern myths.

In a post-modern work such as *Revival Field* which transcends categorization, Barthes' approach, combined with the broad understanding of myth put forth by Cassirer, and the traditional iconographical methods of Panofsky, clarify the multiple ways in which the artwork means. In his presentation of a new kind of agriculture, Chin may be attempting to generate a new humanist and ecological myth to "promote" it. In the process he is most definitely succeeding in exposing myths that hold us back from reviving our environment. Science is not necessarily a force in opposition to nature. Ecological responsibility is not necessarily a retrograde romantic position. And our decisions on the kinds of technology to use do not come out of an objective science, but from a matrix of political and economic practices.

Notes

1 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 940-946.
2 Shown at an exhibit of Chin's work entitled "Soil and Sky," at The Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. It functioned as a reference to his ongoing work in the landfill, as well as part of a suite of installations on ecological/alchemical themes in this particular show. See *Soil and Sky* catalog, 23.
3 Thomas McEvilley in *Soil and Sky* catalog, 12
4 Ibid., 14.
5 Ibid., 13. Babylonian, Mesopotamian, and Rosicrucian uses of the mandala form are cited.
6 *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Myth, Religion, and the Unknown*, xx.
7 McEvilley, 14.
8 This resonates with Chin's use of the "weapon" concept in another piece: a policeman's

nightstick, in which one end has been wired with a microphone that can play loud street music (hip-hop, or rap). The stick now has the potential to be a tool of repression or expression.

9 The science of hyperaccumulators, or "green remediation," dates back to the 1860s when ore mining regions began to suffer great ecological devastation, according to Dr. Chaney; other technologies superceded it, for a variety of reasons. The current interest in its applications came about only in the the 1970s.

10 McEvilley, 14.

11 This retelling is taken from W.H.D. Rouse, *Gods, Heroes and Men of Ancient Greece* (New York: New American Library, 1957), 26.

12 McEvilley, 14.

13 Ibid., 21.

14 Ibid., 14.

15 Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, Harper and Row, 1962): 6-9.

16 Mel Chin, quoted by Kim Levin in "Eco-Offensive Art," *Village Voice*, 1 January 1991, 33.

17 C. Carr, "Endangered Artist List," *Village Voice*, (21 August 1990), 84

18 Ibid., 93.

19 Elizabeth Hess, "Inescapable Histories," *Village Voice*, 31 Dec. 1991, 7: "Ecological concerns clearly motivate the artist, yet there's not a rhetorical moment in the show."

20 Mel Chin, quoted by Marcia Tanner in *Artweek*, 18 June 1992, 5.

21 *Critical Issues in Public Art*, eds., Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 259.

22 Ibid., 259-60.

23 Barbara Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies* (exhibition catalogue)(New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 76.

24 *Fragile Ecologies*, 108.

25 Rufus Chaney, speaking about his collaboration with Chin, at the Ronald Feldman gallery in New York, November 11, 1992.

26 Ibid.

27 The aesthetics of science is often overlooked because it disturbs our deeply held belief that science is an exclusively rational, objective pursuit. See Judy Wechsler's collection of scientist's essays in *On Aesthetics in Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).

28 Ronald Feldman Gallery, November 11, 1992.

29 Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-45*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 87

30 E. Doutté, cited in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, 251

31 *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*, 235.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 253

34 Jonathan Culler. *Roland Barthes*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 39.

35 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 140

Judy Chicago: Exploitation or Art?

Audrey Farrell

Exploitation of another human, whether that individual is willing or not, is at best unintentional, and at worst, when couched in philanthropic rhetoric, an act of cold-blooded, calculated oppression and dehumanization. My focus is the use made of women by Judy Chicago to achieve her singular goals. Chicago's use of women to do her grunt work rivals any exploitation ever executed by any man, anywhere, anytime.

Judy Chicago's work addresses primarily the issue of the feminist ideal—an ideal world that would witness equal opportunities and life qualities for all, not the inequality that exists yet today based not only on a person's gender, but also shades of skin color, intelligence, religious beliefs, sexual preference and on and on. Any small distinction always an excuse for bigotry. Somewhere, always; sometime, constantly; somehow, definitely.

To give Chicago some credit, she has never been afraid to tackle difficult or uncomfortable subjects. For example, and perhaps a small lesson to us all, in her book *The Birth Project* (1985), she wrote about the painful and taboo subject of female genital mutilation in Africa, a needless, extremely painful, and horrifying practice still visited upon unsuspecting female children, which causes these children pain and degradation throughout their lives.

Chicago speaks of how she wanted to do a piece for *The Birth Project* with an image symbolizing this atrocity but lists reasons why this never came about. These include limited time, being daunted by trying to come up with an image of this horrifying ritual and lastly, and most honestly, fear:

> The third reason is harder to admit; I had been severely trashed, both in person and in print for my representation of the black feminist and abolitionist Sojourner Truth in *The Dinner Party,* and I was somewhat afraid to deal with an issue that was so fraught with political ramifications. However if it had not been for the limitations of our support resources, I probably

would have tried anyway. [1]

I find it admirable that Chicago wrote about the horror of female genital mutilation ten years before many studies were published, and before the subject had been widely discussed in the West. While I do find Chicago's limited bravery positive, I am puzzled that she discusses maternity clothes at great length, yet mentions Caesarean section as a birth experience only once and then only in a very negative manner in *The Birth Project.*

