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A Ramble Around Early Earth Works

By Matthew Baigell

I will bet that I am not the only sympathetic person who still has trouble with early Earth Works. In trying to understand their significance as well as to locate them in American art, I find evaluation very difficult. On the whole, the most interesting and affecting examples, with few exceptions, are not the early pieces, but those connected to reclamation projects. But even many of these are neither too different nor too distinct from the efforts of landscape architects, a fact made abundantly clear by turning the pages of the magazine *Landscape Architecture*. I do not mean to argue that art must be socially useful. Art needs no excuse to exist, but at some moment questions of context, quality, purpose and meaning arise, that is, questions of value, and these are not easily put off by the kinds of explanations which appear throughout the literature on Earth Art. To understand something about the particular Earth Work is one thing; to assign value is another. And in this regard early Earth Works still remain problematic.

A basic issue concerns the artists' relations to the land, at least before the beginning of the reclamation projects in the middle 1970s. Initially, some comments recalled less an interest in the land than the kind of hostility

to the Big City and all that it represented held by Regionalists of the 1930s: centralization, urbanization, commodification of objects through the gallery system, loss of contact with nature. In 1969, Robert Smithson asserted, "the tools of art have too long been confined to 'the studio.' The city gives the illusion that the earth does not exist. [Michael] Heizer calls his earth projects 'the alternative to the absolute city system.'"[1] Heizer himself wrote in the same year, "both art and museums are victims of the city which demands compliance with its laws and limits."[2] Critic Edward Fry, combining words reminiscent of Lewis Mumford's diatribes in the 1920s against the City with a modern nostalgia for a past that never existed, felt:

> the new Romanticism of Natural Art is almost purely secular and phenomenal. It aspires not to romantic transcendence but to a historically conditioned nostalgia for the Edenic, the primeval, and the prehistoric, rendered acutely desirable by the excessive urban monopoly of contemporary cultural life and by the degradation of American cities themselves.[3]

Finally, another critic, Nicholas Capasso, suggested that Earth artists, reeling from the psychological onslaughts of the Big City, might be suffering from future shock of something bordering on an inability to cope with modern civilization.[4]

But these notions of escaping the city by returning to the soil are at best debateable, and seem to be more the responses of critics than of artists, since artists have insisted that they were less interested in relating directly to nature itself than in using it for at least two chief purposes. It could be another tool or material with which to work, or, depending upon the setting and siting of a piece in nature, artists might try to invoke other cultures or sequences of time. In either instance, nature was to be used in deliberate ways that were fully urbanized as well as loaded with the apparatuses of the then contemporary styles of Minimalism and Process Art. Recording transcendent experiences or emphasizing the restorative charms of nature were not primary. Bucolics were applied bucolics.

Artists such as Carl Andre, Dennis Oppenheim, Heizer and Smithson also emphasized the separation between art and nature. Andre quite succinctly indicated his position when asked if Earth Art suggested a kind of romantic primitivism. He said that artists had a limited stock of ideas which go in and out of fashion and this notion was more relevant to Earth Art than "a big return to Mother Earth."[5] Smithson found that "photography [made] nature obsolete. My thinking in terms of the site and the non-site," he said, "makes me feel there's no need to refer to nature anymore."[6] Oppenheim turned to Earth Art because he wanted to go beyond indoor pieces. His "use of a terrestrial area came through a very formal concern with sculpture."[7] Of his *Directed Seeding-Cancelled Crop,* which was the letter "X" plowed into a grain field in Holland in 1969, Oppenheim said, "planting and cultivating my own material is like mining one's own pigment...I can direct the later stages of development at will."[8] He also wanted, as he said, to get below ground level, since he did not like protruding objects. At that time, 1970, he thought about sites through studying maps

and collecting data, rather than in response to his physical presence at a site.[9] Heizer, in discussing his *Complex One/City,* a large monument in Nevada erected from 1972 to 1976, stated, "it's about art, not about landscape."[10] This statement seems to reflect his general attitude at the time, since in 1969 he created the pattern for *Dissipate,* a sequence of depressions in the Nevada earth, by first dropping match sticks on a surface.[11] Other outdoor works of this period seemed to satisfy his feeling for and interest in space rather than for any kinship he might have felt for nature."[12]

With Heizer, a note of nationalism was also present in the early years. It was not just bringing to the landscape highly abstract notions of art nurtured by the history of avant-garde taste, not to say knowledge of business procedures in dealing with construction workers and their earth-moving equipment, but of a desire to be both modern and American at the same time. Like Stuart Davis, earlier in the century, who acknowledged the influence of the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, the car and the airplane on his sense of form and pictorial space, Heizer said,

> we live in an age of the 747 aircraft, the moon rocket-objects that are constructed by man that range from the most minuscule complex electronic dial to airplanes that have wings weighing 45 tons on them. So you must make a certain type of art.[13]

This new art, which he identified as American art, should match the scale of America's architectural and technical accomplishments, he believed.[14] Instead of escaping the Big City, Heizer really wanted to compete with its products as an artist and he evidently wanted to do so in an arena physically large enough to handle his responses to a 747.

In fact, several Earth Artists, perhaps unwittingly, created Earth Works that had the paradoxical effect of suggesting the presence of urban civilization in general, but offering a temporal escape from our particular one. Figures such as Robert Morris, Nancy Holt, Walter de Maria and Smithson invoked references to megalithic constructions and religious edifices of earlier civilizations such as those at Stonehenge, Chichen Itza and the Nile Valley and sited their works according to highly sophisticated knowledge of solstices and equinoxes. Heizer even approached the size of Pre-Columbian forms in his *Complex One/City.* However, the various man-made mountains designed by these artists and their uses of astronomical calculations had ultimately less to do with relating to nature than with giving it order. As Paul Shephard suggests in his important book, *Man in the Landscape,* ancient cities were based on agricultural surpluses, or dominance over the land. Structures in early cities, which were invariably associated with a priestly class, symbolized insulation from climate and from nature. Such structures, man-made mountains, actually implied a break in the harmony with the environment, a mastery over it, rather than a reciprocal interaction with it.[15] Employing such forms and using such calculations, then as now, were urban ways of trying to control nature because systems predominate. As for Earth artists, their invocation of past civilizations really put us more in touch with our minimal book knowledge

of past civilization than with nature, past or present.

This is not necessarily bad, just urban. But one can object to the ways in which pre-historic and non-western monuments have been invoked. Usually, objects from other cultures have provided artists with two significant sets of possibilities, one of style, the other of content. For example, Japanese prints and African sculpture have had tremendous impact on western artists with regard to plastic possibilities and the uses of color. Nothing of the sort has emerged from yoking the names of Stonehenge and Chichen Itza to Earth pieces. Certainly no new types of visualization of forms have occurred. Furthermore, invoking the names of prehistoric constructions as a way to "recapture the force of primitive monuments,'[16] strikes me as bogus. Those earlier monuments were integral to their cultures, reflective of profoundly held beliefs and associated with a strong priestly class. To mention them in association with works that are entirely personal and with attitudes of the artists that are essentially ephemeral is to provide the modern works with a heritage and profundity they neither possess nor deserve. Comparisons, say, between the density of meaning of Chichen Itza with that of Heizer's *Complex One/City* is simply improper, and indicates a kind of appropriation of an important artifact from another culture, let alone a gross and playful colonialism, that demands further scrutiny.

Nor is the viewer given any clues, really, about responding to these works or relating them to ongoing experiences, theirs or the artists', other than in a knowingly name-dropping way. In contrast to the glib ways the names of these monuments have been used, one has only to think of how profoundly, say, Marsden Hartley and Barnett Newman considered and were influenced by the cultures of Southwestern and Northwestern American Indians, respectively. Consequently, only with great generosity can I agree with one critic's observations that Heizer's *Complex City/One,* Robert Morris's *Observatory* (1971, The Netherlands) and Smithson's *Broken Circle-Spiral Hill* (1971, The Netherlands) "support comparison with ancient and tribal monuments that seek accommodation with, signify worship of , or aspire to protection from natural deities," and that these works "partake of the dramatic formal vocabulary, the iconic appearance, and the mysteriousness of earlier prototypes."[17]

The desire to align works with the equinox and the solstices by figures such as Robert Morris and Nancy Holt also seems superficial. True, Morris's *Observatory* (1971, The Netherlands) and Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1976, Utah) reflect planetary motion, but in a way utterly vague to the casual observer, and, I suspect, as well to the artists involved, who are probably not very interested in nor conversant with the spiritual and religious (or scientific) elaborations of astromical calculations in any society, let alone their own. By comparison, such works do not even begin to approach the participative and ritualistic intensities of Jackson Pollock's paintings of the 1940s, nor the profound desire to study and comprehend, in any kind of scientific way, the geological changes in and geological history of the earth's surface visible in Frederic Church's landscapes of the 1850s and 1860s, nor the profound responses to nature's cycles witnessed in Thomas Cole's

landscapes in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Pollock, Church and Cole display in their work an inner necessity quite lacking in the Earth pieces.

In *Sun Tunnels,* which is aligned on the solstices, Holt has revealed one plausible explanation for creating works with narrow, confining openings on the landscape. It is that of the typical urban desire for control over nature. I am not criticizing this desire, but I merely want to point it out—in the same way I once suggested that the delight Hudson River School artists experienced in coming upon a house in the wilderness had as much to do with affirming the domestication of the wilderness as with being able to spend a night indoors.[18]

Despite the fact that Holt enjoyed being in the desert in Utah "linked through thousands of years of human time with the people who had lived in the caves around there for so long," she also "wanted to bring the vast space of the desert back to human scale... The panoramic view of the landscape [was] too overwhelming to take without visual reference points," she said. "Through the tunnels, parts of the landscape are framed and come into focus."[19] Thus framed, the landscape is made visually manageable. Despite arranging the tunnels on the solstices, Holt clearly did not want to ritualize that alignment nor suggest a merging of her soul with the Infinite, but to reduce the size of the Infinite to the scale of the individual. Who's boss, anyway? And like Holt, Charles Ross, another Earth artist, also prefers to center the universe around himself. For a work being completed in New Mexico, he wants to "bring the motion of the stars to personal measure, so we can feel the unity of the movement of the universe in relation to ourselves."[20] Unlike Henri Bergson and early twentieth-century American landscape painters such as Max Weber, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe who wanted to project themselves into the flux and flow of universal time and universal rhythms, Ross wants to maintain control, to reduce the movement of the universe to something manageable, to relate it to us. His is less an adventure into the unknown than an attempt to stabilize the unmanageable, to become the sun around which all else rotates. Now any number of artists have imposed their wills on the landscape by using Claudian compositional frameworks, and artists such as Alfred Bierstadt have reduced the scale and splendor of the American West to the psychological size of a living room wall, but what makes artists like Holt and Ross different is that they want to impose control on the entire cosmos for what seems to be primarily personal reasons rather than to try to understand it for religious, cultural, nationalistic or philosophical ones.

A case in point is Holt's *Rock Rings* of 1977-78 in Washington, in which she further refined her sense of control over the landscape by cutting holes in the rings sighted on various compass points. By looking through the holes she felt that one might get to know oneself better. "The viewer explores himself in relation to an expanded environmental field," she said. The openings "seem to have a voyeuristic function with the landscape. They function to frame or isolate distant views and make them available to the viewer

for observation."[21] I am not certain how one explores oneself in such a landscape, but, as in a Renaissance painting with single-point perspective, the landscape view is controlled and the interaction between viewer and landscape is minimal. Again, this is not bad, but it does imply dominance over the landscape, not sympathy with it. Nor does this really invoke prehistoric sites which were aligned with planetary movements for reasons other than personal development.

One wonders, at least in the early Earth Works, how artists really felt about the land. Heizer, for one, said, "in the desert, I can find that kind of unraped, peaceful, religious space artists have always tried to put into their work. I don't want any indication I've been here at all. My holes have no history, they should be indeterminate in time...."[22] This must have been said before he began *Double Negative* which, in its massive assault on the land, reflects, perhaps like the Pumping Iron fad, a machismo response to the frustrations of the war in Vietnam. Of these earlier cuts and holes in the landscape, Peter Hutchinson, at least, understood that "there is a sort of immortality to these Western landscapes that he has violated... It is as though an alien presence has been there."[23]

More symptomatic of the ways nature was manipulated for reasons that had little to do with the landscape was the response of one critic to *Double Negative.* By invoking Saussure to explain the two cuts in the mesa floor, Rainer Crone provided a totally intellectualized and urbanized interpretation of Heizer's piece. Crone argued that signs function through their relative positions rather than through their intrinsic values. Thus we know about dark because we are familiar with light. In regard to *Double Negative,* "we experience the mesa, a part of the landscape of nature, as a positive entity through its opposition to the two trenches which represent the negative element."[24] This is basically an environmental argument without considering the environment, because if you really want to experience the mesa as a positive entity, you merely have to look over its edge into the great valley to see the negative element.

Such human-made intrusions on nature which require such desperate justifications speak of sensibilities utterly alienated from nature as well as from the self. In an overwhelming amount of criticism of Earth Art, there is an insistence on experiential qualities—of the self in its temporal relations to the spaces, forms and colors of the site. But experience and self-awareness to what purpose? Most often, it would seem, to a mere cataloguing of the site and to describing one's passage through it rather than to any kind of evaluation. It would seem that one must visit a site in order to become self-aware and that seems to be recompense enough.

But occasionally something more profound might occur. One critic described Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field* (1977, New Mexico) in what must have been an unintended parody of one of Ralph Waldo Emerson's most famous passages. In *Nature,* Emerson related a transcendental experience, a merging with the Infinite, in the following way:

> Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles at twilight, under a cloudy sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good for-

> tune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration... Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.[25]

The modern critic, recounting her experience out there in the desert, wrote:

> Standing beneath the poles, with their reflecting surfaces mirroring the light and the colors of the ground, the sky, and ourselves, we see them as connectors between earth and sky. As human beings we have the same vertical orientation as the poles. We too are bridges between earth and sky—how often do we perceive ourselves in this manner?[26]

Not very often, it would appear. Nor, given the self-conscious language of this passage, is there any compelling reason why we should or could. But what is interesting about these observations is the fact that nature appears almost as a stranger, as something to be considered in highly intellectual terms or to remind us that there is an "out there" out there. Nature seems so exotic that we observe it and we know we are supposed to be stirred by it, but we really cannot relate to it except by observing that we do not relate to it.

Another critic, observing the panorama from the tumuli forms of animals designed by Heizer at Ottowa, Illinois in 1984-85, suggested that "the viewer is not encouraged to surrender consciousness to the overpowering forces of nature but to use that consciousness in a way compatible with nature" [whatever that means]. Then, reverting to cataloguing the site, the critic said that "standing on the mounds one has a direct physical awareness of the densely compacted earth that forms the mass of the works [this sounds like an introduction to people from Mars about what to expect on our planet], as well as of the silky grasses whose roots hold the contours in place [that is what roots do]."[27]

This sort of analysis also suggests unresolved problems in Process Art which shares fundamental traits with Earth Art. In Process Art, the artist might want to call the doing experience an art experience, but the viewer, not necessarily involved in the process of the doing, is left with trying to make something out of the remains of the artist's experience. Robert Morris articulated the artist's position clearly in 1970 when he wrote:

> there are 'forms' to be found within the activity of making as much as within the end products. These are forms of behavior aimed at testing the limits and possibilities involved in that particular interaction between one's interactions and the materials of the environment... [Process Art] has been involved in uncovering a more direct experience of basic perceptual meanings [direction, weight, balance, motion]...through the experience of interaction between the perceiving body and the world which fully admits that the terms of this interaction are temporal as well as spatial, that existence is process, that the art itself is a form of behavior.[28]

This statement certainly describes what the artist does and how s/he looks upon the making of the object, event, etc. But it really does not inform

the viewer how to witness the art work except in the most general, experiential way. The viewer is left with two choices—recreating the artist's activities by verbal description or trying, as in an Earth Work, to experience it by walking through it and concentrating on what s/he sees. Unless there is some esthetic or ritualistic dimension to enlarge the experience beyond mere observation, then the experience does not transcend the ordinary—or the narcissistic, since it is involved only with the self. If, for the viewer, becoming more aware of one's surroundings when viewing an Earth Work can be called an artistic experience, then any kind of awareness becomes an artistic experience or, at least, a Happening. Hence, I suppose, the excuse for dragging in prehistoric monuments in attempts to raise the experience above the ordinary.

Just the same, there are times when artists like Holt, certainly Smithson, Alan Sonfist and others can move beyond narcissism and urbanism. At such moments, the landscape is used with great sympathy and understanding rather than as another kind of material, albeit larger in size and scale than those used in an artist's studio. And I do not mean land reclamation projects however intelligently planned and useful these might be.

I would argue, for example, that Holt's *Hydra's Head* (1974, New York) is her early masterpiece rather than the more acclaimed *Sun Tunnels* because it cannot be compared invidiously with works by earlier artists, American or otherwise, and because it has interesting transcendental and luminist resonances. It is also a work that escapes the artist's control and becomes anonymous in the landscape. Its six circular concrete pipes, placed vertically in the ground, are filled with water which reflect the sky. Struck by the implications of these images, Holt wrote "the sky has suddenly fallen and is circled at my feet. Clouds drift through the earth...Nature's mirrors absorb."[29] These thoughts, evoking a sense of organic continuity between earth and sky in which the viewer both participates and observes, recall similar passages by Thoreau in *Walden* and in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.* In *Walden,* Thoreau, describing a lake between storms, noted that in the stillness of both air and water "the clear portion of the air above it [the water] being shallow and darkened by clouds, the water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself so much the more important." And in *A Week,* writing about a river on a still day, he said, "we were uncertain whether the water floated the land, or the land held the water in its bosom...For every oak and birch, too...we knew that there was a graceful, ethereal and ideal tree making down from the roots and sometimes Nature in high tides brings her mirror to its foot and makes it visible. The stillness was so intense and almost conscious, as it were a natural Sabbath."[30]

As Thoreau was willing to trust his response to nature unmediated by his need to control, so was Holt in this instance. In a different context, Holt, in another passage describing *Hydra's Head,* provided a late-twentieth century interpretation to an image Emerson had considered over a century before, an image that reaches beyond Earth Art to social commentary on our epoch. She wrote, "evaporation and rain interact in an emptying and

replenishing cycle. Each drop of rain causes circular ripples to multiply—circles within circles within circles."[31] The image is one of repetition, of containment, of limitation, even of exhaustion. By contrast, the more optimistic Emerson wrote in his essay "Circles":

> The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end...Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another deep dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.[32]

Constantly at war with limitations, Emerson, according to one recent critic, understood that, "liberation from one enclosing cultural discourse is to be achieved only by drawing another 'circle' around it, all the while knowing that eventually it, too, will become an inhibition."[33] Such blind faith in the ability to break through 'circles' vanished from the American art world by 1920, and even when contemporary artists use the actual landscape itself, none of its old associations contained in notions such as purity or new beginnings can surmount our awareness of limitations and of the accountability that lies beyond frontiers.

Among Earth artists, Robert Smithson is the most interesting to consider in this regard as well as in relation to Emerson and to earlier artists such as Thomas Cole. For unlike Emerson, but like Cole, Smithson was one of the great pessimists in the history of American art and, because of his interest in entropic situations, a genuinely modern critic of American culture. In fact, his various comments on the American landscape are perhaps the most cogent among artists since those of George Inness in the late-nineteenth century. Smithson found the potentialities for equilibrium and decay much more evident and demonstrable than those for growth and development. Almost as if in response to Emerson's notions in "Circles," Smithson said that "no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back upon point of origin. You are confronted with an extending horizon; it can extend onward and onward, but then you suddenly find the horizon is closing in all around you...In other words, there is no escape from limits."[34] In place of ever-expanding circles, Smithson's key image is that of a spiral or, better, a vortex that encompasses and encloses. As he suggested, "the desert is less 'nature' than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries."[35]

Although Smithson felt that he was part of nature, he thought that "nature isn't morally responsible. Nature has no morality."[36] In an indifferent nature, the transforming qualities of one's spiritual resources counted for little. Consequently, Smithson was resolutely materialistic. In place of spiritual dilation, there was material entropy. In a revealing statement, he said that "rust becomes the fundamental property of steel."[37] Unlike the poetry that Emerson could find in railroad trains and their impact on modern life, Smithson found a deadpan reality in his preference for sites "that had been in some way disrupted or pulverized," sites "that [had] been disrupted by industry, reckless urbanization, or nature's own devastation."[38]

At such sites, in such entropic situations, Smithson understood that time should be considered as something random rather than linear. The end product is the result of an equilibrium of forces rather than the result of a trajectory through time in the sense of a rise and a fall or a reaching for perfection than a dismemberment. In entropy, there is not a sense of progression through time as much as happenstance movement in time. Smithson worked with this modern notion of time, and it distinguishes him from probably all previous American artists who used the landscape in one way or another. The differences are most clear when comparing his point of view to that of Thomas Cole, whose concerns with the growth and destruction of empires as well as the life and death of individuals are linear in concept. Smithson's, by contrast, are diffuse and multiple. And they should be, since he was concerned with the materiality of objects whose destruction could be witnessed. He does share with Cole, however, the knowledge that nature cannot be controlled and that human activity and human endeavors are subsumed by time. Where Cole found solace through his belief in a timeless and eternal God, Smithson, with his more fluid sense of time and greater understanding of science and history, wanted to "explore the pre- and post-historical mind," and to "go into places where remote futures meet remote pasts."[39]

This would appear to be a desperate quest, one which might show a way beyond entropy. But since Smithson was so interested in geology, he was probably in search of an understanding of entropy in all its man-made and natural occurrences, of how it occurs in time, of how the earth and what lies upon it, man-made or otherwise, had ended up in whatever condition it was in. "The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is embedded in the Earth's crust."[40] Self-enlightenment did not seem to be his goal, nor control of nature, but rather a desire to understand its force and then to create works, to create an artistic reality, that paralleled the ways those forces might operate.

In effect, Smithson appears to have been working toward a modern reading of nature. He discounted those who still adhered to the idea of the pastoral, those who had "an elegant notion of industrialism in the woods."[41] And, by applying his tough-minded notion of entropy to the modern landscape, he cut through the whoozy romanticism of artists ranging, in the twentieth century alone, from Max Weber to Mark Rothko to Allen Sonfist who preferred to avoid the problems of modern civilization and industrialization, let alone attempt to understand how nature might really operate, by escaping into or bringing to us a construct of nature that was pure and uncontaminated and unreal.

For Max Weber, under the general influence of Bergsonian ideas early in the century, art was a mechanism to gain access to the life inherent in objects and to the flux of time. "Even inanimate objects," he said, "crave a hearing, and desire to participate in the great motion of time and its in-

dentations...The flower is not satisfied to be merely a flower in light and space and temperature. It wants to be a flower in us, in our soul. Things live in us and through us."[42] Unlike Smithson who wanted to understand nature's processes more directly, Weber imagined a sense of life in everything and projected a desire to become one with everything. "Works of art are man's revelations of nature's contents," he said. "To infer from the visible to the invisible, to penetrate the opaque, to soar high into space, and to dive deep into the seas, to walk through fissures to the center of the earth, to imagine one's self being a fish or a bird, is to penetrate more into the spheres of the unknown."[43]

Even if Smithson's language is occasionally similar to Weber's, meaning is obviously different. Smithson wants to observe: Weber, like Emerson, wants to merge. Similar differences also exist between Smithson and Arthur Dove, a contemporary of Weber. Both Smithson and Dove wanted to work with nature's basic substances. Smithson indicated that he liked "to work with water, land, air and fire (solar light) as a whole interconnected phenomenon."[44] Dove wanted "to take wind and water and sand as a motif and work with them..."[45] But where Dove tried to suggest the oneness of nature, the interconnectedness of the physical and the spiritual (he was a Theosophist) as well as "instincts from all of life,"[46] Smithson seemed to be more concerned with the effect one thing had on the other. He was more interested in the physical processes of nature than its imagined spiritual ones.

Smithson would probably not have responded to Mark Rothko's desire, after 1947, to reveal in his paintings "the principles and passions of organisms," for Rothko's quest, like Weber's and Dove's was of a spiritual, if more private, sort.[47] Rothko wanted to escape into a timeless stream of organicity. Smithson, more materialistic and therefore more aware of physical limitations, based his intuitive concerns on the hard, unyielding surfaces of objects.

