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# Art Criticism

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# The Studio Visit

By Marjorie Welish

Although many of us have rejected the Romantic notion of artist as creative genius, we critics still cling to the related notion that the studio is an arena where an artist grapples with creative process. An artist's invitation to visit the studio, then, would seem like a gesture of uncommon intimacy. Affording the critic the privilege and responsibility of helping the artist to articulate the issues giving rise to his or her art, the studio visit further allows judgement of what has been going on in this creative sanctuary.

Contrast this shared experience with the eighteenth-century practice of opening the studio to the public. It was a big step in the prehistory of alternative spaces when in 1785 Jacques Louis David, in opposition to the official salon, opened the doors to his Roman studio to allow the public to view *The Oath of the Horatii*. An immediate clamor registered as reviews in foreign newspapers, in response to this subversive political image. The privacy of the studio had allowed the artist to utilize impeccable

neoclassicism for expressing a revolutionary sentiment so powerful that despite its anti-government message David was able to get his painting a booking in Paris, in practically instant conversion from private creative to shared public experience.

By contrast, opening a studio to an informed audience of one does not risk public notoriety. Glorious or abysmal, the impact of a critic's visit does not even count as a public event. Compared with the publication of David's canvas, the typical studio visit today suggests an augmented privacy. As controlled an opening as can be imagined, the visit extended to the critic by invitation risks only such interpretation and evaluation as the artist is bound to hear, with no repercussion of widespread recorded judgement.

However else it may be defined, a studio visit is an occasion for dialogue within the assumed context of approval. Preliminary to inviting a critic to visit, the artist has already induced through casual conversation or at least through published writing that the critic might "like the work." The implication is that an elaborated form of the same sort of rapport will follow once the critic and artist are alone together. Twenty years of making and receiving studio visits tell me that, fearing denunciation, most artists tolerate some probing questions if plenty of encouragement cushions the tough engagement. Some artists extract a different arrangement, however, and seek to gratify a need for dialogue or approval. Both extremes of contention and admiration are populated. Of the two, the more common situation of course is the one in which the critic is invited only to admire, and one way or another this artist will manipulate the critic into that stance. Rare, but frequent enough to note, is the situation in which broad-based intellectual rapport between artist and critic suffices to establish trust; then the artist will invite dialogue and a fair degree of contention because he has faith that a common aesthetics or ideology will at last harmonize all differences of belief. A view from both these margins is instructive. Where the artist manages to extract critical approval at all costs, grooming is not merely the preferred contact, it is mandated. Under these circumstances, the critic has no choice but to think that although the work of genius is rare, it does not follow that the artist standing before the critic is reconciled to this. Harboring the dream he is this rare bird, he asks: what do you think of my paintings? To reverence the forgivable delusion but also to establish initial courteous contact, my answer to this question will either take the form of a brief description or a one-sentence analysis of what I take to be the art's central concern. If I persist in my description of the painting it is by way of signaling that matching hospitality with hospitality is all I deem he really wants from me.

At the moment I have in mind one person who, including me among weekend guests, was proud, insecure, and sensitive to all manner of latent content expressed visually and verbally, so there was no question he "picked up on" my intention to stay within the decorum framing our encounter. But as it happened, he pressed further, "Yes, but what do you think?" Given my being his guest, the artist was evidently pressing for positive evaluation, and his question received from me a decided deflection, signaling

that if he pressed further he would indeed get a serious evaluation of his work, but one probably not entirely to his liking. This person, whose code name is Mansfield Park, tends to indulge in certain kinds of out-flanking maneuvers, and cried out, "I know, you hate my work." By this means the critic is coerced into a position of conciliation, if not retreat ("No, I do not hate your work"). He claimed to be doing paintings of "passion," but at no point during this or subsequent visits could I adequately sidestep his psychological manipulation to respond candidly and say that his considerable manual facility and complicated mental contrivance presented obstructions to his hoped-for passion but could be turned to advantage if he were willing to forge a style from a gestural chinoiserie tantalized by Abstract Expressionism's passion. Another studio visit inspired the outcry, "But an artist doesn't want to hear the truth; he wants lies!" A statement which I take to mean both that an artist lives by delusion and that an artist may himself articulate his faults although a critic may not.