> Since forceps were not in general use until the eighteenth century, surgical intervention in childbirth consisted of extracting the fetus piecemeal, after crushing its skull to make removal from the birth canal possible, or performing a Caesarean section on the dead mother in order to save the infant.[2]

The year mentioned here was 1720. *The Birth Project* book was written in 1985. Certainly it must be understood that even though Caesarean section is not "natural childbirth," it is not any less valid as a way to be delivered of a baby, especially when the life of either the mother or the baby is in danger. Chicago thought about attempting to deal with the imagery of female genital mutilation. By the same token, in her *Mother India* piece she did deal with some hard truths, such as child marriage, *suttee* (the practice of burning the wife alive on the husband's funeral pyre), and female infanticide. I don't understand why then, when the result in most Caesarean births is positive, she did not address this. At the very least, she could have followed her feminist philosophy of empowering women by mentioning this method of birth as necessary and desirable under some circumstances. By all but ignoring the many women who have experienced Caesarean birth for whatever complications or medical reasons, she commits by omission the same negation of which she accuses men. The best hope for childbirth, no matter how it comes about, is to have a live and healthy mother and baby. I feel that Chicago tries, perhaps even inadvertently, but does not succeed in invalidating the positive experiences of so many women whose only recourse is to deliver a child by Caesarean section.

Judy Chicago's work *The Dinner Party* was, I believe, addressed to a truly neglected segment of history; the achievements of female poets, writers, and artists. The accomplishments of these women can not be in any way denied or minimized. Their work in most cases rivals in quality that of their male contemporaries, although it has been consistently undervalued. *The Dinner Party* gave me intense feelings of pride, of sorrow and of anger at the obviousness of the exclusions. At the time I felt admiration for Chicago, who had executed an astonishing work—with a great deal of help, of course.

I was in those days a young wife and mother with two small children. I worked very hard to take care of my family. That was my job. Yet as time passed, I realized that since no paycheck was attached to it, all of the work I did was held to be of no intrinsic value in the eyes of the world at large, and my then-husband in particular. Even many other women, who had no children and worked outside the home, made sly references about my "not working." The hurt, humiliation, and anger I felt was only addressed years later by the all-powerful baby-boomer yuppies who labeled what I was doing as worthy. They called it "nesting" and gave validation to all of my hard work by acknowledging that I was merely ahead of the times. Naturally it followed that when I learned of *The Birth Project* in 1981, I became very excited. A group of women in my hometown had started work on one piece of this massive undertaking. I sought them out and joined the Mom group. I had worked extensively in needlepoint and crewel embroidery so my skills and enthusiasm fit in well. I worked heart, mind, and soul alongside these women in the firm belief that we were part of something fine and truly meaningful. I had two small daughters and I wanted to help make the world a better place for them than it had been for me. A world with more equality, more opportunities, and less sexism.

Also, I felt that Chicago was affirming the neglect of the birth process as far as images in art dealing with it. Birth, supposedly the most wonderful and natural act of human existence, could barely be discussed in "polite" company. All I ever encountered were horror stories about pain, discomfort, fear, and lax, negligent male doctors. For the birth of my first daughter, I was fortunate to be cared for by one of the exceptions. This man was gentle, kind, caring, and present during the entire birth which was very difficult. He remains a friend to this day. Unfortunately he was away pursuing advanced studies when my second daughter arrived. That doctor was distant, aloof, and unconcerned. He could barely be bothered to come off the golf course until things got critical. I never was aware, prior to my own experiences, of how wonderful it all could be, but we all knew about the dreadful parts. I could find nothing positive in the attitudes of either men or women. Shame on us all.

I came to work on *The Birth Project* with a very open and positive attitude. I came willingly and eagerly. To this day I hold the women of the Mom group in the highest esteem and have feelings of affection for them all. We have all gone our separate ways over the years, which is part of life's course. When I decided to write about it, I tried to find them, but succeeded in locating only one, Kathy Herman, who still lives in this area. I learned that neither of us has any idea where the piece we worked on is located. Chicago writes, "Unless we could control what happened to our art after we made it, we would all be subject to the same distortion, devaluing, and discrimination that the women before us suffered."[3]

I find that very interesting. I also find it interesting that Kathy Herman and I feel much the same way. The best part of the whole experience was the companionship and camaraderie we all felt as we worked. What we both feel for Judy Chicago is an entirely different matter.

I met Chicago once while we were working on our piece titled *The Crowning*. We had affectionately named our piece Mom when we started work. It was 54-by-84 inches. The image Chicago designed was batiked from a full scale drawing onto the fabric. We embellished this image with quilting, embroidery, and extremely delicate bead work, including tiny ceramic figures of people and animals fabricated by Geraldine Boruta, a potter. These were incorporated into the overall work. The work we did was intricate, precise and very beautiful. We even wove our own hair into the section depicting the baby's head. Chicago came once to review our work. I found her to be rude, snotty, and arrogant. She attributes my impressions of her—which are shared by some of the other women who have worked on her art— to the fact that she is a "professional artist." Of course we all were not. Chicago writes repeatedly about her obvious professionalism as opposed to all of us rank amateurs.