Among Earth artists, Sonfist most nearly approximates the Weber-Dove-Rothko line of thought, but gives it a late twentieth century interpretation. Sonfist has, like Weber, realized that his "work deals with the idea that the world is always in a state of flux. My art," he says, "deals with the rhythm of the universe. A plant grows in cycles—man moves in cycles—my work tries to bring about awareness of these movements."[48] But religion is gone and transcending the ordinary by merging with the Infinite is gone, as well. In their places, Sonfist has assumed responsibility to remind people that nature still exists and that we should be aware of it. Unlike nineteenth-century landscapists who were quite articulate in explaining the ways in which nature affected viewers, Sonfist is vague. He knows it is out there and it is important in some way, but does not guide us to it. He merely presents it. When he says, "my art presents nature. I isolate certain aspects of nature to gain emphasis, to make clear its power to affect us, to give the viewer an awareness that can be translated into unravelling of the cosmos," he is speaking in generalities.[49] These will not work any longer, since we no longer have paths—religious, transcendental, scien-

tific—to get from the general to the specific in nature. A case in point is his *Earth Monument,* 1971, in which earth from the site was presented to show through "the variations of color and texture of the rock...events in the history of that land during millions of years."[50] How are we to react today to layers of earth? Who has the proper geological information? What will it change or re-enforce in our ways of thinking? Like using ancient monuments such as Chichen Itza to give meaning to modern Earth Works, presentations such as Sonfist's *Earth Monument* are ultimately disorienting. We do not know how to make the connections meaningful except in the most non-directive, generalized ways. We can applaud the effort to make us more aware of nature, but, in the end, to what effect, with what kind of focus? Perhaps in the doing activity, Sonfist found some sort of fulfillment, but this does not translate easily to the viewer except in ways that are verbal and conceptual rather than organic and spiritual. We go over in our minds what and why Sonfist did what he did, rather than respond to the effect the work is supposed to have. It seems to me that this is the reverse of what Sonfist had in mind.

I find, then, that most early Earth artists created works too personal for an art that is really in the public domain. In some of these works the landscape was used only as another tool or a thing with which to work, rather than as a something that carries a built-in content hard to ignore. I do not really see an escape from the Big City or the gallery system or anything much beyond a similar manipulation of materials. Some works, although well intentioned, were much too general in that data is presented, but without suggesting ways to interpret intentions. This might be perfectly acceptable if there was something to look at other than the documentation, that is, some sort of visual organization that added up to more than the documentation, or if there was some compelling focus of content that was more than bare-bones archaeological or astronomical. So many pieces also look like rehearsals for something yet to come. On the other hand, the works that seem most successful are those in which the artist elicited from nature qualities peculiar to the landscape itself or in which statements were made, even in the absence of interesting visual presentations, that reached beyond the merely personal. Smithson's ideas are most central because they are theoretical in addition to being descriptive of his activities. His hard-nosed vision of the landscape is a welcome addition to the ongoing dialogue that American artists have conducted with the landscape for over 200 years, and it established a new base position from which to view the landscape. His writings, as well as many of his works, would seem to provide the strongest arguments for the viability of early Earth Works. They hold their own in whatever comparisons one might want to make with earlier writings or works. But, with a few other exceptions, I am still having trouble.

NOTES

[1]Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (*Artforum,* Sept. 1968)" in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 83.

[2]Michael Heizer, "The Art of Michael Heizer," *Artforum,* 8 (December 1969), p. 34.

[3]Edward Fry, *Projects in Nature* (Far Hills, N.J.: Merriewold West, 1975), not. pag.

[4]Nicholas Capasso, "Environmental Art: Strategies for Reorientation in Nature," *Arts Magazine,* 59 (January 1985), pp. 73-74.

[5]"Interview," *Avalanche,* I (Fall 1970), p. 25.

[6]"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson (*Avalanche,* Fall 1970)" in Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 174.

[7]"Earth (Symposium at Cornell University, 1970)," in Holt, *ibid.,* p. 160.

[8]Jack Burnham, "Dennis Oppenheim: Catalyst 1967-1970 (*Artscanada,* Aug. 1970)," in Alan Sonfist, ed., *Art in the Land* (New York: Dutton, 1983), p. 46.

[9]"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 171.

[10]John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), p. 19.

[11]Heizer, "The Art of Michael Heizer," p. 32.

[12]"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 173.

[13]John Gruen, "Michael Heizer: You Might Say I'm in the Construction Business," *Art News,* 76 (December 1977), p. 48.

[14]"Artist Known for Works Created in Nevada Desert," *The New York Times,* June 3, 1985, Section C, p. 17.

[15]Paul Shephard, *Man in the Landscape* (New York: Ballantine, 1967), p. 61.

[16]Craig Adcock, "The Big Bad: A Critical Comparison of Mount Rushmore and Modern Earthworks," *Arts Magazine,* 57 (April 1983), p. 104.

[17]Mark Rosenthal, "Some Attitudes of Earth Art: From Competition to Adoration," in Sonfist, *op. cit.,* p. 64.

[18]Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Cole* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981), p. 13.

[19]Holt, "Sun Tunnels," *Artforum,* 15 (April 1977), pp. 34, 35. See also Beardsley, *op. cit.,* p. 50.

[20]Shelley Rice, "Fields of Vision," *Land Marks* (Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Bard College, 1984), p. 74.

[21]Diana Shaffer, "Nancy Holt: Spaces for Reflections and Projections," in Sonfist, *op. cit.,* pp. 174, 175.

[22]Howard Junker, "The New Sculpture: Getting Down to the Nitty Gritty," *The Saturday Evening Post,* p. 241 (Nov. 2, 1968), p. 42. For this often cited passage, see, for instance, Beardsley, *op. cit.,* p. 19.

[23]Peter Hutchinson, "Earth in Upheaval," *Arts Magazine,* 43 (November 1968), p. 18.

[24]Rainer Crone, "Prime Objects of Art: Scale, Shape, Time," *Perspecta,* 19 (1982), pp. 22-23.

[25]*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), p. 10.

[26]Melinda Wortz, "Walter de Maria's The Lightning Field," *Arts Magazine,* 54 (May 1980), p. 173.

[27]Klaus Kertess "Earth Angles," *Artforum,* 24 (February 1986), p. 78.

[28]Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated," *Artforum,* 8 (April 1970), pp. 62, 66.

[29]Holt, "Nancy Holt," p. 59.

[30]*Henry David Thoreau* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), pp. 391, 37, 38.

[31]*Emerson,* p. 403.

[32]Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 30.

[33]Lucy R. Lippard, "Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory, in Robert Hobbs, ed., *Robert Smithson: Sculpture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 32.

[34]Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," in Holt, *op. cit.,* p. 89.

[35]"Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (1972)," in *ibid.*, p. 154.

[36]Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind," in *ibid.*, p. 86.

[37]"Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson," in *ibid.*, p. 172; and Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape" (*Artforum,* Feb. 1973), in *ibid.*, p. 124.

[38]Smithson, "A Sedimentation of Mind," in *ibid.*, p. 89.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 85.

[40]*Ibid.*

[41]Max Weber, *Essays on Art* (Privately printed, 1916), pp. 14-15.

[42]*Ibid.*, p. 49.

[43]Smithson and Gregoire Muller, "...The Earth, Subject to Cataclysims, is a Cruel Master," *Arts Magazine* 46 (November 1971), p. 41.

[44]Arthur Dove, "An Idea," catalogue statement, The Intimate Gallery, 1927, in Barbara Haskell, *Arthur Dove* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1975), p. 135.

[45]Sherrye Cohn, *Arthur Dove: Nature as Symbol* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 31.

[46]Mark Rothko, "The Romantics Were Prompted," *Possibilities,* I (Winter 1947-48), p. 84.

[47]Statement in Jeffrey Wechsler, "Response to the Environment," in Sonfist, *op. cit.,* p. 263.

[48]Robert Joseph Horvitz, "Nature's Artifact: Alan Sonfist," *Artforum,* 12 (November 1973), p. 32.

[49]Jonathan Carpenter, "Alan Sonfist's Public Sculpture," in Sonfist, *op. cit.,* p. 144.

Art and Reparation: or, Poetry After Auschwitz?

By C. Fred Alford

I.

> Aesthetic formation proceeds under the law of the Beautiful, and the dialectic of...consolation and sorrow is the dialectic of the Beautiful. Herbert Marcuse

In an older and more ambitious philosophical tradition, art is not merely the topic of a special branch of philosophy, called aesthetics. Art is instead the key to grasping the basic structure of the world. We come closest to apprehending the order and harmony of the world when we experience it through art. In the Neoplatonic tradition, "man's sense of his place in the universe is due to his judgment about the beautiful."[1] To be sure, some moderns have left aesthetics at the center of philosophy. However, generally they have done so by subjectivizing philosophy itself, reducing it to a matter of taste. For Nietzsche, art represents the primordial subjective experience of the world, an experience that accepts the mystery of being, rather than seeking comfort in the illusion ("aesthetic socratism," he calls it) of reason.

There are exceptions to this generalization. Heidegger, for example, seems to give aesthetics the objective function of creating a space within which Being might appear. Yet, while art is important to Heidegger, it is certainly no longer at the center of philosophy in his account.[2] It is Croce's view of aesthetics as a branch of general linguistics concerned with the expression of human feeling that best captures the modern view. Or, as Suzanne Langer puts it, art is a symbol of feeling.[3] Below I consider aspects of the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, whose intellectual founders are Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. The Frankfurt School stands in an interesting relationship to this larger tradition, and this is why I focus on it. On the one hand, the School, and especially Marcuse, grants art—the aesthetic sensibility Marcuse calls it—a role it has rarely played in the modern world: it becomes the medium by which a new order of reality is apprehended. On the other hand, both Marcuse and Adorno are concerned that art is too indiscriminate: that it will find beauty and pleasure where it should really find—if it is to be true to reality—ugliness. That is, they are concerned that art will be too transcendent, too eager to reveal a higher order, paying insufficient attention to this one. Marcuse and Adorno are also (but not merely) materialists.

It is in Adorno's famous comment about the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz that the Frankfurt School's concerns about art are most dramatically expressed. To be sure, Adorno came to argue that literature must resist the cynicism that his own comments about Auschwitz and lyric poetry express.[4] Nevertheless, this concern about art—that its beauty will cause us to forget the horror and the suffering—runs like a thread throughout his works. The aesthetic principle of stylization, he says

> make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.[5]

In the end this concern about art inhibits both their aesthetics.

My goal is to defend the truth-telling function of art, while recognizing that the subjective experience contained in art is valid in itself—that is, not to be measured by how close it takes us to Plato's ideas. Relevant questions include whether these two functions are in conflict. If not, what must the world be like, and what must we be like, so that the subjective function serves—or at least does not contradict—the truth-telling function? It may seem that in putting it this way the terms of the debate have been subtly changed, by quietly introducing a third term. For the subjective experience evoked by art is not the same thing as transcendence. While this is surely the case, they are related. For the Frankfurt School, it is the subjective experience of eros, of which art is an almost pure—albeit highly sublimated—expression, that is the source of transcendence. It is the desire for pleasure that leads us to other more beautiful worlds. This is, of course, not merely the position of the Frankfurt School. Plato too saw eros—the desire for beautiful bodies that leads us to the desire for Beauty per se—as the ground of transcendence (*Symposium,* 210e-212b; *Phaedrus,* 249d-252b). It is these considerations that lie behind the decision to treat

the subjective, experiential aspect of art as closely related to, albeit not identical with, the quest for transcendence. A consequence is, of course, that the less this subjective experience is centered on eros, the looser this relationship to transcendence becomes. In arguing that art should be seen as less an expression of eros, more an expression of the desire to restore a shattered whole, I in effect weaken (but do not obliterate) the link to transcendence, while strengthening the truth-telling aspect of art.

The next section (II) explores the dilemma confronted by the Frankfurt School in more detail, showing that it stems from their equation, often tacit, of art with sublimated eros. It is the selfishness of eros, its constant concern with pleasure and gratification, that leads it to escape the pain and suffering of this world. Following this, in what may seem a surprising strategy, a psychoanalytic theory of art, inspired by Melanie Klein, is introduced. Kleinian aesthetic theory finds beauty not merely in that which brings pleasure, but in that which restores to wholeness a moral order shattered by greed and aggression. Or rather, Kleinian theory finds pleasure in this restoration. This might seem to be a complete solution, but it is not. For Kleinian aesthetic theory, as one might expect from a psychoanalytic aesthetic theory, focuses too much on the internal, symbolic dimension of reparation, too little on its real counterpart. What is necessary is an account of art that links it more closely to the real, external world. Yet, this is not enough. One of the oldest and most widely held views of art, art as the imitation of nature, particularly natural beauty, fills his requirement readily. So too does so-called socialist realism. What is necessary is an account that sees this reality-apprehending function as stemming from the types of subjective experiences with which the Kleinian account is concerned. Otherwise, why bother with a psychoanalytically-informed aesthetic theory to begin with?

I find the basis for this account in Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art.* Much of the remainder of this essay involves extending this Klein-cum-Goodman account, showing that it can address several issues that the Frankfurt School recognized as important, but could not master, due to the dilemma inherent in their aesthetic theory. In the conclusion the question of the transcendence of art is again addressed. What art properly transcends is not reality itself, but the lie that this reality is generally good, beautiful, fit for man, or even necessary, not merely contingent.

II. Marcuse's Aesthetics

While paying attention to Adorno, my focus is on Marcuse's aesthetics, because being less dialectically subtle, the contradictions in his account are easier to see. Like Adorno, Marcuse sees aesthetic form as the key to art's emancipatory power. By form Marcuse means those stylistic qualities, such as harmony, rhythm, and contrast, that make a work a self-contained whole. It is by subjecting the particular events with which it deals to the requirements of form that art renders these events universal. Form transforms reality by interpreting particular events in terms of what Marcuse calls universal Ideas, of which the most important are Eros and Thanatos. Through

artistic form, the power of eros and thanatos to constitute reality is heightened (or rather, made more apparent) by stripping away all those mundane events that distract us from this power.[6]

It seems fair to call this a Platonic-cum-Freudian view, in which aesthetic form expresses universal Ideas, ideas which constitute a world, and in turn are constituted by the play of life and death instincts. But, if this is a Platonic-cum-Freudian view, it also finds a place for Aristotle. Aristotle defines tragedy, as is well known, as the representation of action which, enriched by various artistic devices, uses pity and fear to bring about the *katharsis* of these emotions (*Poetics,* c. 6). Marcuse is, of course, not writing only about tragedy. Therefore it is necessary to expand the definition somewhat, but its Aristotelian core remains: art engages our emotions, including those of love and desire—eros—as well as pity and fear, and in so doing subjects these emotions to katharsis, bringing us closer to peace and contentment. As Marcuse puts it,

> this catharsis is an ontological rather than psychological event. It is grounded in the specific qualities of the form itself, its non-repressive order, its cognitive power, its image of suffering that has come to an end. But, the 'solution,' the reconciliation which the catharsis offers, also preserves the irreconcilable.[7]

Here is the source of art's power, and its limit. Through beauty art has the power to create another world, a better world, and in so doing challenge the poverty and ugliness of this one by showing this world as contingent—neither necessary nor universal. Yet, precisely because this power is obtained through katharsis, it risks premature reconciliation with, and acceptance of, pain and suffering. Adorno makes a similar point in *Aesthetic Theory,* arguing that purgation reinforces repression, allowing substitute gratification to take the place of the real thing. In this sense, says Adorno, Aristotle's view of tragedy, no less (albeit more subtly) than Plato's view of art, serves the powers that be.[8]

Marcuse recognized this problem for some time, although he was never able to solve it. As early as 1955, in *Eros and Civilization,* Marcuse states that through its commitment to the value of form, art risks adulterating its negative, critical potential. To be sure, Marcuse did not always stick to this position. In *An Essay on Liberation,* a book in which Marcuse's utopian hopes seem less restrained than any other, he suggests that the artistic representation of suffering might itself help redeem suffering, by giving it meaning. Yet, Marcuse soon came to change his mind, returning to the position he took in *Eros,* a position from which he never subsequently wavered. To speak of art as "canceling" or "redeeming" human suffering is to risk the artistic transfiguration of suffering. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt,* Marcuse argues that art must do no more than represent suffering, in the hope of memorializing it.[9] In order to do this, art must stand back from its suffering subject. For art to emotionally engage itself with its suffering subject risks subjecting this suffering to premature catharsis. A statement in his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension,* reveals that Marcuse believed that this difficulty would not be resolved.

> Art is powerless against this reconciliation with the irreconcilable; it is inherent in the aesthetic form itself. Under its law...a representation of the most extreme suffering 'still contains the potential to wring out enjoyment.'[10]

To be sure, Marcuse assures us that by approaching suffering at a respectful distance, the artistic catharsis may preserve the irreconcilable; that it need not succumb to affirmation. However, he never tells us why. Marcuse's is an assertion about the proper way to approach suffering, an assertion steeped in the subtleties of the dialectic of negation and affirmation, as well as his own sensibility. However, it has no grounds in his aesthetic theory (the same conclusion applies to Adorno). Quite the contrary, Marcuse's aesthetic theory says that art will tend to do one of three things: (1) avoid suffering because suffering is unpleasant, anti-erotic; (2) avoid suffering because in dealing with suffering art risks "subjecting it to aesthetic form, and thereby to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment"; (3) affirm suffering as somehow noble, fine and beautiful.[11] Each of these tendencies is problematic. And none really comes close to the respectful, albeit somewhat distant, approach to suffering that Marcuse has in mind. Avoidance is not respectful distance, but merely avoidance.

The source of this difficulty seems to be the nature of the eros that motivates the artistic pursuit of beauty. At least since Hesiod's *Theogony* (lines 115-125), and certainly since Plato, eros has been seen as single minded and greedy in its pursuit of gratification. Even in praising eros, Plato has Socrates stress the way in which eros wants not merely to experience beauty, but to own, possess, and control it, now and forever (*Symposium,* 203b-e). A similar, equally greedy view of eros is found in the *Phaedrus* (250b-257b). As Griswold points out, the Socratic lover loves another in order to most fully realize his own perfection, wholeness, and beauty.[12] In a word, eros is not truly concerned with the object in itself, but with the object only as it is, or may become, a source of satisfaction. Could it be that it is really against the pain of sympathy (what Germans call *Mitleid,* literally suffering-with-another) that eros, in its pursuit of pleasure, defends by refusing to engage itself fully in the pain of others?

III. Foundations of Kleinian Aesthetic Theory

Melanie Klein was a contemporary of Anna Freud. Like the Freuds, Klein fled Germany for England (Klein's father was a student of the Talmud, her mother the daughter of a rabbi). For a number of years during and immediately after the war, Klein was the leading intellectual force in the British Psychoanalytic Society, at that time the most influential psychoanalytic society in the world. Klein stressed the continuity between her work and that of Sigmund Freud. She did so, in part, out of political rather than strictly intellectual grounds. The "controversial discussions" between the followers of Anna Freud and Klein during the 1930's and 1940's nearly split the British Society. Nevertheless, there is significant continuity between Klein's work and the later work of Sigmund Freud, beginning with Freud's 1920 publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.*

Like Freud, Klein sees emotional life in terms of the play of the life and death instincts. Indeed, Klein is one of the few psychoanalysts to take Freud's concept of the *Todestrieb* seriously. Yet, Klein's view is hardly identical with Freud's. For Freud, libido and aggression produce experience, by means of the bodily sensations to which they give rise. For Klein, libido and aggression are always contained within, and always refer to, relationships with others, either real or imaginary. This shift from a philosophical to an experiential level of analysis constitutes an essential departure from Freud's concepts of life and death instincts, while actually coming closer to how the Frankfurt School understood instincts as subject to historical modification under the impact of new social relations.[13]

Though Klein's emphasis on interpreting aggression is often stressed, the central role of love and reparation in her thinking should not be overlooked. Just as much as aggression, care and concern for others are an inherent feature of the child's earliest relationships. "Feelings of love and gratitude arise directly and spontaneously in the baby in response to the love and care of his mother," says Klein.[14] In a word, love is not merely an aim-inhibited expression of libido, but is as fundamental and basic to mental life as hatred and aggression. Furthermore, caring is not merely a reflection of the child's great dependence on others. It is not merely the case that he cares for others so that they can better satisfy his desires. Care and concern express "a profound urge to make sacrifices," to make others happy out of genuine sympathy for them.[15] Klein reveals the potential of individuals to love and care for others out of a genuine, unselfish concern for the other's welfare.

Juergen Habermas has stated that in his last philosophical conversation with Herbert Marcuse, shortly before Marcuse's death, Marcuse said that "I know wherein our most basic value judgments are rooted, in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others."[16] It is precisely this sense of morality whose roots Klein uncovers, a morality Klein characterizes in terms of the concept of "reparation." She calls it that in order to stress that in caring for others we help to make recompense for the harm we have done them in phantasy. Yet, it would be mistaken to see reparation as merely an expression of a guilty conscience. It is also based upon an ability to deeply identify with others, to feel connected with their fates. Their pain becomes our pain. Even more important, our ability to ease their pain allows us to play the part of the good parent, and in so doing re-create and enjoy the wished for love and goodness of our parents. It is this that helps overcome what Klein calls the depressive position, characterized by a lack of confidence in one's ability to restore the loved object, to protect the loved object from one's own aggression. Klein states that in the act of reparation "the ego is identified with the sufferings of the good objects."[17] It is this way of thinking that informs Marcuse's work, indeed the whole Frankfurt project, which Habermas has characterized as speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves. Yet, it is a morality not theoretically well integrated into Marcuse's aesthetics. Eros, as we have seen, is not well suited to this task.

A Caveat on Style

The analysis of reparative motifs in art cannot be undertaken in a vacuum, in isolation from conventions of style. As Ernst Gombrich points out in "Norm und Form," there is a classical solution to certain stylistic problems in painting, a solution emphasizing symmetry and harmony.[18] To interpret this classical solution as a reparative motif, for example, without understanding how the classical solution evolved as a response to certain technical problems, not just psychological ones, would be absurd. Ignorance of stylistic conventions reduces aesthetics to psychology, rather than enriching the former discipline with the insights of the latter. On the other hand, that symmetry and harmony are part of a classical aesthetic solution does not mean that their appeal cannot be illuminated by reference to psychological factors. That a phenomenon serves an objective aesthetic function does not render psychological explanation irrelevant. Conversely, that formal conventions of symmetry and harmony reflect psychological needs does not make these conventions mere epiphenomena of these needs.

Segal's Development of Kleinian Aesthetics

Several of Klein's essays, such as "Some Reflections on the *Orestia,*" interpret works of literature from the perspective of her psychoanalytic theory. However, the development of a Kleinian aesthetics has been left to others, among whom Adrian Stokes is probably the most well known. In fact, of all the psychologically-oriented aesthetic theories, the Kleinian, along with Gestalt theory, is the most developed. I shall focus on Hanna Segal's "A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics." Art, says Segal, is an expression of the depressive position: the fear that we have lost all we have loved, and cannot recover it, as we are too angry and greedy. Like Marcuse, Segal sees the task of the artist as the creation of a world, arguing with Roger Fry that great art may be defined in terms of how well and how thoroughly it creates another reality. In this world the artist mourns for lost people and experiences that have given meaning to his life. Segal goes on to describe an episode in the last volume of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past,* in which Proust tells why he decided to devote the rest of his life to writing. Upon coming back after a long absence to see his old friends, Proust found them to be mere shadows of the people he had known—useless, silly, ill, on the threshold of death. Others had died long ago. Realizing that what had once been his world existed no longer, Proust decides to sacrifice himself to the recreation of the dying and the dead. It is through his art that he can give those people and things he cares about eternal life.[19]

"What Proust describes," says Segal, "corresponds to a situation of mourning."[20] He sees that his loved ones are dead or dying. Writing a book is an act of mourning, in which these loved ones are given up as they exist in the external world, and recreated in an inner world—in a work of art. All creation, says Segal, is really the recreation of a once loved and once whole, but now ruined and lost object, a ruined internal world. What makes

this situation especially pathetic, Klein reminds us, is that at an unconscious level the death and destruction of a beloved object is seen as a result of one's own hatred and aggression. Unconsciously, mourning is experienced as punishment—living in an empty world—for having destroyed what was good in it.