A lesson learned here concerned the perils of hospitality. Many artists are careful to refrain from impressing the critic or at least wearing down his resistance to their art through extra artistic means, exploiting the domain of hospitality, along with which comes the ubiquitous seduction-by-cuisine, the appeals through name-dropping, if not the actual presence of celebrities to sway the critic's impartiality. Indeed critics are impressed by social milieu. One *New York Times* critic has given special dispensation to artistic scions of the well-connected famous, even arguing in one lead article that how could we doubt Juan Gris's artistic ability: why look whom he knew.... This critic is not alone, however, in assuming that social circle valorizes art. The forms manipulation takes may even entails adjusting the personality to appeal to the "human" side of the critic, or enhancing the pathos of the life in order to soften the critic toward the art.

Critical manipulation often entails presenting one's art as exemplary of his beloved ideas. This campaign may start as an explanation of "what my work is doing," and then proceed as a not-so-harmless orientation that presupposes aesthetic intention to be sufficient and, of course, sufficiently fulfilled by the art. But more often than not, the in-house conscience a critic represents uncovers a discrepancy between intention and realization. And if the critic says so, what follows is a moment of tension, perhaps even of defensiveness, which however mature artists and critics, sensitized to the vulnerability of the situation, convert to constructive dialogue.

But whenever the artist insists that his intellectual agenda is perfectly realized, or is so defensive that his ideology remains impervious to all questioning, he is in effect demanding worship by having foreclosed on all discussion.

Ms. Prison, as I will call her, is a conceptual artist working in mixed mediums, whose topic in the past has been gender politics, betrays more aptitude for craftiness than for troping ideas. Her most promising batch of work succeeded where most artists fail: a masterly structure. Creating a fresh metaphor for rote female iconography, however, did not lead her far enough, and subsequent work evidenced a shrill visual punch to com-

pensate for an attenuated and confused content. After listening to her rap during a studio visit, I did express skepticism that despite her profession of certain content, the art did not embody those claims; I dared not say more. Highly articulate, the artist was also alarmingly fierce in presentation of intention, and hostile when I made a verbal misstep. I dared not say that the discrepancy between her deconstructive rap and her art proved rather her infatuation with the intellect and, in this case at least, an unconfessed careerism. Nor did I say that the art itself betrayed how, despite her alleged intellectual authority, Ms. Prision showed little capacity for self-critique. Given her recent artistic direction, she seemed oblivious to her collaboration with the culture industry — her art remaining fashionable because superficial or sporadic in assimilation of major ideas. Intellectual affectation, not thorough-going style, was her accomplishment. Previous gallery press releases told me what I saw confirmed in the studio: the artist's interpretation of the work had begun to shift seasonally to accommodate the latest intellectual trend. When I expressed doubt that the work can so effortlessly shift content at a moment's notice, she replied that as I wrote in my piece on Yves Klein, every new shift in cultural context alters the reading of art, so changes its meaning. Not proven by that retort appealing to reception theory was whether her artifacts enact any one cultural shift adequately, let alone manage the infinite regress of historicism she desires.

The most taxing encounter in the studio occurs with the ideologue precisely because, if he has mastery over the concepts and arguments supporting his belief system, he is effective at "controlling the board" by virtue of that mastery. Also, his art may fulfill the obligations of his theory to perfection. But if that perfection is academic or labored, the artist will be reluctant to see it, for he has become so expert in visualizing the theory, that critical perspective is indeed difficult. Moreover, a lifetime of devotion to transcendence conveyed by the sensitive facture of Symbolism, or to the materialist implications of modernism, or to the idea of functionalism as democratic, is not apt to be susceptible to the well-intentioned exegesis of a non-believer or a relativist. The critic who expects to be able to overturn the very validity of the ideology itself is unrealistic. To be effective as a critic in this situation, one must demonstrate respect for the intellectual paradigm and work with the artist's assumption that art is normative if the artist is to see how he can transcend his obligations while fulfilling them. Then the artist might concede that something like a pictorial analogue of doctrine would indeed be unworthy of him. All critics must have encountered several highly intelligent, totally rigid artists of this type. It is so obvious to such an artist that there is only one way of creating art — his. Yet his fanaticism may also be the sort that appreciates genuinely radical art, knowledge profoundly and rigorously addressed. These are potentially the great artists, or at least the great historians. Their intellectual passion is so highly developed that they would rather sacrifice their art than the style they are defending to the death.

Explanations for this defensive behavior conventionally invoke the

psychology of the artist. If one accepts the psychoanalytic paradigm wherein love and death are axiomatic, then it follows that art may emerge from the activities of pleasure as they assume a kind of paradise of self-expression. The artist identifying with such pleasure is a narcissist, at least to the extent he is devoted to making a world that “loves him” as he loves it. The palpable suspicion radiating from an artist throughout a studio visit may originate in apprehension of the critic who after all symbolizes the possible agent of wounding and harm. Indeed, when threatened by the questions a critic poses, all the artist’s self-protective alarms go off. The Stranger Is the Enemy might well be the motto of the most defensive artists, despite the fact that the professional art critic trained in art history and conversant with modern art and its ideological implications, including post-modernism, should be much more likely than a dealer or collector to give relevant responses, complex pertinent analyses and generally to work at full intellectual extension in evaluating the art.