> The imagination in their sample had been replaced by a cautious, uninteresting interpretation of what Sally and I had already produced. I was very disappointed and told them so. Unfortunately at the time I really had no idea what a shattering effect my criticism often had on needle workers. I am a professional artist, and accepting criticism is something I learned to do long ago.[4]

Accept this then: perhaps if criticism wasn't delivered in a uncivil, harsh, dictatorial manner needle workers wouldn't have been so "shattered." As we worked on our piece, I began to feel that perhaps what we were involved in wasn't quite what it was presented to be. Indeed time has borne me out on this. As I researched this paper, and as I look back across the years and considered my feelings of unease, I found in Chicago's own written words the concrete evidence that we were never more than drudges in her master plan to execute another massive project. She did work hard and she made it work but her methods and attitudes speak to a whole different set of thoughts than how she initially presented herself.

To begin with, I found it intriguing that only one needle worker came to *The Birth Project* from *The Dinner Party*—only one came out from the nearly 250 whose hard work had made all the difference.[5] Why? I find this very odd and telling indeed. Surely the large group of women who worked on the runners for each place setting were talented and diligent enough to be accepted into the ranks of workers needed to do the embellishment, needlepoint, quilting and myriad other techniques Chicago had planned

for each birth image. Perhaps these women realized *en masse* that being used, though cloaked in different terms, was still just that. Maybe along with the rest of us willing souls, those women discovered that Chicago didn't always hold up her end of things.

> Whenever someone finished a piece, we sent them a 'closure packet' consisting of a thank you letter from me, a lifetime membership in *Through the Flower,* and a *Birth Project* T-shirt. Later they received slides, and photographs of the work they executed showing the way it looked finished and prepared for exhibition, along with a copy of the documentation included in the exhibition unit.[6]

As I recall, and Kathy Herman supports my memories, we did get the gauche pink T-shirt, the book about the project, and our lifetime memberships. Apparently the only worth of this membership is to enable the *Through The Flower* organization to track us all down regularly and ask for donations. We received nothing else.

Let's consider for a moment that maybe we didn't get our "closure packet" in total because of the prevailing attitudes toward the women who worked so diligently out here in fly-over-land.

> In some projects, the group process seemed more the focus than the art itself, although without the art there would have been no process. For me the art was always the most important, but I recognize that for some of the needle workers, especially in remote areas, the opportunity to work with other women on art that related to their experiences was the paramount motivation.[7]

Remote areas?!? The Antarctic is remote. The Australian Outback is remote. Parts of Alaska are remote. Iowa is not remote. Golly gee Judy, we are all just so gosh darn thankful to have been allowed to be involved in "real art." The smugness with which this is casually tossed out is appalling. Chicago speaks as if she had been dealing with a frontier mentality. Had she bothered to ask, she would have found that the women of the Mom group nearly all held bachelor's degrees and a few even had master's degrees. Perhaps we weren't quite as sophisticated as Chicago and her ilk "on the coast" but we as a group are intelligent, educated women well aware and involved in the arts and culture in many forms. For Chicago to talk down to us as if we were merely hayseeds fresh off the farm waiting for her to come and enrich our dreary lives is thoughtless, snide, and even ignorant. And as she would have us all believe, she is the smartest, most talented and brightest of us all. Damn straight too!

How remiss it would be of me to base the contempt I feel for Judy

Chicago on just my own personal experiences. I have read repeatedly in her own words how she feels about women. Always, her attitudes are couched in terms that define her as the caring, nurturing, feminist teacher, yet her own words belie this from her early writings through *The Birth Project* book. Chicago's book *Through the Flower* published in 1971 begins this ongoing dialogue of contempt: "Women do not usually have sufficient drive and ambition to keep them at a job when it becomes frustrating.[8]

My response to this outrageous bit of sexism is have a baby Chicago, and raise it by yourself. Love this child day-in and day-out; care for it year-in and year-out. Don't forget that this is a 24-hour-a-day-job, 7-day-a- week commitment that lasts for years. Don't forget to laugh with this child, to hug it, to nurture it, to always be there for it, always. On second thought, have two; then we will talk. That was in 1971, in 1985 she continues;

> Some of the women I studied and worked with were professionals, but most were not. My thoroughgoing professionalism was often seen by them as 'not being nice.' Moreover most of the women were terrified of rejection, afraid of criticism, too eager to please, and therefore too quick to dissemble; their dishonesty frequently caused problems both in our interactions and the work itself. Most of them knew very little about how the world really operates and even less about the nature of power.[9]

So in fifteen years women had de-evolved from being lazy and frustrated to being terrified, timid, fawning liars who concealed anything at the drop of a hat and had no concept of how "power" or the "real world" works. After all, reasons Chicago,

> The women were suffering from the results of the years in which too few demands were made upon them. They were used to a self-indulgent world where they were rarely uncomfortable, always ready to give up if frustration became too much, never setting long-range goals or trying to do things that were far beyond their strength.[10]

Again my response to this absurdity must be, get yourself a child, Chicago. I have discovered with my two daughters that what is needed is an enormous amount of patience and strength to deal with the emotional, physical and financial demands involved. It is extremely difficult to be "self indulgent" when nearly all your time is required for the care and well being of these responsibilities. As far as long range goals, a child is a commitment from the day it is born until the day either you or it dies. Granted this commitment varies in intensity and need at different times, but it is always, always there. That Chicago, who was childless at that time, has the

effrontery to make such a denigrating statement is very telling indeed.