The appeal of a work of art is that it allows the viewer to vicariously experience—Segal uses Dilthey's term "nacherleben"—the artist's depression at having lost (destroyed) all that he loves, as well as the artist's joy at having recreated and restored his loved objects to an internal world. In a word, art is about destruction, loss, and reparation. Out of chaos and destruction, caused by his own greed and rage, the artist is able to recreate and restore a world which is whole, complete, and unified. Through an act of creation the artist asserts that his love is stronger than his hate, that his powers of care and concern are stronger than his aggression, that he can repair what he has destroyed. It is this that helps him—and those who can vicariously participate in his works—overcome his depressive anxiety: that his love is not strong enough to overcome his hate.

IV. Kleinian Aesthetics and the Frankfurt School

Like Marcuse, Segal focuses on literature, though she makes some attempt to integrate music into her account. Not unlike Marcuse, she tends to regard those works of art that do not fit into her account, such as much modern art, as less great, less beautiful, less "aesthetic." Both Segal and Klein draw most of their examples from classical tragedy, in which the wholeness and perfection of the artistic *form* promises the restoration of an order destroyed by the protagonists' hatred, greed, hubris, and aggression.

> Without this formal harmony the depression of the audience would be aroused but not resolved. There can be no aesthetic pleasure without perfect form.[21]

For Marcuse, form represents the subjection of the particular to the universal Ideas of eros and thanatos. In a similar fashion, Segal argues that in great art the death instinct (understood as aggression, rage, and hatred) is denied less than in any other human activity. Rilke states that "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror that we are still just able to bear." Such an insight, implies Segal, appreciates that behind every work of art lies the narrowest of victories over thanatos.[22] Though Segal, unlike Marcuse, tends to see the death instinct as operative in all those forces which oppose, or stand in contrast to, aesthetic form, rather than in the form itself, both see art as the field in which eros and thanatos play out their eternal struggle. The difference is that Segal understands eros not merely as the desire for gratification, but as an expression of love, the desire to make reparation.

Yet, if Marcuse's aesthetics does not quite find the right balance, neither does Segal's. Though Kleinian aesthetics respects the object, it actually respects the *idea* of the object, an internalization of the object as constituent of one's psychic world. The actual object, especially in so far as it serves as a stimulus for this process, is not important. One sees an interesting

expression of this internal focus in Klein's comments regarding how European colonialists might make reparation for the extermination of native populations. By repopulating the land with their own people![23] For Klein the internal, psychological activity of reparation matters more than its results. To be sure, painting a picture commemorating the destruction of natives, or writing a novel about it, is not going to repair any real natives either. Nevertheless, there is a difference between these creative acts and mere phantasied reparation, a difference not fully grasped in the Kleinian account.

The artistic representation acknowledges the external world, even as it goes on to create another one. In creating another world of perfect wholeness and reconciliation, art calls attention to the contrast between this perfect world and its damaged, fragmented empirical counterpart. It is in this contrast between fantasy and reality that the emancipatory power of art resides—the image of perfect harmony indicts a miserable reality, at least for those who have eyes to see, and ears to hear. Reparation in phantasy is different. Rather than creating another world of perfection, reparation in phantasy may substitute the repair of internal objects for external ones. Rather than heightening the tension between a perfectly restored ideal and reality, reparation in phantasy may diminish this tension, by rendering reparation in phantasy tantamount to reparation in reality. Or, by treating real people as little more than symbolic stand-ins for internal objects, reparation in phantasy may imply that one act of actual reparation (e.g., to White Europeans) is as good as another (e.g., to Natives). Though art need not terminate in premature katharsis, reparation in phantasy likely will.

Kleinian aesthetics and Marcuse's aesthetics err in another regard as well (it is their similarity, even to making some of the same mistakes, that makes a Kleinian perspective on Marcuse so fruitful). Both stress the achievement of wholeness, restoration, unity and completeness (even if they understand these attributes somewhat differently) to such an extent that the idea that art could tell us the truth about a broken, fragmented reality, except by complete contrast, tends to be lost. To be sure, the idea of a torn and fragmented reality is perhaps inconceivable without the idea of its opposite. Furthermore, Kleinian aesthetics, especially, appreciates the way in which it is human aggression that rends the unity of the object. Nevertheless, both stress the goal, the ideal of wholeness and reconciliation—this is the meaning of aesthetic form for both—so heavily that the idea of art as messenger, and truth teller tends to be lost. Certainly part of this truth is that aspects of the world are so deformed and ugly that no reconciliation with them is possible or desirable, a point Adorno seems to appreciate more fully with his aesthetics of the ugly (haesslich).[24]

V. The Beauty of Truth

In *Languages of Art,* Nelson Goodman argues that far from being a passive, contemplative representation of the given, art is an active, intellectually assertive attempt to know the world through our emotions, not just our intellect.

> The aesthetic 'attitude' is restless, searching, testing —is less attitude than action: creation and recreation.[25]

In the aesthetic experience emotions have a cognitive function. They help us learn more about the real attributes of the world. Emotions are a means of knowledge, and art helps mobilize these emotions in the name of knowledge. At first glance, such a view would seem to be quite the opposite of the aesthetic theories discussed so far. Indeed, Goodman's tone of intellectual aggression would likely horrify Adorno, as though art too had become but one more instrument by which to better apprehend the world.

Goodman's insight (art is knowledge) and Klein's (art is reparation) do not fit together neatly. Whereas Goodman makes emotion a tool of knowledge, one could argue that Kleinian aesthetics does the opposite, viewing knowledge of the world as mere stuff in the service of emotional reconciliation with one's internal world. However, aesthetic theory, even when psychoanalytically informed, is not psychoanalysis, and there is no reason not to blend these approaches eclectically if it seems helpful. The result, as I have formulated it, is an account of art that renders it more choosy, more selective in its love, more discriminating in its objects of reconciliation and reparation. Such an account is especially suited to correcting Marcuse's aesthetics, in which the beautifying power of eros risks promiscuity, loving even the ugly and evil. By virtue of its concern with reparation, such an account should also help contain the intellectual aggression that Adorno, at least, might find in Goodman's theory.

The Tasks of Art

Unlike the Kleinian account of art, and also unlike Marcuse's account, mine does not suggest that art is about just one thing—reparation, or transcendence into a realm of joy and beauty. Art does at least four things: it helps makes us more at home in the world; it helps us clarify our emotions, making us more at home with ourselves (this view comes closest to art as reparation); plays with the world, and so creates a realm of personal freedom in an unfree world; tells us the truth about the world, even when this truth is unpleasant. These four tasks of art (and there are surely others) stand in no hierarchical or systematic relationship. A work of art may express all four tasks, just one, or any combination. Its greatness is not necessarily measured by how well it integrates these tasks; perhaps all great works of art are one-sided, or perhaps just some are. Unlike the aesthetic theories of Segal and Marcuse, mine does not seek to explain what makes a work of art great, or beauty a source of pleasure and value. A painting of Elvis on black velvet is just as much art as Michelangelo's *Moses*. Bad art is still art. It's just bad art.

Art Helps Us to Be at Home in the World

In allowing us to use our emotions, not just our cognition, to know the world, art lets us see the world in a way more in accord with our un-

conscious impressions of it. In so doing, art helps us to be more at home in the world, rendering the world more deeply human, less alien. Art does so by representing the external world as an expression of our deepest needs—and fears. In psychoanalytic terms, art projects our deepest needs and fears into the world, allowing us to experience the world in this fashion...imbued with these needs and fears. The result, particularly when aspects of nature are the object of the artist's projection, is an aesthetic experience akin to what Freud called the uncanny (unheimlich). The unconscious experiences a work of art as "disturbingly and unexpectedly familiar," because it recognizes a part of itself in it. The landscapes of Edvard Munch, such as *Summer Night on an Oslo Fjord,* are striking examples of the power of works of art to evoke this experience. Ironically, even the unheimlich can help us be more at home in the world, rendering it less the unresponsive, capricious other, and instead more like us.

Such a perspective is the counterpart to Weberian rationalization and demystification, the opposite of the scientific worldview, in which all comes to be explained in terms of natural processes that know and care nothing for human needs and fears. Is this not pure anthropomorphism, it might be asked, and as such an expression of the primitive, narcissistic denial of the otherness of the objective world, including nature? If this were all there was to art, then the answer would have to be yes. However, the clarifying, playful, and truth-telling functions of art mitigate this tendency.

Katharsis

Seen from this perspective, art may be interpreted as promoting katharsis, expressing our needs and fears and finding for them a place in the world. However, it is katharsis in quite a different sense than Marcuse intends, with its connotations of emotional purging leading to peace and contentment ("its image of suffering that has come to an end," as Marcuse puts it). Aristotelian katharsis, argues Martha Nussbaum, is better seen as the use of our emotions to obtain *clarification,* insight into the true nature of reality. When Aristotle defines tragedy as the artistic representation of action, which by means of pity and fear brings about katharsis of these emotions, he is therefore not writing about emotional purgation at all, but rather about how the experience of pity and fear at an artistic performance allows us insight into the nature of these emotions. The function of tragedy is to accomplish through the experience of pity and fear a "clarification (or illumination) concerning experiences of the pitiable and fearful kind."[26] Nussbaum goes on to emphasize that katharsis does not mean intellectual clarification about these emotions. It means simply clarification—emotional experience is employed to gain emotional understanding about emotions. This, she notes, is something new in Aristotle. Plato would have seen the issue in terms of using emotions to obtain intellectual clarification, as he does in the *Symposium* (201d-212c).

Goodman's account comes closer to Plato's on this point, mine closer to Aristotle's. For while both see the emotions represented in art, and the viewer's emotional reaction to these emotions, as leading to genuine

knowledge of reality, Goodman stresses how emotion serves intellectual, cognitive goals. My Kleinian-inspired account, on the other hand, stresses how the experience of pity and fear may lead us to better understand these emotions in ourselves. Art, at its best, allows us to work through—i.e., obtain emotional clarification about—our fear, so that we can realize our potential to feel pity, the ground of reparation. This working through is, of course, quite different from mere purgation, just as psychoanalysis is quite different from therapies aimed at promoting emotional catharsis. Working through is a combination of insight (illumination) and emotional integration of love and hate, evidently the same type of emotional experience that Aristotle had in mind in his definition of tragedy.

Play

Much modern art, especially painting and sculpture, seems to be nothing so much as play, an expression of the desire to transform reality for its own sake, and for the sake of freedom. The sculptures of Henry Moore are exemplary. How does this fit into my account? It is Marcuse who provides the answer in a 1933 article "Ueber die philosophischen Grundlagen des wirtschaftswissenschaftslichen Arbeitsbegriffs." There he argues that labor must forever be a burden, no matter how it is socially organized, because in labor a man must conform to the "law of the thing" ("Gesetz der 'Sache'"), the objectivity of the natural world. Play is the sole realm of freedom, because in play man can substitute his laws for those of nature (or at least he can pretend to do so; the ball will still not roll uphill unaided, and the butterfly does not rush to meet the collector's net), and thus play solely for himself, as he can never labor just for himself.[27] In play, man at once accepts the objectivity of the natural world (if the world were not objective, there would be no need to distinguish work and play), and rejects it for the world of play, in which his rules, and not nature's, prevail. This too is reconciliation with an alien world, in which we accept its brute givenness and at the same time seek to create alternative worlds of utter freedom, as though to say that the world is not really as given as it appears to be. Or rather, what we experience as entirely man-made, the rules of the game, we know to depend on the givenness of nature's rules as well, and in this way nature's rules become somehow less alien, more an expression of our own, even if there is perhaps an element of wishful thinking in such a perception.

The latter way of expressing it is, however, not so much Marcuse's as my own. For Marcuse, the ultimate goal seems to be not reconciliation with the objectivity of nature, but rather the triumph over it, via the unlikely combination of technology and the "aesthetic sensibility." Since I have dealt with this aspect of Marcuse's program at length elsewhere, I shall not do so here.[28] Suffice it to say that much modern art seeks not to transcend nature, but to play with it, and in so doing create a small measure of freedom in a harshly objective world. *Capricorn,* by Max Ernst, in which the droll king and queen of the sea manage to subjugate one small animal, exemplifies this spirit of play that recognizes the limits of its own freedom.

Adorno makes what I believe is the same point in another context, stating simply that "Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious."[29]

The Beauty of Truth

Much modern art is, of course, not merely playful. It is shocking, unpleasant, ugly, often more alien and alienating than the world itself. How could an artistic representation of giant, dead, rotting instincts, for instance, express reconciliation? In so far as art teaches us about the world by calling attention to our emotional reactions to it, reactions that are often unconscious, art may be seen as telling us what we already know, but have been unable or unwilling to formulate. In the case of the artistic representation of ugliness, art reconciles us to what we frequently recognize but will not admit: that the world, including sometimes even our closest relationships, is filled with hate, ugliness, despair, and emptiness. The portraits of George Grosz are exemplary, as are the plays of Eugene O'Neill. So too, albeit in a more subtle fashion, are Donald Sultan's *Black Lemons,* transformed from a piquant, limpid fruit into "standardized lemons, products of the terrifying consumer society."[30] In telling us things like this, in reminding us of what we already know about our world but will not admit to ourselves, art reconciles us not with this ugly world, but with that part of ourselves that knows the world to be ugly, but will not admit it, or call it by its right name.

In so doing, art helps prevent what Adorno calls, referring to Lukács *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus,* extorted reconciliation ("erpresste Versoehnung"), in which one is asked to love and come to terms with that which is not worthy of reconciliation.[31] Art, in this sense, is even more about truth than beauty. Or rather, it finds a certain beauty in the truth, even when the truth concerns the ugliness of the world. Consider, for example, Manet's *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico,* in which the contortion of Maximilian's face lacks any semblance of beauty, and the observers behind the wall, showing neither joy nor sorrow, seem to testify to this truth.[32] If truth is beauty, and beauty truth, then the truth of ugliness is beautiful because it is the truth, because it has the courage to call a spade a spade. This is the only alternative to the conclusion that the ugly is itself beautiful, a conclusion that both Marcuse and Adorno believe that art always risks. Marcuse would have art turn away from the truly ugly and horrible, lest it beautify it. My perspective avoids this, stressing the way in which even the unpleasant truth can be the subject of reconciliation. Most of the longer stories of Kafka exemplify this point, in which the world is revealed as so flat, fragmented, and ugly that the only possible object of reconciliation remaining is the truth of these facts themselves.

VI. Conclusion: Transcending What?

Seen strictly in terms of the balance between immanence and transcendence, my view comes closer to Adorno's than Marcuse's. Without rejecting the ideal of transcendence altogether ("semblance is a promise of

nonsemblance," as Adorno puts it[33]), Adorno appreciates the way in which art respects the independent reality of the object, the world. He also appreciates the way in which the "de-aestheticization of art" (art that not only knows itself to be illusion, but shows itself as such to all) allows it to capture the alienated, fragmented character of modern life. What is lacking in Adorno is a theoretical basis in aesthetic theory for this balance. His aesthetic theory, as several critics have pointed out, is an extension of the philosophy of negative dialectics to the world of art.[34] Or, as Adorno puts it, "aesthetic experience must pass over into philosophy or it will not be genuine."[35] Art, says Adorno, "is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world."[36] Yet, because Adorno sees art as the continuation of philosophy and history by other means, he in effect abandons this assistance program. Or rather, his philosophical and historical view of art is incompatible with the goal he sets for it: to assist the object in revealing itself. For how could the transformation of art into philosophy lead us to see the object in any way except as a reflection of human intellectual history?

Adorno turns from art to philosophy because he, like Marcuse, is frightened of the irrationality of art, a consequence of its origins in the pleasure principle. Thus, Adorno would in the end harness art to philosophy (sacrificing its power to help the thing reveal itself), whereas Marcuse would have art stand back from certain realities, lest it fail to do justice to them. *What makes Kleinian aesthetic theory different is its greater confidence in the rationality of the non-rational.* It is this insight that my adaptation of her account rests on. While fully appreciating the primitive character of our unconscious needs and desires, Klein sees them as more sophisticated, and other-directed, than the Frankfurt School, drawing on Freud, ever does. As Michael Rustin puts it,

> Kleinian theory is impregnated with moral categories, and its developmental concepts....incorporate moral capabilities (notably concern for the well-being of other persons) into their theoretical definition.[37]

It could be argued that such a claim commits the naturalistic fallacy. This, however, would not be correct. Rather than deriving morality from human nature, Klein discovers morality in the most primitive passions and relationships. Consequently, our emotions and passions can be trusted—not always, not completely, and not to the exclusion of rational reflection. Moral philosophy is still necessary, but it is necessary to guide our desire to make reparation, not to constrain it, or render it less selfish.

If the passions can be trusted within the limits noted above, then the transcendent character of art may be reinterpreted. Our emotional reactions to the artistic representation of reality are not something that we have to guard against in order to prevent the distortion of reality. Rather, these reactions are the best source from which to learn the truth about reality. Here is the source of art's transcendence. Art transcends the conventional, everyday, socially-accepted interpretation of reality in order to show it to us as we really know it to be in our deepest—often unconscious—hopes

and fears: beautiful, ugly, evil, banal, pointless, wondrous, and so forth. What art properly transcends is thus not reality itself—art grasps reality—but the lie that this reality is fit for man, or even necessary, not merely contingent. Art does this by telling us the truth about our emotional reactions to reality, which frequently reflect our unconscious awareness of society's lies, lies that we will not admit even to ourselves. Seen thusly, the transcendence of art is not a threat to truth, but its ground. Art transcends the truths of convention to apprehend the deeper truths that stem from our own passionate encounter with reality. It is in this sense that art promotes *katharsis,* clarification regarding reality.

Notes

[1]*Philosophies of Art and Beauty,* ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix edition, 1976), p. 240. Their overview of the history of aesthetics is helpful.

[2]Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[3]Croce, "Aesthetics," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 14th edition. Hofstadter and Kuhns on Langer, pp. 555-556.

[4]Adorno, "Commitment," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader,* ed. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), pp. 312-313. "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,' in *Prisms,* trans. S. and S. Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.

[5]"Commitment," pp. 312-313.

[6]Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 81. *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 8.

[7]*Aesthetic Dimension,* p. 59. Cf. pp. 10, 55.

[8]Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. C. Lenhardt (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 369.

[9]Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 144. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 43. *Counterrevolution and Revolt,* p. 99.

[10]*Aesthetic Dimension,* p. 66. Internal quote from Adorno.

[11]*Ibid.,* pp. 55-61.

[12]Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 128-129.

[13]Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 141-142.

[14]Klein, "Love, Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Hate and Reparation,* by Klein and Joan Riviere (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), p. 65.

[15]*Ibid.*

[16]Habermas, "Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology,* vols. 24-25 (1980), pp. 11-12.

[17]Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," in *The Writings of Melanie Klein,* ed. R.E. Money-Kyrle (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 4 vols., vol. 1, p. 273.

[18]Ernst Gombrich, "Norm und Form," in *Theorien der Kunst,* ed. D. Henrich and W. Iser (Frankfurt A.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 171.

[19]Segal, "A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics," in *New Directions in Psycho-Analysis,* ed. Klein, P. Heimann, and R.E. Money-Kyrle (London: Tavistock, 1955), esp. pp. 389-390. Segal cites no page numbers in Proust. Presumably she is referring to his description of an afternoon party at the Princesse de Guermantes that concludes the volume.

[20]Segal, p. 390.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 400.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 384. The Rilke source is *Duineser Elegien.*

[23]"Love, Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Hate and Reparation,* p. 105.

[24]*Aesthetic Theory,* pp. 68-75.

[25]Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 242.

[26]Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 388-391.

[27]In *Kultur und Gesellschaft,* vol. 2 (Frankfurt A.M.: Suhrkamp, 1965), pp. 7-48.

[28]Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature: Marcuse and Habermas* (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1985), c. 3. Alford, *Narcissism: Socrates, The Frankfurt School, and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), c. 4. "*Eros and Civilization* After Thirty Years: A Reconsideration in Light of Recent Theories of Narcissism," *Theory and Society* 16 (1987): 869-890.

[29]Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 14.

[30]Brigitte Baer, in a brochure for the exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Spring, 1988.

[31]"Erpresste Versoehnung," in *Theorien der Kunst,* ed. Henrich and Iser, pp. 313-342.

[32]I refer to the larger of the two paintings with the same title, painted in the same year, in the collection of the Kunsthalle, Mannheim.

[33]*Negative Dialectics,* pp. 404-405.

[34]Uwe Hohendahl, "Autonomy of Art: Looking Back at Adorno's *Aesthetische Theorie,*" in *Foundations of the Frankfurt School of Social Research,* ed. J. Marcus and Z. Tar (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1984), p. 219. Berman, "Adorno, Marxism and Art," *Telos* 34 (Winter, 1977-1978): 157-166, p. 158.

[35]*Aesthetic Theory,* p. 190.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 6.

[37]Rustin, "A Socialist Consideration of Kleinian Psychoanalysis," *New Left Review,* vol. 131 (1982): 71-96, pp. 82-83.

Pino Pascali and the Reconstruction of Nature

By Udo Kultermann

In most publications on Italian sculpture of the Sixties the work of Pino Pascali is to a large extent missing. This omission not only demonstrates the limitations of the perspectives of the authors, it also gives a false picture of the historic significance of the period. It is a strange cultural fact that artists who are recognized in their own time often do not deserve the critical attention they receive. In the case of Italian sculpture of the Sixties artists such as Consagra, Fabri, Fazzini, Garelli, Ghermandi, Guerrini, Manuccio, Mascherini, Mastroianni, Meli, Milani, Minguzzi, Negri, A. and G. Pomodori, Signori, Somaini and Viani represent Italian sculpture in most books and exhibitions, but historically, and in terms of artistic relevance, none of them have survived. Even significant artists such as Manzu, Greco, Mirko, Crippa and Marini have to be reevaluated in terms of their historical importance. Only Lucio Fontana, the dominating sculptor and painter of the period, stands the judgment of time and is slowly being seen in his appropriate historical perspective.[1]

Alongside Fontana but completely different from him is Pino Pascali, who from a reevaluated contemporary perspective has to be seen as the outstand-

ing Italian artist of his time. Similar to but going a step further than Fontana, Pascali can be compared with other pioneering artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Beuys and Jannis Kounellis. Pascali adds another dimension to the perception of art in general by his conceptually extraordinary reconstruction of nature. Only in recent years, long after his death, have additional perspectives in his attempts to reconstitute an authentic mythological approach to art been revealed. As early as 1937 Carola Giedion-Welcker wrote in her book *Modern Sculpture* about "subterranean connection of modern times to the uncomplicated emotion and simple, direct symbols of mythical prehistory," of which Pascali's works are the appropriate fulfillment.[2]

The astounding power and vitality of Pascali's works are the product of a short life span. Born in Bari, Southern Italy, on October 19, 1935, he moved with his family to Tirana, Albania in 1940 where he experienced the events of the Second World War. The lasting impression the war left on him can be seen in the large number of works dealing with war and survival, military equipment and prehistoric weapons, all encompassing the dream-like experience of childhood during war time. Beginning his education after moving back to Bari, Pascali continued his studies in Naples and Rome, where he graduated in 1959 from the Art Academy. During these years he was most interested in underwater fishing and motorcycling, which again is strongly manifested in the iconography of his sculptural works. It is ironic that it was a motorcycle accident that led to his untimely death. Another element of interest is manifested in his studies of stage design at the Art Academy in Rome. The technique of many of his mature works demonstrate his powerful theatrical fantasy.[3]

The years immediately following his graduation were spent in voluntary isolation without any attempt to exhibit. Around 1964 he occasionally worked designing stage sets for Italian television and painting murals in Rome. His first artistic recognition occurred at an exhibition at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in 1965. Several one-man shows followed at the Galleria Guido in Naples (1966), at the Galerie Sperone in Turin (1966), at the Galleria L'Attico in Rome (1966), at the Galleria M. E. Thelen in Essen, West Germany (1967) and at the Galerie Iolas in Paris (1970). In addition he participated in group shows in Italy, Germany, England, Norway and France. In 1967 he took part in the exhibition "Arte Povera" in Bologna, organized by Germano Celant and in 1968 at the Biennale in Venice. His first group show in America was in the exhibition of Young Italian artists at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Shortly before his death on September 11, 1968, he also participated in films by Luca Patella and Alfredo Leonardi. Pascali's untimely death at the age of 33 relates him to his contemporaries Yves Klein, Francesco Lo Savio and Piero Manzoni, who also died at a young age. Like them, Pascali made an important contribution to the contemporary situation of art, which has yet to be appropriately understood.[4]

One of the characteristics of the development of sculpture in the Sixties as well as other comparable art forms was the freedom of choice and the

possibility of relating everything to everything. Mircea Eliade wrote about prehistoric times in which, in his opinion, everything was possible. This can distinctly be related to the Sixties, and specifically to the work of Pascali.[5]

My basic assessment of sculpture in the Sixties, written in 1967, came to a comparable result: "The hierarchy of contents and materials, values and goods, peoples and states, which prevailed so long out of arrogance and lack of self-confidence, has been transcended. Freedom of choice also has embraced the effects of foreign cultures on our own, past or present; indeed past, present and future are on one level. Idols of the caveman, fetishes from Africa and Polynesia, masterpieces of Antiquity and the Renaissance, but also shop advertisements and television programmes, industrial products and automobile graveyards—everything has become material for the sculptor today whether in the sense of taking over the material itself, paraphrasing it, imitating the form, or appropriating it by quotations or violation of its character."[6]

The earliest works by Pascali have to be understood from the perspective of this new freedom as well as from his parallel work with set design in Rome. One group of sculptures is devoted to the celebration of woman and the female body: *La Labbra Rossa* (*Red Lips*), *La Gravida* (*Pregnant Woman*), both of 1964, *Torso di Negra al Bagno* of 1965. Parts of the female body were conceived in isolated enlargements in order to emphasize the specific significance of this meaning.[7]

In the two versions of *La Labbra Rossa* (one in the Museo Civico in Turin, the other in a private collection in Casale Montferrato), Pascali incorporated an image from the consumer world into a monumental relief sculpture. The lips protrude from the smooth surface of the large canvas, emphasizing the erotic use of an advertising image. It is the isolation and the change of scale which makes the powerful impact on the viewer who is familiar with subliminal techniques that interfere with the subconscious perception. The lips are not the lips of an individual woman, but the impersonal cliché of lips, the canonic type of facial expression which dominates commercial advertising and often tries to communicate the illusion of a hygienic eroticism. The fact that one of the two versions has the subtitle *Omaggio a Billie Holliday* (*Homage to Billie Holliday*) shows Pascali's familiarity with the American musical tradition as well as his admiration for the blues singer Billie Holliday.