I wish to take a moment at this time to examine Judy Chicago's ongoing dialogue about "power." She uses this term frequently when referring to herself. As I quoted above: "Most of them knew little about how the world really operates and even less about the nature of power."[10]

In 1971 she writes:

> I felt particularly hurt when they make accusations about my being on a 'power trip.' I, who had worked so closely with them and given them so much of myself....It became evident that this rejection mechanism happens when a woman feels that she is becoming stronger. One way of demonstrating that strength which although negative is still an assertive act, is to reject the 'mother figure' who helped her become strong. By saying 'I don't need you anymore,' the woman feels a sense of power. Unfortunately, this need to feel powerful often results in hurting the very woman who made growth possible[12]

I find this very interesting because if she never mentioned "power" again there might be some validity to what she says. Instead she rants on:

> Their inability to understand my explanations grew out of total failure to comprehend that it is power not justice, which determines the nature of the world and, therefore, the definition of art.[13]

What I wonder is why Chicago felt that by putting only her name on our work and by not letting us own our pieces even in the tiniest respect, she changed this definition?

> I guess I still have a lot of feeling from my experience with *The Dinner Party* because of the punishment and abuse I received, all as a result of the terror of female power. I broke the taboo: I am too powerful, and I expressed it, and I'm still expressing it.[14]

Also she writes:

> So many times, when I work with the needle workers and when I lecture, I am faced with the fact that women seem totally confused about what power means. They see me as being powerful and therefore I can change everything—make the world view needlework as art, arrange things so everyone can get paid for their work, ensure that my work force is racially and ethnically balanced—and it does no good to try to explain. When people are committed to a fantasy, it's hard to get them to change their views.[15]

Unfortunately all of this "power" simply gets in the way of Chicago being even a likable human, and we all shared this fantasy that she actually cared about the women doing all of this hard work for her. Her attitudes toward the women she so cavalierly used was at times quite simply appalling.

> And that's why I feel trapped—because I already feel let down by men, fundamentally let down by the way they've treated me throughout my career and, most recently, in relation to *The Dinner Party*. I feel punished, shut out of the art system and made to feel ashamed of what I've created. And so I've turned full-face to women, but I'm filled with fear and anxiety and doubt. It is my own lack of trust of women that I am confronting and my own dislike of women that I am encountering.[16]

So at that point Chicago didn't like men and she didn't like women. One would think that it might have occurred to her that she was running out of species to alienate. But it didn't.

> The one thing I learned was that I need to moderate my behavior with these middle class women, at least until they become more confident and relaxed in the project.[17]

Middle class women! Well excuse us for doing so much of your work and making you look so good. Chicago makes it clear that she had nothing in common with us "middle class women" even though she came from that background herself. Here are other interesting examples of Chicago's thoughts about all these skilled women:

> It's quite difficult to work and see so few results, with everyone in *The Birth Project* working so slowly and the work spread out around the country. Also, it's instructive to see the products of my own hands and be able to compare these to the work being produced cooperatively. There is definitely something missing in a lot of the cooperative work—visual skill and acuity, I think.[18]

Excuse me!

> ...the images are very powerful. I know that, the way I'm conceiving them to be needlepointed, quilted, or embroidered is intended to soften them, to make them easier to handle—by whom? Am I doing this because I am being a mother, providing for all these needy women? God I'm all mixed up.[19]

To borrow a very pertinent and succinct response from Lisa Liebmann,

"Hey, Judy who was ya mutha? Ernest Hemingway?" [20]

I would be remiss at this point not to mention Chicago's delusions of grandeur as well and suggest that perhaps these have something to do with the prevailing attitude of contempt that dripped off the end of her pen.

> On Friday night we had another open meeting; fifty people came. We have instituted the application procedure, which we hope will sort out the people who just come to 'touch the star' from those who really want to work.
>
> ...I don't usually allow people to bring spouses or friends unless we have a potluck to which guests are invited. Some of the uninvolved or new people made me uncomfortable by treating me like a 'star.'[21]

Excuse me again. Reality check here. Elizabeth Taylor is a star. Jackson Pollock was a star of the art world. Chicago was not. Her attitude apparently had kept her head so far up that she couldn't be bothered with real life.

When she did see us, it was from such a self-perceived elevation that our lives were merely low to her. She used diligent and very talented women to do skilled work she couldn't even begin to understand and yet she felt perfectly justified in saying terribly crass, insulting things about these same individuals:

> If by the very nature of our child-bearing function, women are not alienated then the prevailing definition of an artist excludes most women's participation in 'serious art.'[22]

Perhaps Chicago never saw any of us as worthwhile individuals. Her own words show how contemptible she found our life styles, middle class as they were. We were merely drones to the queen bee. Later, in my view, our lifestyles just became a problem for her.

> The primary problem is women's work difficulties, which are manifested in bad work habits, fragmented life styles, inconsistent hours—all the stuff that came up at *The Dinner Party*. But this time they are not in my studio being inspired, pushed, and confronted, but rather on their own turf, where no one's watching them.[23]
>
> I'm learning a lot about women's real lives—and I hate a lot of what I'm learning. I'm discovering many of the reasons that women have so much difficulty in achieving their goals. They may 'want' to do something and they may have the talent, but so many women don't realize that their lives must be

> structured to accommodate their work. Moreover, so many of them have no idea what the world is really like, and they can't deal with what takes place when they try to achieve what they want.[24]

> ...at the same time that there is something suspect about the quality of work possible in a day that includes cooking, cleaning, stitching, taking care of kids, and then stitching some more...[25]

Yet all of this suspicion never for a moment stopped Chicago from the course of blatant exploitation on which she had embarked:

> What can I say? *The Birth Projec*t is just taking too darn long—two to three years was okay; five is more than my interest warrants. I think part of the problem is the pace at which most needle workers stitch. Work that would take me a month takes them much longer, as most of them fit their work around their lives, while, I, like most professional artists fit my life into whatever time my work doesn't fit.[25]

Well I guess that's what happens when you count on all of us middle class unprofessionals to do all of your really skilled work for you. Sniff! Sniff! Tears and fears, it's a tragedy really! Examine her attitude toward one of her workers:

> In fact, when I saw the actual quality of her life and the apartment, which so clearly reflects her spirit, I was tempted to wrest the piece from her hands... When she returned home after her evening out, she sat in front of the TV and ate and stitched for several hours. The idea of my beautifully painted needlepoint canvas being worked on in front of the TV with food and stained hands totally undid me... I never imagined where this project would lead me or what lifestyles I'd be forced to confront. It made me wonder how women think they can do serious work while living a life that is so unfocused and fragmented.[27]

Perhaps all of us were just a bit slow to realize that all our hard work was affording you a fairly decent living so you could do "serious art."

> And never let it be said that Judy Chicago minced words or had a fear of being heartless, cruel, or ruthless. For example when one part of the project wasn't going according to her dictates and she felt the quality wasn't excellent and the worker was too slow to suit her, the piece was cut up, wrapped in cloth and carried like "an aborted fetus" to the garbage can.

> Then Chicago scrawled "Abortion" on this unfortunate person's folder.[28]

The crassness of this act is nearly beyond belief. Chicago tried to tune into women and their birth experiences early on. In 1980 she wrote;

> I have never had a baby, which has both advantages and disadvantages in relation to this work. After all, artists have certainly not personally experienced everything they've painted—one needn't have been crucified in order to be qualified to paint the crucifixion... In terms of the birth process, I rather suspect that never having a child allows me to see the whole experience more objectively and also in a larger, more universal, less personal perspective....[29]

I want to be very clear about what I feel here. The crucifixion of Jesus was a monumental event in human history. It happened once, and nearly two thousand years ago. The issue of abortion in 1985, as it remains today, was immediate and emotionally charged. Birth is a daily and universal human experience. Chicago seemed to think she was empathic to women and their experiences even though she speaks of how "never having a child" made her perspective more "objective" and "less personal." In the lives of millions of women, and in my own mind, there has never been a more subjective, more personal, more anguish-filled issue than abortion. To compare her little bit of worthless cloth to an aborted fetus is inconceivably callous. To treat abortion so lightly in a moment of personal pique is revolting at the very least and fills me with disgust.

Yet, when I started work on this paper I felt only a mild contempt because, after all, I had volunteered to work with Judy Chicago. My feelings of disquiet, by the time we finished our piece, faded over the years. When I received my copy of the book I put it on a shelf and didn't read it. I did notice how very small the photo of our group was, how little was said about us, and that Mom was shown in a very small black and white photo. But the more I read and researched for this paper the more I began to feel the full impact of how nearly all of us on the project "labor force" were only that and nothing more.

> The next thing is the labor force—have I assessed it properly? Are there enough women out there capable of self-motivation to be able to produce enough work over the next three years to have an impact? Unless there is enough work of high enough quality to travel all over and have a large effect, this won't work. And there have to be enough women who can carry through without my constant presence; that is a real unknown right now.[30]

We were merely the hands that did the enormous amount of work she wanted done—work that would have taken Chicago alone a lifetime to do and then some. After all is said and done we meant nothing more to her than the thousands of tiny stitches that went into each piece. All of this work was done under the guise of benevolent feminism and to help us learn about "high art." All of the women who executed these pieces have earned my undying respect and admiration. I feel we all transcended through our intricate painstaking processes, dedication and sacrifice to a level of awareness Chicago could never hope to reach.

Chicago would attribute my personal enmity and disenchantment to being unable to accept her as an "authority figure" and "professional artist."

> Like many women, a number of needle workers had conflicts about authority. They often tended to react overly strongly to my every response: if I was pleased with their work, they were elated; if I was critical, they were devastated. Learning to accept my esthetic 'authority' without being overwhelmed by my 'authority' and learning to separate criticism of their work from criticism of them was hard for many of the stitchers.[31]

And lastly this:

> I am a single-minded, formally trained professional artist with twenty five years of art-making behind me. I have been working with women who generally have little art training, are not professionals, and live lives that are totally different from mine. I suppose it was inevitable that the needle workers would be put off by my directness and lack of social graces; that I would be driven mad by the fragmentation of their lives, their lack of focus, and all their excuses for not working; that they would react personally to my criticism and become defensive and hurt; that I would become frustrated and exasperated by their undeveloped visual perception; and that they would be frightened by my general expressiveness, particularly my tendency to yell when I'm upset. I spent a great deal of time at reviews being alternately reassuring and furious. But most of the time I spent trying to teach the stitchers to 'see.'[32]