Also in this group of works parallels can be found with other artists who used the theme, going back to Edvard Munch. Variations of isolated and monumentally enlarged lips can be found in a painting by Man Ray and in several sculptures by Charles Frazier. And, of course, there are the works of Andy Warhol, who in *Marilyn Monroe's Lips* of 1962 expressed the American emotional reality of glamour in lips related to the actress Marilyn Monroe.[8]

Other works by Pascali from this early phase related to the female body are his *La Gravida* of 1964 and *Torso di Negra al Bagno* of 1965. In *La Gravida* the gentle curves of a pregnant woman are articulated in the shaped

canvas of the torso. Head, arms and legs are eliminated as the work only concentrates on the essential theme.

In addition to the group of sculptures related to the female body, Pascali created a work which referred to one of the old Roman masterpieces of architecture, the Colosseum in Rome, which in modern times has been used as a monumental set for concerts and theatrical performances.[9] Pascali's *Il Colosseo* is a relief sculpture which depicts the Flavian amphitheater, named after the lost colossal statue of the emperor Nero.[10]

It was not large-scale representation of the historic monument that was on the mind of the artist, but the appropriated manipulation of the Roman building as seen in modern mass media.[11] His visually extraordinarily skillful realization of a work of art corresponds to the elegant tradition of Rome in contemporary Italian art. This parallels those American tendencies of the same years which were directed toward an appropriation of American cultural symbols from everyday life, later termed Pop Art.[12]

Pascali's earliest works are to be seen on the same level as American artists who created large-scale images of consumer products in an attempt to reconcile the vulgar reality of man with the otherwise elitist and elevated world of art objects. Examples are Oldenburg's *Soft Hamburgers* and Lichtenstein's inflated comic strips.[13]

During 1965 Pascali produced other large-scale demonstrative works of monumental art. In the context of ruins from Antiquity *Ruderi sul prato* (*Ruins in the Meadow*) he recreates the image of an environmental ensemble by means of three simple curved surfaces which constitute ruins in a landscape with a cloud hovering above.[14] Earth and cloud are suggested by a minimum of prop-like stage design elements evoking a poetic image of a Mediterranean landscape.

This work can also be seen as a parallel to several American artists, among them Marjorie Strider who, in her *View from a Window* of 1965, created the vision of a cloud by means of prop-like elements stemming from theatre set design.[15] At the same time landscape configurations by other sculptors, for example the Italian artist Gino Marotta and the American artist Robert Graham, applied a different set of elements in order to achieve their results. Developments directly interfering with the real landscape environment in works by Robert Smithson, Richard Long, Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim are based on yet another concept which transcends the classical limitations of the structure of art by replacing reality in a manipulated strategy instead of the former metaphorical language of art, in which Pascali was still involved. It was only in later works that Pascali also transcended this borderline.

The year 1965 was one of transformation in Pascali's development. In works like *Barca* (*Boat*) he arranged two curved surfaces in an angle suggesting a shipwreck, an old theme from Mediterranean culture. Again Pascali expresses the image with the flawless visual beauty of contemporary Italian design, only transcending the technological language by means of elements in which the image of a catastrophe finds its appropriate articulation. Not recognizable at first glance it nevertheless is present and inherent

in the work, and when finally seen it is in contradiction to the immaculate and beautiful representation. The whiteness of the surface and the elegance of the shape continues the earlier phases of Pascali's art.[16]

Destruction and catastrophe and the thematics of war are continued in his works of the same year, but in a rather different formal manifestation. Two works of 1965 reveal a language more appropriate to the theme, a vocabulary of form which now intentionally confronts and provokes an immediate reaction of the viewer. One of these works, entitled *Colomba della Pace* (*Dove of Peace*), is a 5 meter long construction of metal and wood. A realistic recreation of a bomb, it was subtitled by the artist *Object for general use.*[17]

Not only does this work relate to the military reality of the 1960s, a time in which weapons and bombs were equated with guarantees for peace, it also satirizes the political propaganda language by exploiting the subconscious in regard to the social and political reality created by this dichotomy. The work is not a political pamphlet to fight the militaristic propaganda in Europe, but rather a complex sign created by Pascali with lasting emotional effectiveness. It provokes reactions on different levels which are forged into one visual equivalent of great suggestive power.

Pascali's *Colomba della Pace* goes beyond the complexities of meaning and is important in a creative articulation of the phraseology and destructive argumentation of a time when bombs were as much in the minds of the masses as were 'Peace Doves.' In Pascali these opposite signs are no longer separated into good and bad images, they are a confusing new sign which incorporates elements of both, war and peace. The title in Italian has additional, effective qualities by means of the interconnections in rhyme of the two opposites, the term "Colomba" in the title rhymes with the visually apparent object "bomba."

In relation to *Colomba della Pace* is the series of sculptures entitled *Armi* (*Weapons*), begun in 1965 and continued into 1966. The works, reconstructions of cannons, is subtitled *Object for general use.* As before in *Colomba della Pace* the theme is military imagery, and Pascali translates the aggressiveness of a specific kind of weaponry into art. These works also have double meanings and can be seen as weapons referred to in the Sixties in Europe as "weapons for peaceful purposes" in the language of military phraseology. It is not the actual cannon that is the theme of Pascali's art, it is the weaponry of political propaganda and the unveiling of the falsification of its language. Pascali addressed the subconscious of human perception in a way that has a much deeper and lasting impact than any anti-war posters of pacifist rhetorics with their rational communication.[18] These works with this military iconography are anticipations of artistic protests in several countries in the years 1967 and 1968.

Pascali's works in 1966 continued along the lines of his earlier developments, constituting monumental sculptures with smooth surfaces, but now with a new content. *Dinosaurs, Hunt Trophies, A Decapitated Rhinoceros, Decapitazione delle giraffe* (*Beheading of a Giraffe*), *Animale Decapitato* (*Beheaded Animal*), *The Head of a Dragon, Cascate*

(*Cascade*) and *Bambu*—are all large scale constructions made of wood and canvas in the manner of stage sets. With these Pascali created a world of imagined prehistoric animals and fantastic fairy tale characters. More than ever he delves into the subconscious and articulates a world of magic figurations which compensate the shocking impact by means of their elegant proportions and classical finesse.

In *Cascate* of 1966, which is part of a series also entitled "False Sculptures," a series of six shaped canvases form a new constellation, suggesting the shape of animals and vegetation. Curved and straight edges are interrelated in the individual parts and in the composition of the whole create a make-believe world in a simple configuration. *Bambu* of 1967 (private collection in Rome) thematically refers to the Asian plant which was seen in Chinese prehistoric times as the symbol of growth and strength.[19] *Trofei di caccia* (*Hunt Trophies*) of 1966 (Collection Dakis Joannou, Athens) is composed of four individual parts representing the tails of imaginary animals. Mounted on the wall, they are exhibited like trophies of a hunt. The fact that the trophies are not from our own time but from prehistoric periods creates an element of surprise. In principle, also here it is the redefinition of the familiar, the element of the unexpected connected with death and survival in cultural terms.

Riconstruizione del Dinosauro (*Reconstruction of a Dinosaur*) as well as *Animale Decapitato* (*Decapitated Animal*) are part of the same iconographic context. The artist imagines the world of prehistoric hunters in which animals of enormous size are represented. But it is not just irony and playfulness that are constituted in these works, it is the grim reality of survival in our own time, camouflaged in the world of the prehistoric hunter. Prehistory, fairy tales and contemporary political reality are on one level. In this sense Pascali's subject matter is both real and unreal, its basis is the depths of the subconscious, and the results are articulations of magic figurations of a human dream world. The dreaming nevertheless has actual relevance, it is unmistakably related to the world in which we all live.

One of the most beautiful but nonetheless demonic realizations of Pascali's work during the year 1966 is *Il Mare* (*The Ocean*), which was part of a group exhibition in the Palazzo Trinci in Foligno in central Italy.[20] Given the dimensions, limits and special proportion of space, Pascali created one of the most poetic environments in twentieth-century art. The front half of two large dolphins disappears into the wall which becomes part of the work of art, similar to the earlier *Hunt Trophies*. The floor of the room is covered with a sequence of curved surfaces created from wooden constructions covered with white canvas, imitating the waves of the ocean. A diagonal dark curved form hitting the waves gives the impression of a dangerous instrument, like a weapon, from which possibly the two large dolphins are attempting to escape.

It is not only the theme which is important in this work, it is the way the seascape is represented. Its symbiosis of several different elements earlier isolated are now united to form a comprehensive whole. The same comprehensive merging is visible on several levels, the known and unknown create a new unity, a mysterious and concrete reality which has an

undefinable poetic quality. None of the works by the other participating artists in the exhibition so totally identified space and content, or provoked a world of a poetic beauty in which dangerous messages were communicated on the level of unconscious perception.

But the most mysterious work by Pino Pascali is his *Muro del Sonno* (*Wall of Sound*) of the same year (Ludwig Museum, Aachen), which brings new dimensions of intermedia imagery to life. Again, as before in Pascali's *La Colomba della Pace,* the title is ambivalent as it can point to or hide the meaning of the work. *Muro del Sonno* translates into *Wall of Sound,* and because of the actual use of pillows the work also suggests a dreaming wall. Both layers of meaning, sound and dream, are united into a reality in which sound and dream together form the cosmos of the work.

In terms of the physical construction the work is an assemblage of five rows of pillows arranged like a stone wall. The soft element of pillows are used in place of normally hard building material. An earlier work of 1964 *Il Muro* (*The Wall*) is clearly related to *Muro del Sonno,* as it contains in a similar proportion an arrangement of five rows of canvases defined as stones, each element inscribed with the work "pietra" (stone).[21]

Walls indicate the limitations of possibilities, and dreams supposedly transcend the borderlines that man in his conscious world erects around himself and his aspirations. Therefore an important aspect of *Muro del Sonno* is the relation of pillow and bed, so that sleeping, dreaming and sounding become interrelated activities in the rational and irrational perception of the work by the viewer. Michel Foucault articulated comparable thoughts when he wrote: "If consciousness sleeps during sleep, existence awakens in the dream. Sleep itself goes toward the life that it is preparing, that it is spelling out, that it favors. If it is seeming death, this is by a ruse of life, which does not want to die; it 'plays dead,' but 'from fear of death'; it remains of the order of Life."[22]

Pascali's *Muro del Sonno* can be interpreted on several levels, and it is specifically this openness that initiates a new phase in his development. A basic innovative approach toward multiple levels in content is achieved in works that will be followed in 1967 by a concept diametrically opposed to this group. Instead of metaphor, literalness of matter and materials will now be in the center: water will be seen as water and earth as earth.

This basic transformation in the development of Pascali's art is continued, on one hand in works in which his earlier conceptual attitude toward complex and ambivalent subject matter is more intensely involved in radical conclusions that further explore the earlier anticipations of magic and shamanistic analogies to prehistoric art. On the other hand, in a radically new approach, Pascali develops a series of works that deal with primary and essential solutions in terms of elementary matter. *One Cubic Meter of Earth* and *32 Square Meters of Water* consists of exactly what the titles indicate, the literally factual presentation of earth and water in precisely defined proportions without any type of metaphorical transformation. Elementary materials are presented in authentic documentary fashion and literary and symbolic meanings are eliminated.[23]

The theme of these revolutionary works is nothing more than earth and water, presented in a non-formal and non-compositional shape. The authentic presentation of reality is the goal of the artist as it was of several of Pascali's contemporaries, such as Walter de Maria, Piero Manzoni, David Medalla and Hans Haacke.[24] Pascali called these works "elementi naturali" as they included water as water, earth as earth, and hay as hay. The latter was used in another subsequent group of works, among them *Cornice di Fieno* (*Frame of Hay*) which was Pascali's most significant step into the explorations of contemporary shamanism.[25]

Hay and wood, plant materials and grass played a very important role in prehistoric thinking and survival strategies. Pascali's late work is, to a large extent, dominated by the use of these materials and the implications they express: the struggle for human survival and the "reconstruction of nature," which is the title of the last phase of his work. Nature is reconstructed in an imaginative way and on a basis which incorporates the earliest phase of man's own development. In order to understand human nature Pascali felt obliged to return to its origin.[26]

A group of works in 1968 entitled *Bachi da Setola* (*Silk Worms*) constitutes a world of animals like worms and caterpillars and other lower forms of life. Constructed in soft materials and in variable shapes they represent metamorphosis or transformation. Easily misunderstood as simple playful objects without meaning, they assume different configurations depending upon the space in which they are placed.

Within the *Bachi da Setola* group is one of Pascali's major works his *Vedova Blu* (*Buona Fortuna*) (*Blue Widow—Good Fortune*) in the Museum Ludwig in Aachen, a configuration of a spider built from a wooden support structure covered with intense blue acrylic. The emotional impact of spiders in art has a long history, for example, there is the spider with a human face created by Odilon Redon in 1881, and a later lithograph of 1887. The work had an enormous influence in circles of symbolist artists and was described in *A Rebours* by Joris Karl Huysmans. Within the same context is Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* which describes the transformation of a human being into an animal.[27]

Pascali continues this tradition but introduces the image of the spider in a sculptural form that addresses the viewer in his own space. It creates a completely new and frightening relationship, as the viewer can literally walk under the work and feel encompassed by its spatiality. The tension between the demonic presence of this environmental sculpture and the conceptual and physical alterations of human perception by the subconscious cannot be explained by rational communication. A new totality of human perception is activated as well as a new exploration of the work.

The impact of the title on the subconscious gives an added dimension. In Italian "Vedova" has the double meaning of spider and widow and the subtitle "Buona Fortuna" (good fortune) is in direct contrast to the intense blue symbol of fear. The physical and the irrational also here, as in many of Pascali's other works, merge into an artistic complexity.

The most powerful group of works was created during the last year of

the artist's life and while they are his most important achievement, they are up to now the least understood. While most of them have to be seen in relationship with prehistoric mentality, they are definitely meant by the artist as a basic statement about the situation of art and life in 1968. This still insufficiently explained relationship between Prehistory and our own time had ingenious results in the art of the early twentieth century.[28]

Carola Giedion Welcker directly related the formal assonances of Prehistory and the art of the twentieth century in her book of 1936, as did Robert Goldwater in his book *Primitivism in Modern Art* of 1937 when he wrote: "The arts of the primitive peoples have widened our concept of what 'art' is, has made us realize the many shapes art can assume, the diverse roles it can play, the multiple and ambiguous meanings it can embody."[29]

Pascali's restructuring of art in the context of Prehistory added a completely new dimension to the early adaptations or prehistoric art forms in Picasso, Brancusi, Giacometti, Miro.[30]

Pascali's specific recreation is relevant for our time, for materials such as hay and straw had only rarely before been used in modern times in this consequential application. Pascali transplanted the prehistoric mentality of strategy for survival into our own time. *Trappola* (*Trap*) and *Ponte* (*Bridge*) are examples in which the artist uses materials in such a way, that all the subsequent technological innovation after Prehistory are not incorporated. These works could have been done by prehistoric man, as they depict objects and instruments that might have been used in his struggle for survival: traps to catch large animals for his physical survival, idols and forms of worship for his spiritual survival. *Ponte* which represents a prehistoric suspension bridge, is built exclusively with plant material but constructed on the same principles as the highly developed suspension bridges of the industrial age. With the exception of the building material there is little difference in the ingenuity of the builders of the two periods, which is just one of the layers of content Pascali conveys in his quest for the understanding of contemporary man and his environment.

To Pascali these works are symbols of human survival or the spirit of what has to survive in order to keep man in his humane core, and the works have to be understood in this very basic context. This is beside the obvious aspect that works such as *Ponte* and *Trappola* constitute a new sense of beauty which expands the traditional rules of what beauty in our time has been. The simplicity of the materials and construction, the efficiency in terms of both survival strategies and refinement is not yet fully understood.

Trappola (Collection of Fabio Sargentini in Rome) is based on primary energy not only on a formalistic level, but also in terms of content matter and the necessity of efficient results in the solving of problems. A trap to catch an animal in prehistoric times not only meant survival, it also expressed the specific energies manifested in these instruments. It is not insignificant that Pascali often liked to be photographed trapped in this specific work, which is an additional indication of the complex relationship he

placed between Prehistory and his own time.[31] For Pascali contemporary art, as Prehistoric art, is a means of survival in a world where human existence is fundamentally in question, both in its spiritual and physical existence. Pascali's art is a reminder that this is valid today as it was in the past, and he makes this quite clear especially in his latest group of works of 1968.

Pelo (*Fur*) and *Contro Pelo* are large cylindrical forms with cantilevering upper parts in the shape of gigantic mushrooms.[32] Seen in the context of *Pelle Consciata* of the same year, they are related to the skin of animals and their possible use for purposes of hunting, dressing and other elementary functions.[33]

Invited to participate in the Venice Biennale of 1968, Pascali continued his explorations into prehistoric imagery by creating a series of works that concentrated on art as a means of survival. Manifested in tools and objects that could have been used in prehistoric times, he constructed gigantic forms in soft elementary materials, that are the culmination of his total development as an artist. *Archetipo* (*Archetype*), *Ponte Levatoio* (*Draw Bridge*), *Solitario* (*Hermit*) are enigmatic configurations which up to now have not been appropriately interpreted. Their context, again, is the world of prehistoric man recreated and adapted to contemporary reality. The imagery suggests isolation by means of bridges that can be lifted, monumental tools for ceremonies and mysterious elementary forms for unknown rituals.[34]

Continuing the exploration of human behavior in the image of the far distant past is *Cavaletto* (*Trestle*), which is described "Senza titolo, cavalletto di lana d'acciao a nastro avvolto su armatura lignea, altezza 240, su cui poggiano un sacco a pele e un ciuffo di raffia."[35] This technical description only refers to the physical circumstances of a work which rationally cannot easily be interpreted. It is a powerful image from the world of early man, created by an artist from our time who was capable of uniting the two periods into one new whole. Like shamanistic activity in prehistoric times and like the emotional perception of survival strategies in our time the impact of the work is based on trance in its realm beyond the rational.

Still another work from the last phase of the artist's life is his *L'Arco di Ulisse* (*The Bow of Odysseus*) which again refers in its iconography to prehistoric times, in this case to prehistoric Greece. Relating directly to Odysseus and his armor, this work is a primitive construction of a bow and arrow: the arrow in position, the bow not arched. Pascali created a symbol of Odysseus's identity as Homer did in his Odyssey millennia ago. The bow and arrow are in relation to Pascali's earlier weapons, such as the bomb and the cannons. Weapons as means of human survival are not just products of technology, they provoke emotional responses and, more than that, they become cultural signs of their time.[36]

Recent discussions about mythic elements in contemporary art have emerged, and for the most part they do not deal with Pascali's work. Several exhibitions have focused on the interconnections between prehistoric and primitive art and the art of the twentieth century, resulting in debates about

their affinities.[37] There have been no solutions yet and questions remain open in many directions. Is it possible to remythicate contemporary man? Is a reconstitution of a mythological approach within the reach of scientists, anthropologists and artists? Some contemporary scientists seem to suggest exactly that. For example Joseph Campbell, who in his many books attempted to make mythical thinking again possible in our time. Since the pioneering research of Sir James Frazer, Claude Levi-Strauss and Mircea Eliade into the mythical past there has been indisputable impact on how man in the twentieth century perceives reality in poetry and art.[38]

But there are distinctions to be made. The scientific or philosophical approach only rarely encompasses the power to interconnect past and present, distance and closeness, man and his cosmos.[39] Art goes beyond what science and philosophy can achieve, the irrational interconnection of times and places beyond the rational limits. Art has the capacity to create tradition every time anew, to transcend borders which man in his rational life has to respect, to reconstruct the natural environment of man in its multilayered meaningfulness. Art in this sense has the innate function to express man's survival beyond just staying alive. Art articulates the way man exists in the world and relates to it and to its totality.

Several contemporary artists can be understood in exactly this context, among them Joseph Beuys, Nancy Graves and Jannis Kounellis, who have created powerful manifestations of a contemporary art which has intimate similarities with the art of Prehistory. For the first time we can begin to understand the meaning of prehistoric art forms which would not have been possible without the great artists who opened our eyes and minds to the affinities and qualities of the distant past.[40]

Pascali's works, especially in the last year of his life, have exactly this quality. They anticipate what most of the European and American artists recognized in this context today. His works of 1968 are creative and powerful symbols of a unique type within the context of the art of his time. They reconstruct nature in the same sense in which human survival requires it, by means of the reconstruction of the world in order to relate harmoniously to it and successfully live in it. Goethe expressed this in a letter to F. H. Jacobi: "Look, dear, that, which is beginning and end of all writing, the reproduction of the world around you by the inner world, which catches all, interconnects, creates a new and constitutes its own new forms and manners, this remains forever a secret."[41] Only few artists have these extraordinary capacities. In this sense Pascali, while still widely unknown and underestimated, incorporates in his works the essence of our time. They continue to grow in importance, reaching back to the earliest times of human development. They are the most appropriate artistic explorations of the core of life as it is manifested today in its exuberant beauty and dangerous frailty.

Notes

[1]About Lucio Fontana see: Enrico Crispolti, *Lucio Fontana,* Brussels, 1974.

[2]Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture* (London, 1968), p. 5. From today's perspective it appears questionable whether the prehistoric emotions were indeed uncomplicated or simple.

[3]Literature about Pino Pascali is limited. Only few studies in book form and preliminary introductions to catalogues exist. They are first steps into the study of his works. The most comprehensive information is accumulated in the exhibition catalogues *Mostra di Pino Pascali,* presentation by Palma Bucarelli, 31 maggio-27 giugno, 1969, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Roma, and *Pino Pascali* Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, December 1987-January 1988, with contributions by Fabrizio D'Amico and Simonetta Lux. Books about Pascali are: A. D'Elia, *Pino Pascali,* Bari 1983; Vittorio Rubiu, *Pascali,* Rome 1976. See also: Udo Kultermann, *Pino Pascali,* in exhibition catalogue, Galerie M. E. Thelen, Essen 1967; Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture,* London 1968, and Vittorio Rubiu, *Appendice al 'Pascali,'* in *Studi in Onore di Giulio Carlo Argan* (Rome 1984), vol.II, pp. 375-378.

[4]About Francescco Lo Savio see Udo Kultermann, "The Space-Light Concept in the Works of Francesco Lo Savio," *Pantheon,* IV, 1979; about Manzoni, see Udo Kultermann, *Piero Mansoni,* exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, 1970.

[5]Vittorio Rubiu already interconnected the insights of Eliade with the work of Pascali: "Appendice al 'Pascali,'" in *Studi in Onore di Giulio Carlo Argan,* vol. II, p. 375.

[6]Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture,* p. 6; the term "appropriation" here first was used in the interpretation of art from the Sixties.

[7]Loredana Parmesani, "Pascali," in *Contemporary Artists* (New York, 1983), p. 718.

[8]Illustrations of Frazier's and Warhol's works in Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture,* figs. 61, 62, and 64.

[9]The measurements of the *Il Colosseo (The Colosseum)* are 170 x 220 cm. In one installation photo of the Galleria La Tartaruga the work is set on the ground, in another installation it is exhibited slightly lifted from the ground, hanging on the wall. See also Pierangela Rossi, "Stage Design and Sculptors," *Scultura,* Dic. 1978-Gennaio 1979.

[10]About the building, its historical significance, and the later uses in history, see J. Pearson, *Arena, The Story of the Colosseum* (London, 1973).

[11]C. Vivaldi in his introduction to the exhibition in the Galleria La Tartaruga in 1965 saw the work in the context of a "gusto ironico a demistificante," which by Vittorio Rubiu was related also to Michel Foucault's characterization of Friedrich Nietzsche; see V. Rubiu, "Appendice al 'Pascali,'" p. 376.

[12]Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York, 1974).

[13]The works by Pascali and American Pop Artists are seen in their interrelatedness in Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture.*

[14]See *ibid.*, fig. 137.

[15]See *ibid.*, fig. 134.

[16]Pascali's "Barca" of 1965 can be compared with Kusama's "One Thousand Boat Show" of 1965, which articulates the sexual obsession of the Japanese artist; both illustrated in *ibid.*, p. 89.

[17]Udo Kultermann, "Introduction," exhibition catalogue, Galerie M. E. Thelen (Essen, 1967). The title in its German and English version can also be read as "Objects for the Use of Generals."

[18]Other works by Pascali in the same series were entitled *Uncle Tom and Uncle Sam.* See: exhibition catalogue (Rome, 1969), p. 22.

[19]Udo Kultermann, *I Contemporanei* (Milan, 1979), p. 161.

[20]About the concept of environmental art see Udo Kultermann in "Lo Spazio dell Immagine" (Venice, 1967). The other artists invited to participate in the exhibition in Foligno were Getulio Alviani, Alberto Biasi, Agostino Bonalumi, David Boriani, Enrico Castellani, Mario Ceroli, Gianno Colombo, Gabriele de Vecchi, Luciano Fabro, Tano Festa, Piero Gilardi, Gino Marcotta, Eliseo Mattiacci, Romano Notari, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Gruppo MID, Gruppo ENNE, Paolo Scheggi.

[21]Illustrated in exhibition catalogue *Contemporanea* (Rome, 1974), p. 136; and exhibition catalogue *Pino Pascali* (Milan, 1987/88), No. 1.

[22]Michel Foucault, "Dream and Existence" in *The Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry,* 9, No. 1, 1984-1985, p. 54. Fascinating precedents of these complex iconographic idiosyncrasies are Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Gives Birth to Monsters* of 1796/1798 as part of his series of the *Capricchios* and, in more recent times, and to be seen in the same complex traditional continuity, Max Ernst's *Wenn die Vernunft schlaeft, singen die Sirenen* of 1960. Udo Kultermann, "Twentieth Century Concepts of Sleep," unpublished manuscript, 1986, p. 162. See also Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature,* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1982), p. 264.

[23]The principles of literalness in modern art can be traced back to the revolutionary works of Vladimir Tatlin, see: J. Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde.* (New Haven, 1983).

[23]See the chapter "The Elements as Media," in Udo Kultermann, *The New Sculpture,* (London, 1968), p. 173ff.

[25]On Shamanism the basic works are: Mircea Eliade, *Schamanismus* (Zurich, 1947); Andreas Lommel, *Shamanism* (New York, 1967).

[26]A comparable obsession with prehistoric times and materials in accordance with it is the sculpture of Joseph Beuys. He has a large number of works in materials like fat and felt, in his case often in combination with technological materials and energy systems of our own time; Beuys has accurately been described as a contemporary shaman. About Joseph Beuys see Goetz Adriani et al, *Joseph Beuys* (Cologne, 1973); Heiner Bastian, ed., *Joseph Beuys* (Frankfurt, 1973 and 1975); Rolf Wedewer, "Hirsch und Elch im Zeichnerischen Werk von Joseph Beuys," *Pantheon* (January-February, 1977).

[27]Joris Karl Huysmans, *A Rebours* (Paris, 1887).

[28]Cubism, Fauvism, Brancusi, Giacometti, Ernst, Miro.

[29]Quoted after the revised edition of 1965, p. 18.

[30]William Rubin, *Primitivisms in der Kunst der 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1984).

[31]Udo Kultermann, *I Contemporanea,* p. 160; the given date in that publication has to be changed to 1968.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 172.

[33]"Pelle Consciata" is illustrated in exhibition catalogue *Pino Pascali* (Milan, 1987/1988), No. 15. Also of 1968 are *La Meridiana* and *Nido,* both exhibited in the 1970 exhibition with Iolas in Paris 1970.

[34]See L. Levy-Bruhl, *La Mentalité* Primitive (Paris, 1922); Philip Rawson, ed., *Primitive Erotic Art* (New York, 1973).

[35]Exhibition catalogue Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (Rome, 1969), p. 230.

[36]A related work, also in the context of a theme from antiquity, is *Penne d'Esopo* of 1968. The reference is here to the poet Aesop and the writing of poetry. The work consists of a circular shaped structure with pens sticking out, illustrated in exhibition catalogue, *Contemporanea* (Rome, 1974), p. 137.

[37]Among them is "Zum Mythos der Urspruenglichkeit," Museum Leverkusen, 1984.

[38]See his books *Myths to Live By,* (New York, 1987); *The Power of Myth* (New York, 1988).

[39]One example is the poetry of T.S. Eliot, who openly admits to the influence of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* on his work.

[40]K.H. Bohrer, ed. *Mythos und Moderne. Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion* (Frankfurt, 1983); Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt, 1981), sec. ed.; Douglas Fraser, ed., *The Many Faces of Primitive Art* (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J. 1966); Robert Redfield, Melville J. Herskovits and Gordon F. Ekholm, *Aspects of Primitive Art,* (New York, 1959); A.O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitive and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York, 1935).

[41]Edward Lucie Smith, *Sculpture Since 1945* (New York, 1987) devotes one chapter to "Ethnography, Archaeology and Craft," but does not mention Pino Pascali; Carter Ratcliff, "On Contemporary Primitivism," *Artforum* (November, 1975) discusses a number of American artists in this category.

[42]Goethe, *Werke,* vol. XII, ed. H. von Einem (Hamburg, 1953), p. 693, my translation.

Clement Greenberg in the 1930s: A New Perspective on His Criticism

By Susan Noyes Platt

> Kafka sees life as sealed off and governed by unknowable powers who permit us the liberty only to repeat ourselves until we succumb.
> Clement Greenberg (1946)

In Clement Greenberg's unsettling comment on Franz Kafka, he unwittingly described his own career as an art critic. Greenberg established his permanent criteria for significant art during the same months that the armies of Hitler were engulfing Europe. As he witnessed the disintegration of European civilization, he declared that abstract art, conceived in terms of a purified aesthetic appropriate to the medium in which it was made (i.e., in the case of painting, the art must be flat and concerned with surface), and characterized by unity, immediacy, and authority, was the only art which had a lasting value. This aesthetic, and its accompanying negative value judgments of art that was not in this category, has remained the cornerstone of his criticism to the present day.

For almost fifty years, through drastic social, political, and economic changes, and with the mounting opposition of artists, critics and historians,

Greenberg has continued to reiterate the importance of the autonomous aesthetic experience of abstract art above all others, and to denigrate art that he sees as engaging with lesser issues. His astonishing consistency, paired with a repetitive and assertive dogmatism, has created an aura of absolute verity about the proclamations that he makes concerning the nature of art. Almost hypnotically, the art world still uses his premises as a reference point, both positive and negative, for virtually every discussion on art and aesthetics in contemporary art.[1] Yet, in spite of Greenberg's obvious centrality to the mid twentieth-century dialogue on art, much confusion remains as to exactly how to place Greenberg's contribution in the history of twentieth-century art criticism.

To accurately assess Greenberg's contribution, he must be seen in the larger perspective of twentieth-century political and aesthetic history in Europe and America, rather than simply in the limited arena of the post World War II art world.[2] Greenberg wrote the two most seminal essays of his career as the entire fabric of European civilization was threatened by totalitarianism. Also directly affecting Greenberg was the type of art that was sponsored by the totalitarian governments of Hitler and Stalin and the threat such sponsorship posed to the avant-garde artists who opposed it. These apocalyptic confrontations, in both the political and aesthetic sphere, as well as the particular environment in New York, determined the nature of Greenberg's formulations. In this article I will examine Clement Greenberg's formative years in the late 1930s, his cultural heritage as a Jewish intellectual, and his first contacts with art, aesthetics and politics. My purpose in elucidating the political and cultural context of Greenberg's early work will be to explain why and how he chose the particular stance that he did as well as to suggest why he adhered so rigidly to the same position for five decades.

In his early essays, Greenberg drew eclectically and arbitrarily on political ideology, art, art theory, and critical practices, all filtered through his own cultural perspective. The combination of all these aspects led directly to the startling, dogmatic, dialectical argument in his influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), as well as to the aesthetic proclaimed in "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940). Taken together these two essays contain the core of his thinking. Their principles, generalities, values and language created for Greenberg the bedrock of his later art criticism.[3] They also forge an alliance between formalist methodologies and political metaphors that created a new type of dialogue about art after World War II.[4] Greenberg's activity later as an art critic was based on the transformation of the general principles of his early essays into a simplified and absolute norm, a norm that initially encompassed a new generation of artists in the 1940s, but was not flexible enough to respond to the issues raised by later developments in contemporary art. Despite its inadequacies, this norm and the terms and concepts that accompanied it have been the source of his astonishing influence.[5]

Clement Greenberg was born in 1909 in Bronx, New York, the oldest son of three brothers. His parents were Lithuanian Jews who had come

to the United States separately as children from Russia and Poland. While they were not orthodox in their religious practices, they did speak Yiddish at home. The family moved from the Bronx to Norfolk, Virginia in 1914, then to Brooklyn in 1920. Greenberg attended Syracuse University from 1926 to 1930, majoring in foreign languages. After college Greenberg worked sporadically for his father at variously successful business ventures in drygoods manufacturing. In 1934-1935 he married and had a son. At that time Greenberg obtained a few jobs as a translator for Knight Publications,[6] but from 1936 until 1942 he primarily supported himself by a job in the federal government with the Appraiser's Division of the United States Customs Division, the Department of Wines and Liquors, an intriguing parallel to his developing stance as an appraiser of culture. Unlike many other second generation Jews in the 1930s, he did not work for the Works Progress Administration, but rather obtained a more traditional and economically secure employment. His background places him between the working class roots of some Jewish intellectuals of this era and the Ivy League credentials of others.[7]

Greenberg's Jewish heritage shaped his responses to both art and politics. He emphasized the importance of that heritage by including an essay on Kafka, "The Jewishness of Kafka," in his *Art and Culture* collection of 1961, the book which, until recently, was the only collection of his published writings.[8] In the Kafka essay and elsewhere, Greenberg provides a fascinating perspective on his own work.[9] One of Greenberg's early reviews suggested that the tendency to conceptualize, to think abstractly, was a mode of self-protection for the Jew from the excruciating realities of the ghetto.[10] This inclination toward abstraction and the channelling of emotion into a logical framework was a central characteristic of Greenberg's own writings.

In the two articles that Greenberg devoted specifically to Kafka, he transposed those issues into the character and content of the writing and compared them to the Orthodox Jewish experience:

> Kafka's fiction is composed of parables and cases and deals with the paradigm, the patterns or habits of individual existence, not its originality or unicity (sic)....
>
> Kafka's static, treadmill...world bears many resemblances to the one presented in the Halachic, the legal part of the post-Biblical Jewish religious tradition...the Law....But whereas Halacha arrests and systemizes life into case history for the sake of relating every jot and tittle of it to God,...Kafka with his Westernized sensibility, finds the world static...and experiences, not only alienation, but also its lack of drama, resolution, and history as a nightmare paralyzing us in the face of a doom that wells up out of its very orderliness.[11]

Greenberg's criticism bears a strange resemblance to this description. From the perspective of the Jewish tradition of the Halacha or Law, his rigid aesthetic stance, based on the reiteration of a few concrete aspects of an art work, assume the character of a new Halacha, a transposition of the Jewish heritage into the fabric of his thinking and writing. He can be seen

as the prophet of a new type of Messianic event. Such an absolute faith shielded him from that sense of meaninglessness and impending doom that was so prevalent in the 1940s and so prominent in Kafka.[12]

Greenberg selected a purified, abstract art as the law of his aesthetic. That choice related directly to the artists he first came in contact with just before World War II when he began to involve himself in the art world. In 1938-1939 he attended three lectures by Hans Hofmann and first met the group of writers centered around the *Partisan Review*.[13] These two events were fundamental to the development of his criticism and his aesthetic predilections.

At the time that Greenberg attended the Hofmann lectures (half of the complete series of six lectures Hofmann gave that winter), he had only a cursory knowledge of art and even less of modern art. Except for a single art class in high school at the Art Student's League, Greenberg had been entirely immersed in the study of literature and language.[14] Thus in approaching the Hofmann lectures, he was almost entirely unfamiliar with the principles that Hofmann presented. Greenberg has frequently acknowledged that these lectures were fundamental to his aesthetic ideas.[15] They apparently enabled Greenberg to make a rapid leap from a traditional view of art to a conception of the abstract principles governing modern art. Certainly Greenberg's inclination to think in terms of abstract ideas as well as his need for a reference point in understanding art increased the impact of Hofmann's ideas.

Hofmann's own interpretation of modernism came out of Paris and Germany before World War I. He began teaching American students in Germany in 1915. Coming to America with their support in 1930, he settled in New York the following year. He thus had little contact with the continuing European avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. After 1936 and particularly the large exhibition of "Cubism and Abstract Art" at the Museum of Modern Art, his lectures contained more examples from recent art, particularly Matisse, Miro and Mondrian. But he continued to discuss space in a way that exactly corresponded to the type of low relief/deep space, flat surface tension apparent in the work of Cézanne and the early Cubism of Braque and Picasso.

In the 1938-1939 lecture series Hofmann spoke of the dynamic of the picture plane. After almost twenty years of teaching American art students, he had an acute awareness of their particular academic perspective; all of his teaching was aimed at breaking through that limited understanding. He contrasted the concept of the plane to the traditional one-point perspective of earlier art. He spoke of the importance of the given reality of the surface on which the artist worked and the role of the medium. These two issues, planar surface, which Greenberg later simplified to flatness, and the important role of medium and surface, became the cornerstone of Greenberg's aesthetics.

But there is a crucial difference between Hofmann and Greenberg. Hofmann spoke of surface and flatness in terms of space. He demonstrated planar relationships (the famous "push and pull"). The surface was given,

but the artist created, by means of formal shapes, tension in it. This planar tension effected a sense of depth. It was a central issue in his teaching. Greenberg heard the lecture in which Hofmann stated:

> ...the real problem in planes creation is just this—to destroy this two dimensionality and recreate with three dimensionality this two dimensionality. In other words, there is a fundamental difference between flatness and flatness.
>
> There can be a flatness which is meaningless and there can be a flatness that is a highest experience of life—from infinite depth and up to the surface—restoring ultimately the two dimensionality. *This is what plastic creation means.* Otherwise it is decoration.
>
> ...Naturally we cannot create actual depth—we can only create the illusion of depth as opposed to movement on the surface. Many of the so-called abstract artists today are not clear about this.[16]

Hofmann's entire teaching hinged on this crucial issue: space was "something concrete," not just the surroundings of an image and not just two dimensional surface. Depth was necessary, and it was based on a relationship with the given space. For Greenberg, this subtle idea and distinction would ultimately become simply flatness and the simple two dimensional surface, a "premise" that Hofmann was carefully avoiding.

Hofmann linked spatial tensions to a conflict or struggle with the medium, a crucial point in lecture 2 of his 1938-1939 series:

> Nobody can make a hole in his picture to go into the picture and come out again. No—the depth is here and must be created with the understanding of the medium with which we create.... Richness, fullness, vitality—these are all things that must be experienced in a direct or indirect way...in the conflict with the medium with which I struggle. So when an artist works by heart he takes the nature of his medium as the basis for his creation.[17]

The idea of a struggle with the medium would also be fundamental to Greenberg.

Hofmann went on to explain the importance of purity, particularly with respect to color and color relationships. Another constant theme was unity of the picture plane. He accompanied his lectures with diagrams that demonstrated his theories. On the issue of abstraction, Hofmann felt it was not absolutely necessary in 1938-1939, but that abstract ways of thinking about the creation of a work of art were fundamental. (Hofmann himself did not begin to paint completely abstract works until the early 1940s.) Greenberg's focus on abstraction came from other sources initially. The first essay in which Greenberg fully embraced Hofmann's ideas on the importance of unity, purity, and formalism in art was "Towards a Newer Laocoon," which appeared in the *Partisan Review* of July-August 1940. Greenberg combined Hofmann's emphasis on the importance of purity in the use of the elements and medium of art with the idea of purity in terms of content:

> From the point of view of the artist engrossed in the problems of his medium...purism is the terminus of a salutary reaction against the mistakes of painting and sculpture in the past several centuries which were due to such a confusion [of the arts.][18]

In developing the idea of purity, Greenberg also borrowed from a conservative theorist, Irving Babbitt, whose book *A New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), Greenberg cited. Babbitt, in turn, relied on the ideas of an eighteenth-century writer, Gotthold Lessing. Babbitt favored formal classicism and opposed Romanticism as impure because of its narrative elements. Romanticism was also a regression for Greenberg. In Greenberg's article, the turning point in the purification of the medium was Courbet, in whose painting "flatness" explicitly emerged. Thus Greenberg arrived at the avant-garde ghetto of purity:

> ...the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its "legitimate" boundaries and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art....
>
> The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums.[19]

The peculiar territorial note to this remark may well have been a subconscious parallel to the European losses of territorial integrity in the spring of 1939. As Greenberg wrote his theory of pure art, Paris was surrendering to the Nazis, the perpetrators of the idea of racial purity.

In "Towards A Newer Laocoon," Greenberg defined purified art in terms of Hofmann's formalist aesthetic, explaining what was specifically happening in purified painting. He elaborated on the denial of perspective space and the importance of the "square" of canvas and its "actual surface." He tackled the Hofmann concepts of planar complexity, but subtly transformed them into a progressive development from a type of struggle between volume and plane into a "further stage" in which the "realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface."

The culmination of this development appeared, according to Greenberg, in the work of the recent "abstract purism" of the Dutch, Germans, English and Americans. These artists were contrasted on the one hand to the "orthodox surrealists" who "turned back to the confusion of literature with painting," and, on the other hand, the "mock surrealists" like Miro, Klee, and Arp, "whose work, despite its apparent intention only contributed to the further deployment of abstract painting pure and simple." Greenberg suggested that these artists intended to be expressive but "so inexorable was the logic of the development that in the end their work constituted but another step towards abstract art." Greenberg added here to his sequence of avant-gardism, purism, and abstraction, a deterministic "imperative."[20]

Greenberg directly reflected, in the examples cited above of specific artists, not simply Hofmann's preferences, but also the environment of the *Partisan Review,* the magazine for which he was writing. George L.K. Morris, an editor and backer of the *Partisan Review,* was their official art critic as well as an abstract artist and leader of the large group known as the American Abstract Artists. Morris's reviews of abstract art in the *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1943 stand out, amidst the political complexity of the rest of the magazine, as an Olympian statement of an ideal. In addition to an interview with Jean Helion, reviews of the English abstract artist Ben Nicholson and French artists such as Jean Arp, Hans Hartung and Joan Miro, Morris wrote "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting" and the "Relations of Painting and Sculpture."[21] Greenberg cited this review in one of his own reviews, although the article does not at all correspond to Greenberg's own theory of medium purity.[22] Morris wrote with a sophisticated formal vocabulary; he emphasized the "decisive properties" of the medium and he introduced Greenberg to the abstract artists working from 1939-1943. Greenberg was not aware in 1940 that Morris based his writing on principles developed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell in the teens and twenties. Nor was he aware of the full scope of twentieth-century art. This lack of perspective led him to cling to Hofmann's emphasis on Cubism as well as Morris's formalist advocacy of abstraction with the ardent belief of a new disciple who had received a revelation. That revelation remained his credo throughout his career.

At one point in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Greenberg linked the early stages of the avant-garde to "opposition to bourgeois society," an act of "self-preservation...responsible to...only the values of art."[23] Here he was utilizing Leon Trotsky's analysis of the role of art in a revolutionary society. Greenberg simply transformed the aesthetics of purism into a radical act of social revolution. Under the pressure of the era in which Greenberg was writing, abstraction became the radical painting which, inherently inseparable from radical politics, was the last hope for the survival of culture.[24]

The underpinning for this position appears in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Its main focus was the linkage of aesthetics and politics. It was the direct result of Greenberg's contact, in 1938-1939, with Dwight Macdonald, an editor at the *Partisan Review.* When Greenberg met Macdonald, his contact with politics, apart from the generally socialistic orientation in which he had grown up, was almost as slight as his contact with visual art.[25] His interests had been intellectual rather than activist. As in the case of formalism, Greenberg engaged with radical politics in the cultural sphere when it was already an acknowledged, serious influence on American intellectuals. In fact, by the late 1930s, the political/cultural nexus had reached a peak of tension and complexity.

The linkage of radical art and radical politics began early in America. It existed already in the teens, in the Greenwich Village activities of Floyd Dell, John Reed, Randolph Bourne, and others.[26] By the time Greenberg joined the influential intellectual group around the *Partisan Review* in late 1938, it had already gone through several stages of Marxism. *Partisan*

Review writers included Meyer Schapiro, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, and Harold Rosenberg, as well as Philip Rahv and William Phillips, the original founders, and Dwight Macdonald, Frederick Dupee and George Morris, who helped reorganize the magazine in late 1937. They made a brave anti-Communist stand in late 1937, after the news from Russia of the Moscow purges and the persecution of the intellectuals reached America. In lieu of Stalin and Communism, the editors embraced a more traditional Marxist-socialism that called for workers' revolutions to overturn the ruling class. They also actively sought a solution to the dilemma of creating culture in a revolutionary society. They turned to gleanings from early Marxist writings, and to Leon Trotsky.[27] Trotsky's ideas about the role of the intellectual, and the current status of revolutionary art, appeared in the *Partisan Review* in two articles in the summer and fall of 1938. Trotsky claimed that the masses did not create revolutionary ideas, but were led by the cultural sphere. That sphere maintained its separate activity yet provided the central inspiration for revolution, because "the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art." At the same time, Trotsky was opposed to purism: "It is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art."[28]

Greenberg would have read these articles about the time he met Dwight Macdonald in late 1938. In his own writing, however, he ignored the fact that Trotsky was opposed to purism and aestheticism in art, and adopted the model of art he learned from Hofmann and Morris as the only acceptable radical art. For Greenberg, new to the art world, abstraction and purity appeared to be sufficiently radical tools in the cultural struggle. His basic theoretical accomplishment was to change the idea of the artist as a subconscious participant in the revolution working in a separate sphere, into the notion that abstract art, through its struggle with the medium and pursuit of purity can function as the emblem of the revolution. That was how Greenberg himself turned "Trotskyism...into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come," as he proclaimed with the hindsight of the 1950s.[29]

Shortly afterwards, Greenberg published a short study of Bertolt Brecht, establishing his Marxist credentials.[30] He was in Europe from April to June of 1939, a tense time to travel there. He interviewed Ignazio Silone in exile in Zurich who was an important figure to the *Partisan Review*. An anti-Stalinist, he balanced art and politics, ideas and reality.[31] Greenberg's interview appeared in the *Partisan Review* in the fall of 1939, in the same issue with Greenberg's first major article, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." The published interview provided several constructs Greenberg used in his own article. Silone spoke of a "third front," which would be politically independent, and to which writers would belong: "The third front, existing as yet only in an ideal state, must be kept pure as an ideal. And for that too, courage was required." He opposed the *ersatz*, conservative solutions of Fascism, asserting that socialism was crucial to "a regime of real freedom."