Yes, I "see." It simply took me awhile to realize the full extent of your duplicity. I "see" that we were used by a modern day female Tom Sawyer to white-wash your fence, only without the humor. I "see" that in exchange for the vast amount of time, effort, our own money, and tedious painstaking work we put into this project, we were given nothing but a free education in how we could never, ever hope to make "high art" such as you do yourself. For that, I thank you. I wouldn't want to live with any false hopes. I "see"

that you lack any bit of empathy, understanding or sympathy with the kind of strength, compassion, and commitment it took for us to complete our pieces while still doing all the day to day work at our jobs and taking care of our families. I "see" that you didn't even like us much as a group, saw very few of us as individuals, and that you had little respect for our talents other than how you could exploit them. I "see" your total and aberrant fascination with being a "star," an "authority" figure, a "powerful" feminist example to all of us timid, weak, lazy, lying, ignorant women who were so lucky to have had you grace our heavens for a short while.

Do we see clearly now? Oh yes, I think we do.

Notes

1. Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 188.
2 Ibid., 191.
3 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 188.
4 Chicago, *Birth,* 63.
5 Ibid., 90.
6 Ibid., 104.
7 Ibid., 37.
8 Chicago, *Flower,* 105.
9 Chicago, *Birth,* 6.
10 Chicago *Flower,* 107.
11 Chicago, *Birth,* 6.
12 Chicago, *Flower* ,110.
13 Chicago, *Birth,* 6.
14 Ibid., 87.
15 Ibid., 148.
16 Ibid., 57.
17 Ibid., 34.
18 Ibid., 135.
19 Ibid., 33.
20 Lisa Liebmann, "Post-Partum Oppression," *Vogue* (Aug. 1985): 77.
21 Chicago, *Birth,* 177; 56.
22 Ibid., 152.
23 Ibid. 102.
24 Ibid., 148.
25 Ibid., 149.
26 Ibid., 218.
27 Ibid., 146-47.
28 Ibid., 64.
29 Ibid., 18
30 Ibid., 69.
31 Ibid., 168.
32 Ibid., 166.

Fall in Review: Selected New York Shows

Meghan Dailey, Lara Ferb, Jennifer McCormick, Denise McKenna and Janie Welker

A Man and His Golden Arm
Martin Kippenberger at Nolan/Eckman
Oct. 29—Dec. 3, 1994

Like Sinatra, Martin Kippenberger did it his way—again. The artist's commentary on the supposed value and preciousness of art still bites. His sculptures were shipped to New York in special crates, protecting them as the invaluable objects created by the Man (artist) with the Golden Arm. The tone of irony is familiar—remember the trash bin full of destroyed but once "perfect" Kippenbergers? This time his work is not as much about physical obliteration, but you still get a bit of a nothing-is-sacred attitude. The real irony then lies in the objects. They are carefully constructed, engaging, and sometimes beautiful. They are worth protecting. *Vorsicht Kunst!*

Kippenberger's works are sometimes like a game. It can be fun to puzzle out the meaning of a gnawed rolling pin or admire yourself in a brightly-lit vanity mirror. The works are replete with culture references and his borrowings from Modernism are keen. The plastic shapes hanging from hooks on wood are like pastiche toys, miniature Calders for sale. Perhaps the importance lies not in what the objects actually are, or to which Sigmar Polke he might be referring, but in their overall effects, which can be tremendous. Whether minimal and shining or vibrating as collage, these pieces are always clean.

These constructions are about the changing conditions of materials and all artistic processes, but mostly the artist's own. The motifs from an earlier sculpture of a man with a lantern head and a fried-egg belt buckle are reused with fascinating results. It is the same object, only rendered unrecognizable in a more essential form: he has flattened out the lantern as it might appear in the foundry and integrated the egg into the grid. Kippenberger wants to explore the connections between the states of things. In one work, he chained a three-dimensional lantern to the wall, linking it inextricably to its flattened counterpart. This work signals

Kippenberger's larger message. He goes beyond merely taking found objects, anointing them with his golden touch and turning it into ART. His dada is infused with a genuine alchemy, turning flat shapes into round, changing bronze into silver and back again.

Meghan Dailey

Drawings
Kiki Smith at Pace
Oct. 21—Nov. 26, 1994

Kiki Smith's uptown debut is attended by a sense of moderation and refinement perhaps tailored to her new venue. Smith moved from Fawbush to her father Tony Smith's former gallery last February (1994), but her work does not suffer for the restraint of decorum here. Smith's focus is still the sexual female body, but conceived with less of the shocking visceral brutality and wretched pathos than before. Violence is implicitly woven into the work rather than laid bare like an open wound. With willowy layers, fragmented-cut-outs, irregular creases, and unfinished seams, Smith transmutes paper into abstract bodies to be stamped with ciphers of anatomical detail.

Often eclipsed by the shock value of much of her work, Smith's formalist sensibility comes to the fore here. Yet such uptown taste does not preside over the work itself. Smith uses collage techniques to twist conventional postures of formalism. In a number of works, she subverts the minimalist grid into abstractions of body parts—breasts, armpits, coital scenes. The tension between hand and machine is clearly played out between Smith's chicken-scratch drawings and more illusory and elusive mechanical means such as xerox transfer. While downtown fans might perceive Smith's temperance here as a conciliatory detraction, a bow to this corporate bastion of Modernism (Barnett Newman's "The Sublime is Now" is downstairs), it nonetheless adds a meditative, conceptual dimension that will make the work more accessible to the larger audience it will reach here.