He then went on to oppose the role that writers played under Stalinism, saying that they "risk nothing." Finally, he spoke of the work of art as "beautiful, quite apart from the intentions of the artist."[32] Silone's language— "courage," "idealism," "risk," "beauty"—easily found its way into Greenberg's youthful aesthetic and political vocabulary.

Where his short article on Bertold Brecht had opened the door of *Partisan Review* for him by its display—however shortlived—of the correct political credentials, Greenberg's second article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" established him as an influential critic. As a theoretical statement it picked up on Silone's ideas about the importance of an absolute or ideal realm of art. Greenberg linked that ideal realm to Hofmann's aesthetic of "spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors."[33]

Greenberg contrasted such pure art, specified by sweeping general examples, to "kitsch," the term he adopted to describe mass culture. Mass culture, in Greenberg's definition, was mechanically reproduced, and "draws its life blood" from real culture. Greenberg equated this type of mass culture with resentment of avant-garde culture, and to the type of realism supported by fascism:

> Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness or the blood's health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.[34]

Greenberg saw these regimes as responding to mass taste and utilizing that taste as an effective tool of propaganda. Greenberg was more elitist than either Trotsky or Silone, for he utterly disdained the mass taste of the worker: "There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch."[35] Thus, Greenberg expanded his category of kitsch, adding folk art to realism and to mass produced imitations of the avant-garde. Greenberg derived his notion of the nature of working class taste, or kitsch from an article by Dwight Macdonald on Soviet Cinema, in which Macdonald connected the decline of avant-garde Soviet Cinema with the government's desire to use film as understandable propaganda directed to the working class. The Soviet Government supported popular style, in some cases basing it on Hollywood movies, in order to communicate the Government's socialist message to a large public.[36]

Greenberg generalized mass culture, folk art, and realism into a single negative. In viewing realism as a regression to an easy art, Greenberg adopted the model of Hofmann, who regarded realism (and surrealism, especially as used by Dali) as less modern than art that utilized abstract formal principles. Abstraction became the radical alternative to realism (and

by extension mass culture) that would preserve the revolution, if not bring it about. The obvious contradiction that the working class didn't like abstraction, that it was in fact an elite art, and that it required the support of the powerful class that was supposed to be overthrown, did not trouble Greenberg.

In his fundamentally elitist definition and privileging of a realm of culture, Greenberg borrowed more from T.S. Eliot than Trotsky and Silone.[37] In the 1930s, Eliot pursued a "reactionary" direction: he converted to Catholicism, and was considered a fascist. But Eliot's dicta for writing, and his model of the development of art echoed in Greenberg's work. Indeed, it fit seamlessly together with his other intellectual frameworks.

Eliot, in his 1923 essay "The Function of Criticism," spoke of the "problem of order." He regarded the critic's responsibility to be the making of order, that is, providing a system as a context for individual works of art: "There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position." The idea of an issue larger than art itself, which Eliot at one point said "may provisionally be called truth," dominated individual artists.[38]

Eliot offered a more hierarchial model of art than Trotsky. For Trotsky, the artist led the uninformed masses to revolution by reason of his intellectual superiority. For Eliot, the artist followed a higher concept, which had nothing to do with the masses. For Greenberg, the issue of art was this independent ideal. By focusing on this great abstract absolute—seemingly fortuitously represented by abstract art—the artist attempted to realize, Greenberg justified a privileged realm of art and artist. This led to a narrow view of culture (and indirectly of politics). It precluded engagement with political or social change. In fact, it encouraged maintenance of the established system, the ideological status quo. Indeed, art had no social necessity in this view.

Socialism, then, was a mere dusting on Greenberg's vocabulary, designed to give him access to the politicized pages of the *Partisan Review*.[39] He also adopted the magazine's embattled tone, its call-to-arms chic. The *Partisan Review* regarded itself as preserving and identifying the only authentic radical culture of the late 1930s. It thought of itself as the only hope for the future of culture. Greenberg aggressively asserted, in true *Partisan Review* style: "Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened."[40] Fundamental to the year 1939 was a sense of combat and confrontation—struggle between opposing forces. Greenberg's dogmatic certainty and generalization of polarities reflect anxiety about the future of culture, and by implication of humanity, during the bleak hours immediately before and just after the start of World War II. It was a time when hundreds of European artists faced a choice of exile or death. The *Zeitgeist* did not allow for petty quibbling and precious subtleties. Ultimately, Greenberg's formulation of an artistic/political avant-garde, with a shallow link to socialism, sought—for all its conservative aspects—to create an at-

mosphere of hope. He in effect attempted to save high culture from social catastrophe. Ironically, it could only be saved if it voluntarily went into the ghetto of abstraction. In fact, this aesthetic ghetto was established by a world at war, with limited patience for high art, and with the time and energy only for an obvious realism and an even more obvious kitsch.

Greenberg did not actually work as an art critic—as opposed to a theoretician of culture—until 1941, when he began to write for the *Nation* in two inches of space at the end of the magazine. After a brief stint in the military in the Spring and Summer of 1943, he became a regular reviewer. His criticism of the early and mid forties continues to utilize the instruments of aesthetic critical taste he developed from 1938-40. This remained the case even as he was confronted by the increasingly varied styles of the artworld itself. To his frustration and surprise, Greenberg discovered that much art—particularly Surrealism—did not correspond to his aesthetic, and thought it irrelevant.

While, at the end of "Towards a Newer Laocoon," he had written that he did not know which way art would develop, in his first exhibition review he was in fact dogmatic about what was "necessary" in art: "Shows of the works of three great, or once great abstract painters held in New York recently afforded an opportunity to consider the present condition of our most advanced painting... It is my opinion that the fate of our particular tradition of art depends upon that into which abstract art develops."[41] This statement initiated the strategy of prediction—in effect an attempt to predetermine significance—Greenberg avoided in his earlier essay. By 1944 Greenberg wrote, emphatically, that "the most ambitious and effective pictorial art of these times is abstract or goes in that direction." He justified his statement with a passing dialectical allusion to history. By 1946 Greenberg declared, with assurance, that "Gorky, Hare, Roszak, Tobey, MacIver, Price and even Motherwell have to be taken seriously, whether for good or bad...they are among the relatively few people upon whom the fate of American art depends."[42] This little ghetto of abstract artists, with their supposed avant-garde idealism, had nothing less than the fate of art in their hands. The presumably only hope of culture in the dark forties was a delusion of abstract grandeur.

Greenberg developed the metaphor of the artist struggling to avoid surrendering in a fight, a theme readymade for war time: "How arduous is the career of the abstract painter, how difficult it is to sustain his freshness and growth... When the abstract artist grows tired, he becomes an interior decorator."[43] For Greenberg's aesthetic of theoretically autonomous abstract art, the wartime struggle was transformed into—reduced to—that between artist and medium, rather than Nazi and Jew, or socialist and bourgeois.

At the same time, he was confronted—surrounded—by Surrealism. Initially he thought it represented "the world on the point of dissolution" (1942). This telling metaphor suggests the reason for his uneasiness with the style.[44] In 1944 he was "worried" about such artists as Dali, Blume, Tchelitchew, Berman, Tanguy, among others: "The extreme eclecticism now prevailing in art is unhealthy and it should be counteracted, even at

the risk of dogmatism and intolerance."[45] Finally, he wrote a long essay opposing Surrealism, referring to it contemptuously as "vicarious wish fulfillment."[46]

Shortly after his attack on Surrealism he reviewed an exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of this Century Gallery. He declared that "Jackson Pollock and William Baziotes...[were] among the six or seven best young painters we possess.... Baziotes is unadulterated talent...deflected by nothing extraneous to painting." Greenberg said that if Motherwell, "Only let himself stop watching himself, let him stop thinking....Let him forget his personal 'subject matter'....But he has already done enough to make it no exaggeration to say the future of American painting depends on what he, Baziotes, Pollock and only a comparatively few others do from now on."[47] The Abstract Expressionists, interpreted strictly in terms of their articulation of surface seemed the proof-in-the-pudding of Greenberg's aesthetic. Lauded as the critic who discovered the Abstract Expressionists, Greenberg in fact did no more than interpret them in the voice he had created for himself, editing out their extensive interest in symbolism and content. He in effect castrated them for the sake of his limp aestheticism.

Through his simplification of Abstract Expressionism Greenberg perpetuated his 1939-1940 polarized, generalized aesthetic of abstraction, surface, flatness, and purity. He spoke of the "dangerous and exciting abstract," "ambitious" and "serious." The terms of his dialectic of art changed slightly, but his grand distinction between avant-garde and kitsch persisted. Greenberg now set the difficulties of avant-garde art over against the facile and the decorative, "merely pleasing" and "naturalistic."[48] In the forties Greenberg began to speak of taste as the deciding factor in the polarized art situation. Good taste, rather than good politics, became the key issue.[49] In spite of his embellishment of his criticism with fresh metaphors and adjectives, it continued to deal—redundantly—with the same issues. He continued to support the same post-Cubist aesthetic he preferred in his early essays.

In the late 1940s, Greenberg made a grand aesthetic stand in several long *Partisan Review* articles.[50] Now a powerful intellectual force in New York, after writing for many years in the *Nation,* he aroused strong objections to his criticism. The first attack came from his former colleague at *Partisan Review,* George L.K. Morris. He found Greenberg a disgrace to the profession:

> So deftly and inaccurately are the appraisals contrived that one suspects the thesis of having been the starting point—especially as several names that do not follow the pattern get left off the lists entirely. The field of contemporary art is given the semblance of a tournament. Umpire Greenberg charts the last rounds.[51]

Morris's skepticism, and his sense of Greenberg as a manipulator of reputations, seemed, at the time, to be related to his apparent conservatism as a critic. In fact, Morris forecasts what became some of the terms of objection to Greenberg which became universal in the fifties and sixties.

Other critics with more complex criteria of significance recognized the Abstract Expressionists,[52] but Greenberg got all the credit. In the 1950s, the New York art world lionized him and his aesthetic. The domination of his simplistic dialectical formalism, based on a facile antithesis of good and bad, avant-garde and kitsch, acceptable and unacceptable, in or out, reflects the naiveté of the New York art world at the time. It especially indicates the absence of a tradition of sophisticated art criticism and discussion of art. It also suited the Cold War era, when good and bad seemed easily differentiated.

But even as abstract painters—products of Hofmann's teaching and Greenberg's preaching—began to dominate the New York art world in the late 1940s and 1950s, the banned aesthetic of realism, decorative art, narrative art, and even mass culture itself developed vigorously, proliferating until it could no longer be ignored nor matter-of-factly dismissed as trivial and irrelevant. By the 1970s, Greenberg's clear dialectic of good and bad taste dissolved in a new environment of ambiguity and pluralism.

Greenberg's tragedy was his inability to modify his ideas on art to respond to changing circumstances. He rigidly adhered to an aesthetic of abstraction, defined in terms of flatness and purity. He had quickly latched onto those ideas, borrowed from Hofmann, and promoted by Morris. For Greenberg, they became a security blanket against the threatened obliteration of all culture. That sense of threat remains alive in Greenberg's writing to this day. Perhaps if he had allowed himself a more difficult, sustained struggle with his own medium of art criticism his thinking would have had more depth. But in the desperate atmosphere of the late thirties, extended theoretical explorations were not permitted. Decisions, including art decisions, had to be made quickly. Greenberg needed the certainty of a fixed point of reference. Carefully dissected, the conservativism of his criticism—in the original sense of that term—becomes evident. It was the result of his Jewish heritage, described by Greenberg himself as emphasizing logic, abstraction, and the belief in an absolute. Greenberg brought these predispositions to bear on an early twentieth-century version of aesthetic significance, clothing it in a forceful style of writing, and giving it a political flair.

His repetitive, increasingly mechanical dialectic of art contrasts sharply with his subtle analysis of literature, especially in the first ten years of his career. He never settled for an absolute norm in his analysis of Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, and the Victorian novel.[53] His literary criticism is at times more daring and durable, and subtle than his art criticism. Although he adopted, particularly in his later writing, some of the same notions, such as medium purity, he did not use them as uncompromisingly. The dogmatism of his art criticism, his whole program of formalism in visual art seems, in retrospect, Kafkaesque. It reflects Greenberg's fear of impending doom. This fear forced him to maintain an absolute—religious—belief in a utopian sphere of aesthetic activity, in order to avoid surrender to despair.

> Kafka sees life as sealed off and governed by unknowable powers who permit us the liberty only to repeat ourselves until we succumb.[54]
>
> Clement Greenberg (1946)

Notes

[1]The bibliography on Clement Greenberg is extensive. The best overview and bibliography of his criticism is Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg, Art Critic,* (Madison, 1979). See also Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism,* vol. i. *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1940,* and vol. ii. *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949,* ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, 1986). Page numbers and titles from these anthologies are identified as "reprint."

[2]Recently some aspects of Greenberg's career have begun to be examined from a political perspective. One excellent example is Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History,* vol. 4, no. 3 (September 1981): 305-327.

[3]Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review,* vol. 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 5-22, and "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review,* vol. 7, no. 4 (July-August 1940), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 23-38.

[4]While other writers posited alliances between art and politics, Greenberg's particular version has been the most influential, primarily because of his dogmatic consistency. For a general survey of some aspects of the thirties' alliance of art and politics see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago, 1983), chap. 1.

[5]The concept of what constitutes an avant-garde has been the focus of major reconsideration in theoretical studies in the last twenty years. A reference to Greenberg's early essays is usually included. See for example Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 80-81, for an astute analysis. See also, for a seminal redefinition of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, 1984) and, for the next generation of theory, where some of Greenberg's long usage still resonates, Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide, Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986). Huyssen also makes a valuable parallel between Greenberg and the theory of Theodor Adorno, p. 9.

[6]Greenberg's first translation was of the report by the World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, *The Brown Network, The Activities of the Nazis in Foreign Countries* (New York, 1936). The book focused on political infiltration and activities such as the kidnapping of Berthold Jacob. Anti-semitism was discussed only occasionally. His second translation, in collaboration with Emma Ashton and Jay Dratler, was Manfred Schneider, *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist as a Man* (New York, 1936). The employment was with the publisher of these works. The first book introduced Greenberg to urgent contemporary political issues, the other to art history.

[7]Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Boston, 1962, 1965) exemplifies the working class branch. The Ivy League background of writers such as Lionel Trilling and Sidney Hook is discussed in, for example, Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill, 1987), pp. 33-47 and pp. 50-52. Another excellent source is Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison, 1986). On the Ivy League credentials of several of the editors, see, pp. 100, 101.

[8]Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston, 1961), pp. 266-273. The book has a subtle art historical order in terms of the artists discussed, indicating Greenberg's leanings at that time. On Greenberg's liaison with art historians in his later career see the insightful articles by Barbara Reise, "Greenberg and the group: a retrospective view," *Studio International,* vol. 175, no. 900 (May, 1968), pp. 254-257 and

vol. 175, no. 901 (June, 1968), pp. 314-315. Kuspit (cited n. 1), pp. 21-22, makes the important point that Greenberg heavily revised his essays when they were published in *Art and Culture* into an "oracular" style. This type of revision is strongly in evidence in the case of the Kafka essay, which first appeared as "The Jewishness of Franz Kafka: Some Sources of His Particular Vision," *Commentary,* vol. 19 (April, 1955), pp. 320-324. At that time it generated some discussion; see F.R. Leavis, "How Good is Kafka," *Commentary,* vol. 19 (June, 1955), pp. 595-596 and Greenberg's reply, ibid., pp. 595-596; F.R. Leavis,"A Critical Exchange," *Commentary,* vol. 19 (August, 1955), pp. 178-179. Leavis complained about Greenberg's unfounded assertions as well as his separation of art and life which "would lead to a doctrine of aestheticism and Pure Art Value. ...[which] no one seriously interested in literature has ever readily held." Curiously, unlike the other revisions, Greenberg does not acknowledge these in *Art and Culture.*

[9]He stated in fact that "I believe that a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write." "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews." *Contemporary Jewish Record,* vol. vii, no. 1 (February 1944), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 177.)

[10]"The Jewish Dickens: review of *The World of Sholom Aleichem* by Maurice Samuel," *The Nation,* 16 October 1943, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, pp. 156-157.

[11]"Introduction to 'The Great Wall of China' by Franz Kafka," *Commentary,* vol. 2, no. 4 (October, 1946), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. ii, pp. 101-102.

[12]Greenberg returned to the theme of the Halacha in the 1955 article on Kafka that he included in *Art and Culture.* There he stated, more obviously and somewhat more negatively, the role it played in Jewish secular culture, with its "petty concerns, its parochial absorption in the here and now and its conformism. Routine, prudence, sobriety are enjoined for their own sake, as ends in themselves and for the sake purely of security...The emancipated Jew longs for history more deeply and at the same time more immediately than the Orthodox Jew." (*Art and Culture,* [cited n. 8], p. 269.) The concern for the "Halachic sensibility" in the work of Kafka, according to Greenberg, made it "difficult to charge their matter with dramatic movement." Likewise, Greenberg was unable to significantly modify or alter his original ideas, to display any movement or development in his own thinking. Last, Greenberg suggested that Kafka "wanted more than anything else to be an artist, a writer of fiction not of oracles." This too can apply to Greenberg, who was a writer of oracles.

[13]The literature on the *Partisan Review* is extensive. See for example, James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (London, 1968), chap. 4-8 and more recently Cooney (cited n. 7).

[14]Clement Greenberg to Susan Platt, June 1, 1984, San Francisco. In this conversation, Greenberg also stated that he had read Sheldon Cheney's book on modern art [probably *The Story of Modern Art,* New York, 1941] around this time, also reinforcing the idea that he was not at all versed in modern art. Greenberg has also stated that he understood little about art at this time. See "The Late Thirties in New York," *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), p. 230.

[15]Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," reprinted (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 9, note; "Review of an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann...." reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 2, p. 18; "The Late Thirties in New York," (cited, n. 8), p. 230. See also "Hans Hofmann," *ibid.,* pp. 189-196.

[16]Transcription by Lenita Manry, "Hans Hofmann Lectures, Winter 1938-1939," Lecture 1, p. 5, Lenita Manry Papers, Microfilm Roll 151, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[17]Hofmann (cited n. 16), pp. 4, 6.

[18]"Towards a Newer Laocoon," (cited, n. 1), vol. 1, p. 23.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 32.

[20]*Ibid.*, pp. 35-38. Greenberg's determinism has already been widely discussed and will not be treated here. See Kuspit (cited n. 1), chap 2.

[21]George L.K. Morris, "Modernism, in England," book review of *Circle, "Partisan Review,* vol. 4, no. 1 (December 1937), pp. 69-70; "Art Chronicle: Hans Arp" *Partisan Review,* vol. 4, no. 2 (January 1938), p. 32-33, "Miro and the Spanish Civil War," *Partisan Review,* vol. 4 no. 3 (February 1938), pp. 32-33; "Interview with Jean Helion," *Partisan Review,* vol. 4, no. 5 (April 1938), pp. 33-40; "Art Chronicle: Recent Tendencies in Europe," *Partisan Review,* vol. 4, no. 5 (Fall, 1939), pp. 31-33; "On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting," *Partisan Review,"* vol. 8. no. 5 (December 1941), pp. 403-417; "Relations of Painting and Sculpture," *Partisan Review,* vol. 10, no. 1 (January-February 1943), pp. 63-71. For a helpful comparison of Morris and Greenberg see Melinda Lorenz, *George L.K. Morris, Artist and Critic* (Ann Arbor, 1982), pp. 95-103.

[22]Greenberg, "Review of the Exhibition 'American Sculpture of Our Time,' " *The Nation,* January 23, 1943, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 140.

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 28.

[24]Two poignant examples of the apocalyptic atmosphere of those years and the *Partisan Review*'s concern are an article of January-February 1941 (immediately following Morris's "Art Chronicle") titled "What Has Become of Them? A Checklist of European Artists, Writers and Musicians." *Partisan Review,* vol. 8, no. 1 (January-February 1941), pp. 59-62. Photographs labelled as "the only photographs ever taken of murals by Joan Miro. ...According to reports, the walls of the house were knocked out when the Germans recently converted it into a stable. Thus, Miro's only mural work has presumably been destroyed." Miro's photograph appeared in *Partisan Review,* vol. 8, no. 3 (May-June 1941), inside front cover. The photograph was by Suzy Frelingheusen, another member of the Abstract American Artists. Gilbert (cited n. 13), p. 194 also discusses some of the activities of the *Partisan Review* to save the writers and artists.

[25]Cooney (cited n. 7), p. 21 treats the role of socialism for the young Jewish intellectual. See also Alfred Kazin, (cited n. 7).

[26]Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York, 1961) and Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, *Socialism and American Life,* 2 vols. (Princeton, 1952) offer comprehensive accounts of socialism, communism and Marxism in America. See also Gilbert (cited n. 17).

[27]William Phillips, "The Esthetic of the Founding Fathers," *Partisan Review,* vol. 4, no. 4 (March 1938), pp. 11-21.

[28]Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton, "Manifesto: Toward a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review,* vol. v, no. 4 (Fall 1938), pp. 51, 52. Although signed by Andre Breton and Diego Rivera, the article is by Trotsky and Breton; see Herschel Chipp,

ed. *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 457, n. 1. See also Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics In Our Epoch," *Partisan Review,* vol. v, no. 3 (August 1938), pp. 3-10.

[29]"The Late Thirties," (cited n. 8), p. 230.

[30]"The Beggar's Opera—After Marx: Review of A Penny for the Poor by Bertolt Brecht." *Partisan Review,* vol. 4 no. 4 (Winter 1939), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, pp. 3-4. A Marxist interpretation is briefly alluded to in certain class references, almost unavoidable in Brecht, but the bulk of the article is not Marxist. Greenberg had thought about Brecht since the early thirties (ibid., p. xx)

[31]Cooney (cited., n. 7), pp. 148-149.

[32]"An Interview with Ignazio Silone," *Partisan Review,* vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1939), pp. 23, 26, 28. According to the introductory note, the interview was written by Silone based on Greenberg's notes.

[33]"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," (cited n. 3), p. 9.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 18,19.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 17.

[36]Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Society and Its Cinema," *Partisan Review,* vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter, 1939), pp. 80-95. Greenberg made several direct references to ideas in the article in his own essay. The term "kitsch" appears to be Greenberg's own choice of terminology for the mass culture. Since he knew German, it is probable that he simply knew the word and its meaning, "trash, sappy stuff."
Van Wyck Brooks (New York, 1948).

[37]Clement Greenberg to Susan Platt (cited n. 14). In this conversation he stated emphatically (speaking as he writes) that Eliot was the principle inspiration for his criticism. Greenberg did not acknowledge his debt to Eliot until he included an article by him in *Art and Culture.*

[38]T.S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (London 1933), pp. 12-13, 22.