Giving this show much more weight and breadth than its diminutive title would suggest, Smith's conception of "drawing" is a broad one, really more a synthesis of sculpture and collage. Paper is both substance and surface for Smith, a metaphor for the susceptibility of bodily flesh. In several works she treats paper as a plastic membrane to form voids signifying armpits and mounds alluding to breasts or vulvae, adding *papier collé*, *papier maché*, mechanical printing, and xerox to underscore the dialectic tension of the body as a frail subject and social object.

Those who found the brutally embodied corporeality of Smith's wax and paper vanitas sculptures difficult to stomach will find these works easier, but no less powerful. Rather than terrorizing the spectator with

unyielding *vanitas*, Smith integrates explicit images of mortality—such as *écorché* anatomical drawings—into hauntingly immaterial paper bodies that float through the gallery like transvaluations of the carnal. The works become seductive rather than repellent, *human* rather than merely mortal. *I am*, three decapitated heads suspended from the ceiling, mongrel features collaged with grainy lithographs reminiscent of some nineteenth-century eugenics experiment, is ironically engaging, as is the equally sinister portrait of *A Man*, a surreal composite of fragmentary x-rayed brain scans, eyeballs, ears, and nostrils printed on a collaged grid of Gampi paper. We know we are to find ourselves somewhere in these works, but *how*?

The conventional drawings here are in fact rather weak, in some cases setting up juxtapositions to the benefit of the more complex works and in others undermining Smith's apparent sophistication. A juvenile series of lip-piercings is so prosaic that the conceptual corpus linking the cerebral with the scatalogical via umbilical twisted paper tendrils and analogies between mother's milk, black blood, and tears displayed above can only seem profound by comparison. Yet in a group of trite and adolescent *Mermaid* drawings incorporating text, words fail Smith in a vain attempt to articulate what goes without saying in the other works, and they all suffer for this intrusion of speech. The experiences Smith imparts through her work are communicated beyond the realm of language, which can not do her justice here.

Lara Ferb

Purgatorio
Francesco Clemente at Gagosian
Sept. 10—Oct. 15, 1994

In *Purgatorio*, Francesco Clemente eschews God, and expels himself from paradise. The drama, enacted on five canvases, disassociates feeling and representation. Hamlet's "I know not seems" is Clemente's battle cry; the artist cannot leave himself or his turmoils unspoken. The *Purgatorio* conceit, however, noble, becomes a stage for self-display. Now that God is dead and Clemente is the master of his own universe, the creation of his own purgatory seems like self indulgence. The artist fashions himself heir to Dante and aligns himself with Virgil, barred from paradise, who leads him through the afterlife: both are trapped in limbo, tainted with knowledge and longing. But Clemente seems to enjoy lingering there. And why shouldn't he, since he has transformed sorrow into surfeit, longing into consummation. His vision is solipsistic, all the more painful for its publicity.

In *There*, as always, the body is the agent of desire; it contains both

the problem and its solution. The figures writhe and transmutate, clinging to their bodies as matter escapes them, blending into androgynes. Clemente creates an aura of helplessness and damnation, rousing visions of Paulo and Francesca. Yet the artist's expressionism is merely formal. It insists upon itself too much, imploding, like *Hand* or *Body*.

In *Fearful Love*, Clemente becomes more insistent. The tension that would seem to be the result of such a restless position is missing. The artist gives us too much, in a stew of vanitas imagery: birds, a skeleton with a body shaped like a heart, a self-portrait. Here, he is maudlin (Robert Creely's accompanying poems intensify this effect), and everything spills forth in green, brown and black over the image of the artist contemplating himself. The pathos of *There* is gone, the searching of the four self-portraits has disappeared, and we are left to contemplate the artist's ego.

In *Loop* and *Body,* Clemente layers veils of images over one another that read as residue. His colors glow and are often acid hot, but they register themselves coolly, like x-ray traces. His ego, prominent as the phalluses that dot the canvases, cannot be abandoned long enough to create the instability of indeterminacy. Ultimately, Clemente's allegory sprawls and shouts, but it is itself as insubstantial as it is luxurious. His purgatory is vague and triumphant, despite all the poses of suffering, loss and longing. For Clemente's desire is aspiration, his appetite is artful, in the guise of art history. While the works are seductive, like Milton's Satan, they are more manifesto than purgatorio.

Jennifer McCormick

Budapest
Andres Serrano at Paula Cooper
Oct. 1—26, 1994

Serrano and shock are words that go hand in hand, so the surprise is that *Budapest* is not shocking. Serrano might still enrage Jesse Helms, but the glut of violence and sex scandals commanding the nightly news has diminished Serrano's controversy quotient: not that Serrano need rely on shock for intensity. Budapest is disturbing because of the richness of the illusion he creates. Colors are saturated and warm. Figures stand out in relief against the background, however minimal. The photographs are deceptively immediate; and that is how Serrano catches us. He calls it *Budapest* and yet we are aware it is staged. Serrano plays with the photograph's ability to create an illusion of objective reality; the captured moment.

Budapest is a technicolor exploration of the sacred and profane, but for Serrano even though the location is new, it is old and familiar territory. In using Budapest as a setting Serrano follows a well-worn path though illicit subjects defused by remote locales. Gerome used the Orient to a

similar purpose in the Nineteenth Century, and with an equally empty effect. Perhaps Serrano chose Budapest because we can observe without being involved; the oppositions are clearer, simpler.

The images fall into obvious categories: church and state, men and women, life and death, youth and age. He juxtaposes an old woman praying in *Funeral* with *The Prostitute and Client.* The solemn *Young Hassidim* hangs opposite a breast-feeding mother in *Woman and Child.* But the child is older than we would expect, and immediately the woman's foreignness is reinforced. Or is it the staged quality of Serrano's portraits? Complexities are hinted at, but the subjects are alienated from their setting and any real individuality is denied to them. This is what is troubling about *Budapest*—the ease with which Serrano has typed these people, denied their location and their time. Their real context is merely Serrano's eye: *Budapest* could be anywhere.

If Serrano doesn't exploit the location, except by name, he does exploit the medium. Surfaces are seductive and repellent. Wrinkled and sagging flesh is documented in *Model* just as are the pimples on a teenager's bare bottom. However, in Serrano's world, the ravages of time affect women more than men, and they are sexualized from childhood to old age. *Frida* courts controversy, but I wanted to groan rather than gasp. Do we need to see another eroticized five year old? It is pointlessly insensitive, and limits Serrano to a tired genre explored more effectively by Mapplethorpe. *Frida* also exposes the easy trap Serrano has fallen into: confusing the ability to shock with the power to provoke. In *The Lake,* aging nudists exude a sexuality that is warm and joyful, confounding puritanical stereotypes. The shame of *Budapest* is that Serrano needn't rely on facile gimmicks for strong images, but more often than not, he does.

Denise McKenna

Origins of Impressionism
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Sept. 27, 1994—Jan. 8, 1995

Visiting the *Origins of Impressionism* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art left me more divided than Seurat's brushwork.

My first impression was that here is just one more blockbuster show with the word Impressionism in the title so it can be mass marketed—there's nothing like a century's passage of time to make art palatable.

However, once inside the *Origins,* it was gratifying to see a serious effort to assess and make accessible the innovations of the Impressionists, whose popular appeal has left them out of favor in academia and obscured their contributions to the modern. At its best, this exhibit reminds us just how startling were the departures of Manet and company. The curators were wise to set the scene with a roomful of works from the

Salon of 1859. One look at a simpering Bougereau or nymph-laden Gerome suddenly casts a work like Degas' *Woman With Flowers*—with its cropped composition, surface patterning and quotidian subject matter—into the revolutionary. A light-filled Monet winterscape is as bracing as the cold, bright air it captures.

It is worth the trip alone to see Manet's *Fifer:* pictorial space reduced so dramatically one could imagine peeling him right off the canvas, yet so alive, so vital. And don't miss the artist's signature; unlike the fifer, it does cast a shadow, not only on the canvas, but on all the contemporary assumptions about art and reality. Another part of this show's charm is its inside art world gossip. Here is *Christ with Angels*, Manet's attempt to get into the Salon with a religious subject—too bad he placed Christ's chest wound on the wrong side of the body, earning him ridicule rather than acceptance. We also see Manet and Courbet going to the canvas over the heavyweight title for Realism. As a response to Manet's infamous *Olympia* (unfortunately, not on loan for the New York show), Courbet paints the Cabanel-like *Woman With a Parrot.* Manet then one-ups Courbet —and makes his opinion clear—by adding a caged parrot to a full-length portrait of a clothed Victorine Meurent, the model for *Olympia.*

Speaking of Meurent, who has the distinction of appearing in no less than five major works by Manet here, I come to my final and lasting impression of *Origins,* which is as a feminist viewing the exhibit. In the wall text, Meurent is identified merely in terms of her relationship to the "great" men with whom she fraternized—she is presented as Manet's model and as the mistress of another artist. There is no mention that she herself was a painter, and exhibited work in several Salons. The omission brings to mind a question posed a few years back by the Guerrilla Girls: "Why do women need to be naked to get into the Met?" Being naked, or at least decorative, seems to be about the only way for women to get into the *Origins*, since they certainly are not represented by the work.

Viewing this exhibit, one would think that Impressionism originated totally without such figures as Berthe Morisot, who was working with Manet and Degas by the late 1860s, and who exhibited with the renegade Impressionsts from the start. (One work by Morisot was included in the Paris version of this exhibit; none in New York.) The sole female artist represented here (by a single painting) is Eva Gonzales, and her *Soldier Boy* is used merely as a foil for the audacity of Manet's *Fifer.* The Impressionists may have operated in a public sphere in which women—other than prostitutes and models like Meurent—had difficulty entering. But we do not, and any exhibit seriously purporting to examine the foundations of Impressionism does not have the luxury of leaving those nineteenth-century values unexamined.

Janie Welker

Contributors

Michael Peglau is a painter and art historian who teaches at Drew University.

Trisha Laughlin is an art historian who lives and works in New York City.

Ross Neher is a painter who teaches at the Pratt Institute.

Zhou Ping and Fei Xin Bei are Chinese artists.

Sally Kuzma is an artist and teacher living in Suffolk County, N.Y.

Audrey Farrell is an artist who lives on Long Island.

Meghan Dailey, Lara Ferb, Jennifer McCormick, Denise McKenna and Janie Welker received master's degrees in art history and criticism in May 1995 from the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

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