[39]Two analysis of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," that point out its weaknesses as an ideological document, are in Cooney (cited, n. 7), pp. 211-212 and Andrew Higgins, "Clement Greenberg and the Idea of the Avant-Garde," *Studio International* 182 (October 1971), pp. 144-147. Greenberg's contact with Macdonald, a highly politicized writer, would have required him to engage in political stances. Macdonald's sponsorship of Greenberg provided the budding writer with his rapidly developing position within the magazine. His closeness to Macdonald is suggested by their collaboration on "Ten Propositions on the War," *Partisan Review,* vol. 8, no. 4 (July-August 1941), pp. 271-278.

[40]"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1 p. 11.

[41]"Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miro, Fernand Leger, and Wassily Kandinsky," *The Nation,* April 19, 1941, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 62.

[42]"Review of the Pepsi-Cola Annual; the Exhibition 'Fourteen Americans'; and the Exhibition 'Advancing American Art'," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 2, p. 113.

[43]"Miro, Leger, Kandinsky," reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 63-64.

[44]"Walter Quirt," *The Nation,* 7 March 1942, p. 294 (Not included in reprint).

[45]"A New Installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a Review of the Exhibition 'Art in Progress' " *The Nation,* 10 June 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 213.

[46]"Surrealist Painting," *The Nation* 19 August 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. 1, p. 231. Piri Halasz, "Art Criticism (and Art History) in New York: The 1940s vs. the 1980s; Part Three: Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine,* vol. 57 (April 1983), pp. 80-89, discusses Greenberg's writings on Surrealism, taking issue with the idea that Greenberg opposed it.

[47]"Review of Exhibitions of William Baziotes and Robert Motherwell," *The Nation,* 11, November 1944, reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 239, 240, 241. The challenges raised by Pollock's work for Greenberg's criticism are material for a separate study. See for example, "Review of Exhibitions of Marc Chagall, Lyonel Feininger, and Jackson Pollock," *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

[48]Reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 211, 131, 153, 287. For one study of Greenberg's later criticism see Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor, 1980), chap. 3-4. Foster also makes a helpful comparison between Greenberg and Walter Pater, pp. 20-21.

[49]Kuspit (cited n. 1), chap. 6 amusingly discussed this issue at length.

[50]"The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 1 (January 1948) reprint (cited n. 1), pp. 192-196. "The Decline of Cubism," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 3 (March 1948), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II pp. 211-215. "The Crises of the Easel Picture," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 4 (April 15, 1948,) reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 221-225. "Irrelevance and Irresponsibility," *Partisan Review,* vol. 15, no. 5 (May 15, 1948), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. II, pp. 573-579; for other *Partisan Review* articles see Kuspit (cited n. 1), p. 207.

[51]"On Critics and Greenberg: A Communication," *Partisan Review,* June 1948, p. 682.

[52]The criticism of James Johnson Sweeney stands out as more subtle and sophisticated, than Greenberg's in its engagement with elements other than form. See for example James Johnson Sweeney, "Art Chronicle," *Partisan Review,* vol. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1945), pp. 240-242 and "An Interview with Jacques Lipchitz," *Partisan Review,* vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1945), pp. 83-89.

[53]The best example of the subtlety of his arguments about literature is the essay "Bertold Brecht's Poetry," *Partisan Review,* vol, 8, no. 2 (March-April 1941), reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 49-62. Also published in *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), pp. 252-265; and "A Victorian Novel," *Partisan Review,* vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 1944) reprint (cited n. 1), vol. I, pp. 193-198. Also published in *Art and Culture* (cited n. 8), pp. 245-251. The inclusion of these early, lengthy essays, much less revised than those on art, suggests that Greenberg felt they were among his best works.

[54]"Introduction to 'The Great Wall of China' by Franz Kafka," (cited n. 11), p. 101.

Art and Moral Resistance to Simulation

By Timothy Long

To live in this media-saturated, technology-fixated, bureaucracy-bound age where the ends have long since become an ornament to the means is a numbing experience. In this unreal "second nature," with its endless diversions and compulsions, the real issues of human alienation and suffering have too often gone neglected. The need for a critical resistance of moral strength would seem unquestionable. Yet Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation, which so persuasively describes the current crisis, at the same time problematizes the notion of critical resistance. For Baudrillard, society's current predicament is an inevitable destiny: "Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety—political, social, historical and economic—that from now on incorporates the simulatory dimension of hyperrealism.... There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously—it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality—radical disenchantment..."[1] If daily life no longer offers a challenge to simulation, neither does Baudrillard through his theory: "To be the reflection of the real, to enter into a relation of critical negativity with the real, cannot be theory's end."[2] The form of Baudrillard's discourse provocatively asserts this posi-

tion. His writing replaces objective analysis with chains of metaphors linked in endless spirals of connotation. The effect is deliberately hyperbolic rather than coolly analytic. His writing itself, lacking any final referent, *is* simulation. Baudrillard, then, completely rejects the task of critical resistance.

Because of the widespread influence of his work, especially in the art-world, a serious appraisal of his theory is imperative. Is Baudrillard's position justified? An increasing number of people, artists and art theorists among them, would disagree. What grates against the critical sensibility is not so much Baudrillard's description of society—most would agree that simulation poses a 'real' threat—but that Baudrillard, in his nihilistic presumption, deems the situation irremediable. The intent of this discussion is to explore, through concrete examples, how an art practice of moral force may successfully confront the supposedly inevitable regime of simulation and thus maintain the necessary activity of critical resistance within the world today.

Why has Baudrillard abandoned criticality? This is the first question which must be addressed. The answer requires an examination of the development of Baudrillard's theory. The origins of Baudrillard's theory of simulation may be traced back to his earlier critique of the political economy.[3] Inspired by the deconstructive strategies of poststructuralism and the sociological insights of Georges Bataille and Marcel Mauss, Baudrillard initiated a radical critique of Marx, which revealed that Marxism, based on the fetishization of production and use value, was no less an ideological construct than the bourgeois system it critiqued. Indeed, for Baudrillard, all the values which have provided Western culture with meaning—Religion, History, Law, the Dialectic and the Unconscious to name but a few—are based on an appeal to a nature (human, historical, metaphysical or otherwise) which does not exist. Thus Baudrillard completed the materialist expulsion of metaphysics initiated by Nietzsche; indeed, he takes the philosopher's dictum as his own: "Down with all hypotheses that allowed the belief in a true world."[4]

In *Simulations,* where his theory of simulation is most fully developed, philosophical theorizing is linked to an analysis of the historical developments which have led to the collapse of metaphysics in contemporary society. Most importantly, Baudrillard remarks on the extension of rational and scientific inquiry into all realms of existence: all terrains have been mapped, both physical, by space exploration and the physical sciences, and symbolic, by the social sciences. In this situation, Baudrillard observes, "when there is no more territory virgin and therefore available for the imaginary, when the map covers the whole territory, then something like a principle of reality disappears."[5] Reality becomes subject to the "precession of simulacra." In other words, the models which the social sciences (as well as advertising, politics and others) employ, replace or "precess" the reality which they originally sought to understand. Just as industrial products are now *"conceived from the point of view of their very reproductibility,* diffracted from a generating nucleus we call the model,"[6] so the objects of sociology, ethnology, and even psychoanalysis become simulated through the ques-

tion/answer models: by anticipating the response of their objects, the models reproduce the object in their own image. Thus Baudrillard maintains "the impossibility of obtaining for a *directed* question any answer other than *simulated* (other than reproducing the question)."[7] In this schema, all social relations become closed systems in which signs, cut off from any referential finality, endlessly circulate according to generating models or what Baudrillard terms "the genetic code."

According to Baudrillard, this theory has profound implications for the very definition of humanity. With its deepest secrets probed by science and exposed in the light of the media and television, humanity is marked by a loss of interiority: the "forced extraversion of all interiority" and the "forced introjection of all exteriority."[8] With no final referents to fall back upon, the individual "cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks."[9] Gone even is "the drama of alienation." We now live in the "ecstasy of communication.... Ecstasy is all functions abolished into one dimension, the dimension of communication. All events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information: this is obscene."[10] In this new situation, Baudrillard continues, "[o]ne thing is for certain: the scene seduced us, the obscene fascinates us."[11] Fascination rather than passion and ecstasy rather than alienation, are the marks of this new condition. Human nature has truly undergone a "profound mutation" if Baudrillard's theory of simulation is valid.

It is clear, then, why Baudrillard has abandoned criticality. With abolition of all traditional referents, both philosophical and social, Baudrillard is left with no basis for a critique. With no values to defend, there can be no discontent and therefore no genuine criticality. He cannot even preserve a definition of humanity. For the definition of what is "Human" itself is, for Baudrillard, tautological. "Human v. Inhuman" is for him an insupportable distinction maintained solely by "moral law and the principle of exclusion."[12] What is human has value only because of what it excludes, the "Inhuman," and this distinction is arbitrary. Here Baudrillard's fundamental position is encountered: his essential nihilism. As he himself explains: "I am a nihilist.... I note, I accept, I assume, I analyze...the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. Whoever lives by meaning dies by meaning."[13]

This element in Baudrillard's theory must be resisted before anything may be done about the actual condition of simulation. Against this nihilism, one can only assert that a human being has a value and meaning. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to adequately justify the basis of this assertion. However, the aim of this essay is not to elaborate a philosophical critique of Baudrillard, but to demonstrate the possibility of resistance to simulation. It must suffice, then, to acknowledge that the question of resistance is profoundly ethical, rooted in affirming the value of humanity against a system which would deny the private dignity and meaning of the individual.

With this assertion in mind, it is possible to agree with Ross Gibson's observation that there exists at least:

> one element of the real which is without effective simulation, which will not disappear through the fascination stages of the screen, and which is still the ultimate referent. Everything, except death, might be envisaged as imaginary, and all production, action or inaction, all noise or silence from the masses is still rendered political by its imminence.... As long as one refuses to forget about the possibility of death contingent on any action (or inaction) perpetrated by oneself or by others, one's "real world" is constantly susceptible to the ultimate manipulation.[14]

Death, in this light, is the one reality beyond the reach of simulation. The consciousness of death, being the ultimate internal event horizon, rescues interiority; this knowledge breaks the smooth surface of communication, disrupting fascination. Furthermore, as Gibson suggests, to dismiss the reality of death might lead to the "ultimate manipulation." In other words, there is a need to resist the temptation of considering simulation as a *fait accompli.* This insight is especially pertinent with regards to what John Miller has described as Baudrillard's "ominous futurism" and his willingness to grant "technology a determinant autonomy."[15] Indeed, for Baudrillard, "the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social." Society, Baudrillard foresees, will, by an "inverse, irreversible, *implosive* process," institute a "generalized deterrence of every chance, of every accident, of every transversality, of every finality, of every contradiction, rupture or complexity...."[16] Once again the technically programmed world of simulation is spoken of as a destiny. However, as French sociologist, Jacques Ellul has demonstrated, technology expands by a more convulsive inner logic. According to Ellul: "History shows that every technical application from its beginnings presents certain unforeseen secondary effects which are much more disastrous than the lack of technique would have been."[17] By necessity, as Ellul goes on to point out, a new technology must be invented to solve the problem created by the initial application. In this manner, by continual crisis, the technological bubble is expanded. However, instead of taking these recurrent crises as occasions to question the inherent contradictions in technological growth and as opportunities for resistance, Baudrillard continues to promote a doctrine of technological manifest destiny.

Rightly, then, the paralyzing nature of Baudrillard's vision has been decried. One critique, notable for bringing art works into the arena of debate, and thus a major precedent for the present discussion, has taken the form of an exhibition. Appropriately entitled, *Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard),* the exhibition was assembled in early 1987 by the artists' collective, Group Material (Doug Ashford, Julie Ault and Tim Rollins). The organizers stated their aims in a panel discussion held in conjunction with the exhibition: "On the whole we find ourselves opposed to Baudrillard's work because we see it further disarming the idea of culture as a site of contestation and resistance."[18] In the ensuing discussion the problems of resistance continually surfaced among the panelists (Judith Barry, Peter

Halley, William Olander, Julie Wachtel and Oliver Wasow, with Doug Ashford and Julie Ault of Group Material moderating). Some questioned the possibility of resistance for substantially the same reasons Baudrillard presents; the others, with Group Material, maintained resistance as a necessary option, however, without articulating a theoretical position. While this is unfortunate for the sake of this discussion, Group Material's intention was more to raise questions than to present a fixed platform. Their exhibition functioned in a similar manner: it presented a wide spectrum of artists and represented a diverse range of practices, not limited by time (Honoré Daumier and George Grosz were represented) or by traditional definitions of high art (as the posters by the anti-apartheid organization, S.W.A.P.O., evidenced).[19]

A clearly articulated opposition, which specifically addresses the art work, remains an unfinished project. This is a necessary task, particularly if the inclusion of certain artists who are a part of Group Material's project and who have been identified with supporting Baudrillard's theories—Peter Halley on the panel and Barbara Kruger in the exhibition—is to be justified.[20] By contrast, the grounds for resistance of the artists to be discussed can be readily formulated. The work of the four artists, Jim Starrett, Dan Graham, and the artistic collaboration of Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, demonstrate that simulation may be resisted, but only if the moral will to resist is not left to atrophy. Consciousness of ethical issues arising from awareness of the reality of death, suffering and alienation may, in fact, be used to locate places of possible resistance and to reinvigorate criticality.

The choice of artists for this study may at first seem misguided. Starrett continues to work in a discredited mode: traditional imagistic easel painting. Graham and the Harrisons operate within the domain of technology and modern urbanism, or as one might say, in the depths of the hyperreal. However, the best challenge is often launched in the heart of enemy territory. As Jacques Ellul asserts: "Freedom is completely without meaning unless it is related to necessity, unless it represents victory over necessity."[21]

The choice of artists has another, more pointed significance. As previously noted, according to Baudrillard, "[A]ll events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information: this is obscene." Through the endless flow of information, simulation effectively isolates the individual and society within an endlessly repeated present, and thus eliminates the possibility of criticality or significant action. For this reason, the discussion of resistance will be linked to a rehabilitation of a real time continuum. Each artist chosen addresses through their art one temporal dimension, past, present or future. Thus, their work will provide an opportunity to confront on all fronts the paralyzing effects of simulation which freezes past memory, present self-consciousness, and future hope.

THE PAST

Peter Halley's article, "The Crisis in Geometry," is helpful in pinpointing the new status of the past in the universe of simulation. Halley's exegesis of the "Neo-Geo" art of the early 1980's employs several Baudrillardian

concepts. For artists of this movement, according to Halley, "there can only be a simulacrum of art, not the 'real thing' resplendent with transcendent significance and referents, only a simulacrum with 'orbital recurrence of the models' (nostalgia) and 'simulated generation of difference' (styles)."[22] Later in the article, he quotes Baudrillard again. For Baudrillard and for Halley "'nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of lost referentials, alone remains."[23] In this manner, Baudrillard's statements concerning history in general are directly related to art. Both history and art history have become ghost worlds which encompass the present, cutting off the present from any contact with the 'real.' Thus, Halley, to explain his use of Hard-Edge and Color-Field styles in works such as *Two Cells with Conduit and Underground Chamber,* 1983, states: "For me, those styles are used as reference to an idea about abstraction and an ideology of technical advance replace reference to the real."[24] Abstraction's claims are mocked, for simulation precludes any transcendence. All that remains is a reference to a reference, a nostalgic remainder of an older, more authentic, era.

Jim Starrett is an artist who, like Halley, reuses signs and styles of the past. Thus his work would seem to provide another example of 'hyperreal' art. However, Starrett's work incorporates an ethical dimension, born of a knowledge of suffering and alienation, which gives the work real criticality and allows his art to penetrate the surface of second hand reference and maintain a vital contact with the past and with the real.

The paintings referred to here are a series of untitled canvases completed in the period of 1980-1983. At first, the phantasmal world of history and historical style surround the viewer on the level of both form and content. As a basis of formal organization Starrett employs a Mondrian-like grid construction which is immediately subject to the ingress of nostalgia. As to the content, Starrett contrasts symbols of the Nazi regime (swastika, iron cross, SS double lightning bolt, etc.) to symbols of Catholicism (Latin cross, rosary beads, a photographic image of Pope Pius XII): signifiers whose referentiality has been dispersed by countless war movies on the one hand, and invalidated by the "death of God" on the other. Like 'abstraction' and 'progress,' they are signifiers easily mocked. To understand how he resists, one must understand Starrett's critical intent.

The basic message of the paintings is, as summarized by Donald Kuspit: "[W]hy did the prince of peace [Pope Pius XII] not speak out against the Nazi atrocity, the Nazi crime against humanity? Why did he not use his ethical office to speak out against evil?"[25] As to the personal significance of this event for Starrett, two additional sets of symbols provide the clue: a knife and a comb and the backdrop of a prison cell and a solitary chair refer to the drama of prison life: torture v. self-care. This is the personal drama of Starrett, a Catholic pacifist, who was imprisoned by the Army on charges of absent-without-leave before his request to be declared a conscientious objector was processed.[26] Thus the drama enacted is really Starrett's imprisonment interpreted as a personal holocaust made all the more intolerable by the silent betrayal of his expected source of succor, the Catholic Church.

Personal relevance alone does not lift the imagery out of nostalgia, however. For in some way, Starrett's comment on war is similar to statements made by Baudrillard concerning the Vietnam War. In Baudrillard's opinion, Vietnam was not a war of good against evil, but a means for America to normalize relations with China.[27] The war ended when this mission was accomplished and China's non-intervention was secured; the war was a simulacrum. Baudrillard concludes his discussion noting:

> a war is not any the less heinous for being a mere simulacrum—the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead ex-combatants count as much there as in other wars.... What no longer exists is the adversity of adversaries, the reality of antagonistic causes, the ideological seriousness of war—also the reality of defeat or victory, war being a process whose triumph lies quite beyond these appearances.[28]

In a like manner, Starrett's paintings assert that there is no objective difference between those who make war and those who claim to make peace. There is merely the normalization of relationships.

But are there truly no adversaries? Who put Starrett into jail? The new adversarial relationship is with the system, as Starrett discovered. To give his suffering meaning, he had to identify an adversary: authority itself. This is the source of his criticality, his reality apart from the realm of simulation. Furthermore, this is the key difference between Starrett and Baudrillard: Starrett has suffered and found that the system still has deterrents other than Disneyland,[29] and that a society in which space no longer exists (as Baudrillard claims), still has room for a prison cell. Thus Baudrillard's claim that Foucauldian forms of "hard deterrence" belong to the past are cast in doubt.[30] What happened to Starrett could surely happen today.

The content of Starrett's paintings is thereby justified and rescued from the hyperreal. He does not mock the symbols of the Nazi regime or of the Catholic church, but invests them with a personal meaning, making them his symbols for a society and a religious institution which has betrayed him. History is real inasmuch as the events of the past are not simulated, but repeated today in a new and relevant way. Furthermore, while society may no longer give meaning to death, the individual, may, through his consciousness of suffering and alienation.

By a strange twist, even the form of Starrett's paintings is thereby given real meaning and a significance beyond nostalgia. With reference to the grid construction of the great paintings, Kuspit asks: "Can Mondrian, for many the greatest representative of pure painting, the greatest abstractionist, be regarded as the Pope Pius XII of the Church of Art, 'fiddling' with his art as the world burned (literally)?"[31] Style, too, is a bearer of meaning in Starrett's work. It is not a "parodic rehabilitation," but a means of implicating the art world in the same manner that the content challenges the world at large. Thus, instead of being cut off from the real, reference is established on all levels to Starrett's suffering; the form and content are far from empty of significance as they are in Baudrillard's paradigm, but are invested with a new, personal meaning.

THE PRESENT

The present is the key moment in simulation for it is the nexus which absorbs the past through nostalgia and denies a real future by means of various deterrences which presume, as Baudrillard demonstrates, a world "where nothing can be left to chance."[32] The television screen is the ultimate object of a society fixed in a non-transcendable present, suspended in a state of simulation.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication,* Baudrillard makes this quite clear: "In the image of television, the most beautiful prototypical object of this new era, the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens."[33] As previously noted, with the scene gone, the individual "cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen...." This is analogous to the condition of schizophrenia, as Baudrillard observes. There is no past or future for the schizophrenic, only a present which continually impinges on him from every side.

Dan Graham, in his writings on video and television and works involving these media, confirms Baudrillard's analysis. Graham's decision to employ video as a medium rather than film reflects a concern for immediacy, an undistanced representation of reality. "Video," Graham writes, "is a present-time medium. ...The space/time it presents, is continuous, unbroken and congruent to that of the real time which is the shared time of its perceivers and their individual collective real environments." Film, on the other hand, is described as "discontinuous," "contemplative and 'distanced' " and "a reflection of a reality external to the spectator's body."[34]

Television's "obscenity" is acknowledged in Graham's *Video Projection Outside Home,* 1978. This project calls for a video projection screen to be set up on the front lawn of a suburban house. The screen would display whatever channel was currently being watched by the household. Thus Graham literalizes the notion that people's experiential reality is no longer a physical place, but the world of television.

Furthermore, Graham acknowledges the screen/mirror dichotomy set up by Baudrillard. Graham contrasts the effect of video feedback, which results from seeing a delayed image of oneself on a video monitor, to the effect of a mirror. The mirror, Graham maintains, is based on "[p]sychological premises of 'privacy' (as against publicness)...an assumed split between observed behavior and supposedly unobservable, interior intention."[35] Video feedback, on the other hand, allows "'private' mental intention and external behavior...[to be] experienced as one."[36] Thus, he concludes, "[w]hile the mirror alienates the 'self', video encloses the 'self' within its perception of its own functioning, giving a person the feeling of perceptible control over his responses through the feedback mechanism."[37] This corresponds to the loss of interiority implied in Baudrillard's description of the condition of the "pure screen," which involves a "[p]rivate telematics: [in which] each person sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his original universe."[38]

Graham literally simulates this condition in a series of works including *Opposing mirrors and video monitors on time delay,* 1974. In this work Graham employs two video cameras and two monitors with display camera images after a five second delay, thus inviting the spectator to experimentally adjust their actions in relation to the feedback effect. Here the similarity to Baudrillard ends, though, for while Graham acknowledges and exploits video's "enclosure" of the self, he does not abandon the mirror. In *Opposing mirrors and video monitors on time delay,* actual mirrors, cameras and monitors are set up in such a way that the spectator may see, when looking into the mirror:

> 1. a continuous present-time reflection of his surrounding space; 2. himself as observer; 3. on the reflected monitor image, 5 seconds in the past, his area as seen by the mirror of the opposite wall.[39]

The viewer sees not only a feedback image of himself, but since the opposing mirrors set up an infinite spatial regress, he sees himself as he watches his feedback image. The operation of immediacy (fascination of the screen) is bracketed and destroyed by the alienating reflection of the mirror. One realizes that one is caught, absorbed by the screen. In this realization a double moment is involved. As Donald Kuspit has noted: "Graham shows us trapped as well as intellectually liberated by the feedback situation."[40]

Graham's work offers a criticality which Baudrillard's defeatist acceptance of simulation precludes. Furthermore, Graham carries this criticality to other projects. In *Local television news program analysis for public access cable television,* 1978, Graham seeks to deconstruct local television news programming. The project involves taking local national network news reports and analyzing them on a local cable channel. The analysis entails showing the actual newscast, a family watching the newscast, a 'behind-the-scenes' shot at the station, separation of dialogue from the image, etc. One of the aims Graham describes in the "Working Notes" for the project, was to demonstrate that:

> In the actual construction of a typical daily news program, unmediated immediacy is simply mythic; in fact, 'action'-news is pre-planned in advance of the stories taking place, so that camera, crew and narrative can be 'there when it happens.' In fact, most news-stories are just that, stories, stereotypes repeated in slightly different forms each day and not very different from other fictional TV programs.[41]

Intervention into the everyday surface of television broadcasting disrupts passive consumption of the image and provides a critique of television's simulation of real events. At the end of the "Working Notes" for the project, Graham asks: "Can an analytic, didactic de-construction of media, such as we propose, be of cultural and political value to the community?"[42] Graham's work is part of a larger humanistic enterprise.[43]

His architectural projects, for example *Alterations to a Suburban House,* 1978, employ mirrors to critique the power structures imbedded in modernist architectural codes. Mirrors, in this case, subvert the power of glass to

separate interior from exterior and thus privilege the gaze of interior dwellers. The use of glass relates to the "glass house" of Mies Van der Rohe and Philip Johnson and to the glass office building, both symbols of bourgeois corporate power.

In the *Alteration,* Graham proposes to replace the facade of a suburban tract house with a glass wall and place parallel to the glass wall, half-way into the house interior, a mirror wall. The net effect would be to open the house entirely to the passerby's gaze. Jeff Wall provides the following description: "The mirror, the new facade of the new interior, clasps within its optics occupant and passersby, and explicitly identifies them with each other.... The passersby...suffers identification with the extreme state of homeless disintegration played out by the failed interior."[44] Once again, the mirror is used to force the viewer to confront alienation, in this case, the desolation of a suburbia which is the obverse of modernist utopian architecture as represented by the "glass house" and the glass office tower. Once again the viewer is "socially trapped" but "intellectually liberated."

In these two projects, *Local television* and *Alteration,* Graham confronts Baudrillard's assumption that the regime of the screen has been inaugurated and is in full power. Graham, on the other hand, demonstrates that older, Foucauldian forms of hard, architectural deterrence are still in play. If architecture is imputed to be a mere backdrop to the screen, the mirror breaks that illusion. Graham demonstrates that the oppressive confinement of our society persists behind the mirage of simulation and thus disrupts the present-time immobility of fascination.

THE FUTURE

To discuss the future with reference to simulation implies the possibility of authentic history, a history in which total control of all determinants has not been established. There must be a possibility for change which goes beyond Starrett's obvious sense of powerlessness or Graham's revelation of social alienation and confinement. The work of artistic collaborators, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison attempts a change of this nature.

The Harrisons address through their work communal concerns arising from the ravages of industrialization, urban alienation and ecological mismanagement. Some of the problems they have explored include: the inhumane living conditions caused by American chemical companies in a Brazilian industrial city (*The Happy Denizens of Hell,* Cubatao, Brazil, 1985); the loss of communal space and identity resulting from insensitive city planning (*The Baltimore Promenade,* Baltimore, 1980-1); and the ecological damage (topsoil erosion, river pollution) which is occurring in California's Central Valley due to the exploitive land division system (*Meditations on the Sacramento River, the Delta and the Bays at San Francisco,* California, 1977). Their work usually involves two phases: actual scientific research, political lobbying and intervention (if possible) followed by a gallery installation. The ultimate aim, in Newton Harrison's words, is to reestablish "a metaphorical relationship to a life web, reassociating with the natural environment as it were."[45]

However, from Baudrillard's perspective, the natural environment no longer exists, except as an elaborate stage setting for historical events, which in themselves are nothing more than "script[s] for a disaster film."[46] The world has largely been refashioned into a completely synthetic environment. Although Baudrillard does not say this directly, he implies it in relating an anecdote about an old cook in the Ardennes who created a complete, private world out of reinforced concrete (including trees, hogs, furniture, etc.)[47] This is the literal and metaphoric truth of our society for Baudrillard.[48] Furthermore, the nature which does remain, is, for the most part, in nature preserves and national wildernesses. Baudrillard's comments concerning the last primitive tribe to be discovered, the Tasaday, are to the point in this respect. Like the Tasaday, who upon discovery were immediately made off-bounds for anthropological study in order to preserve them in their "natural" state, nature is "posthumous: frozen cryogenised, sterilized, protected to death, [it has] become [a] referential simulacra."[49] To claim a living connection to nature in this situation is to claim a living connection to a fossil in a museum.

Yet this is precisely what the Harrison's attempt to do: to establish the connection of man to the ecosystem through the use of metaphors.[50] For example, the Harrisons' *Baltimore Promenade* project began with "the founding metaphor of a harbor." As Newton Harrison goes on to describe, a harbor:

> is a place where fresh and salt water meet and mix. It is a place of generation. It's really an ecological marketplace. The same values hold, but if someone (as in Baltimore) puts an eight lane road around the harbor, you have breached the metaphorical values. Therefore, you must first restore the metaphorical values, before you can restore the others, and these values drive our art. That's why we set up a reconnection between the harbor and the rest of the city.[51]

Are the Harrisons effective in making such a connection? Can their metaphor have an effect in a city, which, as a large urban center, conforms in some degree to Baudrillard's description of Los Angeles: "a network of endless, unreal circulation—a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions."[52]

Frederick Jameson has asked precisely this question. Jameson is highly critical of Gavin McRae-Gibson's analysis of Frank Gehry's Santa Monica residence. McRae-Gibson, in his book *The Secret Life of Buildings: An American Mythology for Modern Architecture,* (MIT, 1985) credits Gehry with establishing metaphorical links between his house and the sea on which Santa Monica borders. This, Jameson objects, is an irrelevant association, because Santa Monica has lost all sense of place: the location of people's lived reality is no longer connected to a specific geographical location, but to the electronic, technological world of communications and information flow.[53]

Against this species of objection to the Harrisons' work must be placed the ethical dimension of their metaphors. For their metaphors are not simply means of establishing some poetic, purely subjective value, but a consciousness changing device to make people aware of the real destructive

processes of technological civilization and to propose an ecologically sensitive alternative. In other words, the stakes are real; the ecological future of the world is in real jeopardy. The *Meditation on the Sacramento River, the Delta and the Bays at San Francisco* focuses attention on the real possibility that the valley may become a dust bowl if certain agricultural and administrative practices are not changed. Another example is the *Seventh Lagoon* of *The Lagoon Cycle,* 1972-83. This work questions the effect of introducing tractors to replace water buffalo in Sri Lankan agriculture.[54] A text, composed of a conversation between an ecologically sensitive "Witness" and a more instrumentally minded "Lagoon-Maker," is incorporated into the work. Through the metaphor of "dialogue," the Witness realizes that the tractor's "dialogue" with the land is a "technological monologue" that will destroy a link in the ecosystem (which the water buffalo previously held) and result in an increase in malarial mosquitos, vermin, and a loss of natural fertilizer. The water buffalo, the Witness concludes, "is more efficient/and its dialogue with the land/more lucid./ Clearly there is something about technology that does not like that which is not itself." This is not a question of preserving the Sri Lankans like the Tasaday in some form of natural state for the benefit of anthropology's bad conscience, i.e. to preserve "the real."[55] It is a matter of resisting a mentality of exploitation and the imposition of a technological system on a society which does not need it. The alternative, one can imagine, is to see Sri Lanka eventually face the same disastrous scenario laid out in *Meditations on the Sacramento River.*

To return to *The Baltimore Promenade,* one may agree with Baudrillard and Jameson that American cities are hyperreal and that the project of establishing metaphorical relationships is problematic. The issue is, however, are we to abandon the future of the city to this condition? Perhaps if there were more living spaces with metaphorical values that united people to one another and to their immediate environment, promenades for example, then there would be less of a need for centers where these values are created artificially, such as Disneyland. Furthermore, although The *Baltimore Promenade* addresses a problem of less apparent urgency compared to some of the other projects discussed, it has its own importance in creating an awareness of the greater environmental issues. Of course, against all this Baudrillard might level the complaint that this ecologically-minded activity is merely a form of deterrence. In other words, it presents a scenario of moral resistance to environmental damage (which may be equated to the ravages of capitalism) while concealing the truth that capital and the technological imperative are never moral and are not part of a "social contract."[56]

However, Baudrillard assumes that this situation was inevitable and that any change would be superficial. This assumption has its own inevitability: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Harrisons make no claim to change the world; although they sometimes think on a global scale, their praxis is directed to local intervention on a human scale.[57] Furthermore, their work constitutes a real audience whose participation counts. As Michel de Certau has observed:

> its implications are more than an ironic protest. ...The Harrisons' work introduces technical data to problems that now interest everybody, and it implants in maps and in laboratory calculators street discussion. It thus establishes a political arena.... That is, it makes possible a collective management of the relationships between human beings and nature.[58]

The viewer is not a spectator, but a potential participant. At any rate, he is addressed as a real person with an interiority capable of developing metaphorical values. The viewer is repositioned in relation to the hyperreal society as one who is against the blind technological determinism which sees nature as an object to be recast, in metaphorical terms, in reinforced concrete. In this way the art of the Harrisons creates an ethical resistance movement to a simulated future.

* * *

Each of the artists examined has located a point of possible resistance, a point where simulation is not complete. At the very least, all three maintain a criticality which resists simulation, which breaks fixation in a present-time fascination. Starrett's personal experience demonstrates that Foucauldian hard deterrence in the form of institutional violence is still in effect. As a consequence, Starrett resists nostalgia, the besetting sin of traditional imagistic painting, by investing symbols and styles of the past with painful, personal meaning. On the other hand, both Graham and the Harrisons mount successful critiques in the heart of the technological and urban milieu of simulation. Graham reveals that the mirror can be used to break the Medusa-like power of television and video to petrify the viewer in a state of fascination. Furthermore, Graham makes clear, just as Starrett does, that the old codes of deterrence,in this case architectural, are still in effect and that these can be effectively critiqued. The Harrisons' long range view on environmental issues affords them a perspective beyond the seamless present of simulation, thus allowing them to reveal the shortcomings of technology's efforts to simulate the natural environment. They show the violence to human and natural ecology which has been the result and attempt, through their projects, to reverse the trend and instill in the public new values.

The artists proceed from an ethical stance. The foundation of their resistance is a conviction about the fundamental value of not just their own, but of every individual's life. Starrett begins with pacifist ideals, Graham with the idea that people should be free from capitalist and technological determinisms, and the Harrisons with the belief that "connectedness" to nature and to the human community is essential to meaningful existence, even survival, on earth. These convictions lead them to evaluate their position in society; the result is discontent and conflict. This discontent is the mainspring of their art and causes them to seek effective ways of critiquing society.

The degree of their effectiveness varies, no doubt. Neither Starrett nor Graham offer an alternative to the current social structure. Their work is a resistance aimed at keeping the consciousness of unfreedom alive in a society which would all to easily welcome the loss of individual criticality. The

Harrison's have the virtue of attempting concrete change. However, to reestablish metaphor, which they admit is a thought-form which has been debased and coopted by the media, without addressing the media itself, is problematic. In addition, they have an optimism about potential for change which Starrett and Graham do not have, and which may in the long run be unfounded.

The initial question, however, was not how to change the system, but a more modest query, how to resist the effects of simulation and investigate the role an ethical stance might have in this. This goal has been accomplished. Short of a philosophic revolution (the resurrection of a metaphysic) accompanied by a social transformation (the radical reevaluation of technology's role in society) to ask more of an artist would be unjust. To ask less, however, would be immoral.

Notes

[1]Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations,* trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 147-8.

[2]Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication,* ed. Sylvere Lotringer, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p. 97.

[3]See *The Mirror of Production,* intro. and trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975) and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* intro. and trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

[4]Baudrillard, *Simulations,* p. 115.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 158n.

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 100.

[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

[8]Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication,* p. 26.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

[10]*Ibid.*, pp. 22-4.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 26.

[12]Baudrillard, *L'eschange symbolique et la mort,* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976), p. 193. My translation.

[13]Baudrillard, "Sur le nihilisme," *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Editions Galilee, 1981), p. 231. Cited and trans. in Paul Foss, "Despero Ergo Sum," *Seduced and Abandoned, the Baudrillard Scene,* p. 10 (Throughout).

[14]Ross Gibson, "Customs and Excise," *Seduced and Abandoned, the Baudrillard Scene,* ed. Andre Frankovits (Glebe, Australia: Stonemoss Servies, 1984), p. 51.

[15]John Miller, "Baudrillard and his Discontents," *Artscribe International* (May 1987): 51.

[16]*Simulations,* pp. 63-4.

[17]Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society,* intro. Robert K. Merton, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 105.

[18]"Group Material: Anti-Baudrillard," text of panel discussion rpt. in *FILE Megazine* no. 28, 1987: 111.

[19]For a more complete description of the exhibition, see John Miller, "Baudrillard and his Discontents."

[20]Both of the artists have complex positions. Even in the course of the panel discussion, Peter Halley voiced both reservations, along the lines of Baudrillard about the possibility of resistance, and, at the same time, a cautious optimism concerning the ability of art to effect change, even if it is merely "expanding the open mindedness or liberalization of the bourgeoisie." See "Group Material: Anti-Baudrillard," p. 119. Barbara Kruger, somewhat paradoxically, exhibited a work entitled *"Resistance" or why I am not "Anti-Baudrillard,"* which consisted entirely of a quote from *Simulations.* Furthermore, one of the two introductory essays for the catalogue of her 1987 exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery was written by Baudrillard (the other was by Kruger). If we are to take his interpretation of Kruger's images as correct, then the "political, feminist, ideological message" so often ascribed to her works, what might be considered resistant in them, is not to the point. For according to Baudrillard, "I do not believe that these images create a collective mobilization or awareness. If they had such a political goal, they would be naive. ... The virtue of these images resides, no doubt, not in political demystification or provocation, but in designating the absence of either the virtual antagonist or the masses and thereby underlying the unreality of our state of things." Thus the possibility of resistance is annulled. See Baudrillard, "Untitled," *Barbara Kruger,* exhibition catalogue, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Mary Boone and Michael Werner Gallery, 1987), n.p.

[21]Ellul, p. xxxii.

[22]Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry," *Arts Magazine* (Summer 1984): 114.

[23]*Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 115.

[25]Donald Kuspit, "Jim Starrett, Pacifist Painter," *Artforum* (October, 1984): 69.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 69.

[27]*Simulations,* p. 65ff.

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 67.

[29]*Ibid.*, p. 23ff. "Disneyland...is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real... It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere."

[30]*Ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

[31]Kuspit, "Jim Starrett" p. 71.

[32]*Simulations,* p. 62.

[33]*Ecstasy*, p. 12.

[34]Dan Graham, *Video-Architecture-Television* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1976), p. 62.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 69.

[36]*Ibid.*, p. 69.

[37]*Ibid.*, p. 69.

[38]*Ecstasy*, p. 15.

[39]Dan Graham, p. 27. For a description by the artist of the project, see Graham, *Buildings and Signs* (Chicago: Renaissance Center at the University of Chicago, 1980) pp. 34-35.

[40]Donald Kuspit, "Dan Graham, Prometheus Mediabound," *Artforum* (May, 1985): 78.

[41]Graham, p. 61.

[42]*Ibid.*

[43]Kuspit, "Dan Graham" p. 79.

[44]Jeff Wall, "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel" in *Dan Graham,* exh. cat. (Perth, Australia: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985), p. 36.

[45]T.W. Sokolowski, "Nobody Told Us When To Stop Thinking," interview with Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, *The Quarterly Bulletin of the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center* (Spring, 1987): 1.

[46]*Simulations,* pp. 75-76.

[47]*Ibid,* pp. 90-91.

[48]Cf. Baudrillard's discussion of the significance of plastic. *Simulations,* pp. 91-2.

[49]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

[50]This extends even to the urban environment which Newton Harrison describes as "urban ecology." Sokolowski, p. 1.

[51]Sokolowski, p. 1.

[52]*Simulations,* p. 26.

[53]Frederick Jameson, "Spatial Equivalence: Post Modern Architecture and the World System," lecture, S.U.N.Y at Stony Brook, September 17, 1987.

[54]*The Lagoon Cycle,* exhibition catalogue (Ithaca, N.Y. : Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1985), p. 95.

[55]*Simulations,* p. 23ff.

[56]Cf. Baudrillard's description of deterrence with regards to Watergate. *Ibid.*, p. 26ff.

[57]See also *The Guadalupe Meander, A Refugia for San Jose, Sleep Stack and Disappearing Fence* and *The Barrier Islands Drama.*

[58]Michel de Certau, "Pay Attention: To Make Art," *The Lagoon Cycle,* pp. 22-23.

Artistic Cynicism

By Joseph Nechvatal

Cynicism—everything seems to be penetrated and molded by its force. Today the endless cycle of the production and consumption of images and information has, it seems, generated less and less conventional meaning, not more. Realizing this, a highly cynical art of doubt, pessimism, lost faith, and suspicion has emerged during the 1980s. The general effect of all this cynicism has not, it seems to me, been one of attacking out-moded abstractions, (as cynicism traditionally did), but rather one of social integration. Its effect has been to make people adjust.

Art education is an absolute prerequisite for the creation of cynical art, for educated minds are those most affected by the vast amount of incoherent information. Artist-intellectuals are the most vulnerable to cynical summations because they absorb the largest amount of second-hand unverifiable information, which they feel compelled to have an opinion on. So they succumb easily to the opinions offered them. They often delude themselves by accepting cynicism's necessity, while pretending they are free in spite of it by simply saying, cynically, that they are cynical. They call upon cynicism to solve the problems created by the media, and by the death of the progressive and heroic ideals associated with modernism. With the increased marginal role of art in an age of electronic mediation, and with

the almost complete commodification of art, today's cynical art hopes to evade modernism's completed death. It makes a rather desperate, pathological, futile attempt to try to sustain the old heroic ideals. Today's cynical art results, then, from the disparity between the modernist conventions and the postmodern reality, in which we are deluged by a sea of contradictory representations which eclipse reality.

Cynicism is the effect of a techno-media society that embraces the entire person in order to accomplish his or her complete integration in it. It is only the innermost, and most elusive, manifestation of the Spectacle. It results from the effort to keep informed in an astonishingly incoherent, absurd, and irrational world, which changes rapidly and constantly, for reasons not understood. Even Camus, who considered living with this recognition the only honest posture, would today be tempted to bring order into our electronic world. Cynicism supplies that order: the more complicated the information, the simpler the smug explanation.

Cynicism succeeds primarily because it corresponds exactly to the need for an all embracing simple explanation of the Media Society. People are doubly reassured by cynicism: it becomes the "explanation" of the media image, and the "solution" dissolving it. The validity of cynicism replaces every other validity. One might go further and assert that cynicism gives those who believe in it as the ultimate angle on the truth quasi-religious personalities in that the entire psychology becomes cynical: they have an absolute credo of cynicism by which to measure—cut down to size—any reality. In the face of the problems of the Media Society, cynicism seems a social remedy, the answer to deficiency which at the same time signals the special neurotic (psychotic) character of society, that is, its inability to distinguish the real from an artificial.

As for the cynical artist, he or she gives art a cynically narrow meaning in order to integrate it more easily into a cynical system, while at the same time anxiously gaining the esteem and affection of the largest number of people. In his or her psychic confusion, created by his or her cynicism, cynicism alone imposes the order of cynical recognition which can alleviate the confusion. The only trouble is that cynical recognition of a cynical artist by a cynical public simply confirms the alienating confusion. Such recognition swings wildly between mania and depression, in even more rapid alternations between the two.

If it would truly break with modernism, cynicism would wane, for without the sense of mocking a corrupted ideal and the sense of affection that it brings in its wake, cynicism becomes implausible and unsustainable. An alternative to cynicism will finally emerge from disillusionment with cynicism—disillusionment itself. A sense of modernism's completeness and termination, and of complete comprehension of its conventions—complete self-consciousness about its practice and socio-aesthetic function—should lead to a postmodernist meta-consciousness so caught up in its own spontaneous internal necessity that it cannot bother staging cynical comments. By reflecting critically on the fact that cynicism is an act, a mask, a facile performance commenting on modernism's failures and broken promises,

artists might regain their freedom and sense of purpose. It is when we begin to realize that we have been conditioned into cynical self-censorship, pointed toward a narrower and narrower perception of ourselves, our importance, and our magnitude, that we will begin to seek out something else. If we have been trained in skepticism and sarcasm, if cynicism is the dogmatically imposed moral paradigm of our time, a deprogramming emancipation can begin with this realization. The fight becomes one between suppression and expression. If we come to realize that cynicism leads not only to the tearing down of bogus abstractions, but also to deadening repetition, the absence of feeling, and the dehydration of art, the question becomes, how can art once again stir things up, catalyze a new sense of reality?

If images are no longer anchored by representation and float around weightlessly in hyperspace, then the artistic challenge is to accept this new world of simulation and take it to its logical conclusion, where it evaporates completely from its own weightlessness. Baudrillard has suggested (simplistically, facilely) that "we are no longer a part of the drama of alienation, that we live in the ecstasy of communication." By taking this superficial ecstatic freedom and coupling it with antagonism towards the present state of socio-artistic affairs, one might skew the continuity of cynical discourse by setting up multiple readings, transparencies, non-linearity, and random chance. By showing that everything, all visibility, all simulation, is phantasmagorical, an exit from the current postmodern dead end of empty surfaces might be uncovered. A phantasmagorical conception of simulation shifts established understanding away from the old hierarchy. The exclusive cynical use of simulation is only the result of a nostalgia for the old reality of sure belief in representation as accurate map of reality. By realizing and facing the lack of true reality that organizes the Social, by facing the contamination of the concept of "reality," we assure ourselves of the potential for escape from any overarching ideology.

We can do, then, a lot more than wear the mask of the cynically commodified simulator. Since the cynical aspect of simulation and commodification has taken on, lately, the stature of a meta-narrative, let us not forget Jean Francois Lyotard's influential definition of the postmodern condition as one that stresses incredulity towards meta-narratives. The need to ascribe meaning to one's actions, against the terms of an overarching, all-inclusive cynicism, either renders superfluous the primary understanding of postmodernism, or becomes the latest candidate for postmodern deconstruction. Granted all dystopian and utopian ideologies oversimplify and overstate their condition; but if, with postmodernism, we have, as Lyotard exclaims, reached the end of generalized ideology, then can and should we not now shrug off the pithy ideology of cynicism as well? If the logic of the image, of the whole Media Society, of postmodernism in general, is satiated, exists in a state of overabundance, then can we not now take this decadent condition to its logical conclusion and destroy it?

Decadent modes of expression always assert themselves in response to dogmatically imposed paradigms. It is in the hyper-logic of decadence, in

the abuse of simulation itself, where we might stage the site of contestation and negation today. A post-simulation decadence asserts an active force which can seek out an antithetical response to the established simulated norms. There are no fixed answers, but in decadent modes of contestation, form enmeshes, alters, and disrupts the commonly understood meaning. The greater the amount of information, the greater the noise, the greater the freedom of choice, the greater the uncertainty. All great artistic periods collapse in a burst of hyper-logic, understood to be mannerist and decadent. Hence, with the nearing end of modernism, cynicism becomes a prelude to this last gasp. Cynical art itself remains modernist, however, due to its self-criticality, a property we attribute to the basic underlying logic of modernism.

It is interesting to note that the basic stance of cynical art's questioning everything has to date been largely ineffectual. The basic tenets of cynical art seem to be mere reproductions of those of Pop art. Pop art cynically commodified itself through its cynical use of mass media, even while it ironically appropriated the commodified image in order to effect a critical reappraisal of mass culture and to comment upon the commodification of daily life under capitalism, on its advocate claim. Pop and cynically simulated art leave themselves open to both kinds of readings. Indeed, their susceptibility to both readings is an aspect of their cynicism. Cynical parody can be read as either conservative and nostalgic, or critical in its ironies and implied commentary on society. Can one both challenge *and* exploit? I don't think so. What happens is that the dominant, mass culture is stronger than any ironic, paradoxical subversion, and so the dominant culture wins every time. By making one's art easily accessible to the dominant culture, with the naive hope of subverting it, one merely guarantees one's art a speedy self-neutralization and complicity. On the other hand, blatant offensiveness will be overlooked and dismissed as trivial by society. Seduction and decadence are the keys to unlock the door of the moment. They belong to the essential revelation of post-structuralism: that everything is concoted and thus alterable. Post-structuralism reminds us that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world, and that we create them all as part of our creation of our version of humanness. The world is not meaningless; every meaning, including cynical meanings, are our own creation. We grant meaning, and today privilege cynical meaning.

The art of the nineties will hopefully challenge us to further understand this, rather than merely reproduce blindly handed down conventions. If so, it will begin to do so by rejecting the current cynical master-narrative: the idea that creative play is impossible in the face of the collapse of meaning. The mass media does not neutralize reality for us, nor replace it with simulation, without our consent. Perhaps we will withdraw this consent—blind consent to the mass media. In a meta-cynicism we will become aware of our own cynical self-creation. From a meta-cynical perspective we can again playfully turn inward for inspired meaning.

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