I am most comfortable with a narcissistic explanation of art where applied to art that is patently libidinous in form and content, and where, compounding the situation, the artist displays not so much an extreme pose of doctrinal defense but rather a defense of sensibility. Let’s call this person Louis XV. An abstract expressionist whose stylistic omnivorousness forages among rococo and surreal idioms, all put in the service of a brilliant sense of decor — this painter (and a particular one does come to mind) is gifted in the extreme, capable of genuinely imaginative applications of his inherited visual languages. At his best, he proves that decoration is a profound mind-set.

Familiar with this artist’s work and decidedly predisposed to it, I was therefore unprepared for the disastrous course of events that occurred in the studio. No doubt about it, this artist’s sense of entitlement was monstrous enough to extend even to dictating the terms of my praise. The vocabulary — the very words — characterizing and esteeming the art were adjusted if they deviated from the artist’s preferred image of himself. Not surprising then, though I was unprepared for it, was his massive denial of critical — that is to say, analytical and discriminating — comment, and, when reservations were expressed, his conversion of negative to positive value. To the suggestion that a work of his was “breezy,” for instance, came the correction that it was a work of “virtuosity.” Subsequently, whenever a studio visit came about, he made sure to tell me how long he had worked on his paintings, having filed away in his mind that I esteemed art that took time to hatch — or rather, this was the interpretation he gave to my remarks. Soon after, when I confessed my shock to a writer whose highly developed visual faculty surpasses that of many professional critics, she told me, “I always tell him, ‘Wonderful, just wonderful!’ because he throws a tantrum if you tell him anything else.”

Editors, biographers and historians — all express themselves narcissistically. Artists have no exclusive rights to this. Positively speaking, narcissism as theory of creativity extends well beyond art and permeates cultural artifacts ceaselessly. In arriving at original solutions the minds of genius

mathematicians and physicists are impregnated by imagination, as, for instance, the achievement of the late Richard Feynman would attest.

Furthermore, narcissism constitutes a Romantic theory of creativity that, as fruitful as it is, does not exhaustively comprehend the aesthetic impulse. The normal vulnerability of the artist to criticism of an artifact built of his overflowing libido may, in an artist who values ideas or issues more than his pleasure, drive the creative process well beyond selfcommemoration. He may elect an aesthetic that he deems the most culturally progressive not because he likes it, even less because it likes him. To paraphrase the composer Arnold Schoenberg: I didn't want to be Arnold Schoenberg, but no one else volunteered. An aesthetic commitment often originates despite the artist's desires, despite the wish for dilettantism which glides past unwanted, troubling thoughts.

If the studio visit offers an opportunity for dialogue predicated on approval, the situation is by no means always a matter of adoration. An invitation to visit often comes about despite no promise of flattery, no demonstrable liking of the artist's work. A prelude to the visit, then, is trust posited on common philosophical ground. Artists of this kind who require only intellectual rapport, not psychological obeisance, to engage in a dialogue with the critic. They are motivated to seek intellectual stimulation as much as approval.

I remember writing a mixed review of surrealizing pictures of deer portraying omniscient animal intelligence, aware of the probability that, as so often happens, my acquaintance with the artist would turn sour once the review appeared. Months later, he approached me to say that mine was "an interesting review; let's talk about it." For once, a negative review inspired not boycott but an invitation to further discussion. Nor was this artist coy in his intention, for in the studio, sitting on kitchen chairs and sipping tea, he asked me to explain what I had meant by writing that his visual sophistication was far in advance of his literary ability. Remarkable to me, as I learned while visiting him, was this artist's deep appreciation of that which is problematic. Less concerned with gossip than many artists, he was much more concerned with tracking intellectual nuance than in psychological back-biting. Moreover, during subsequent studio visits he followed through the implications of our literary dialogue. How to get past literal and naive portrayal of mythopoetic content became the springboard of many discussions leading far beyond his own immediate interests. Allegory versus myth, a topic of central concern to this artist, became a much more inclusive issue as time went on. The problematic nature of mannerism, so threatening to Ms. Prision, was endlessly fascinating to Sky Watcher, as were such matters of taste as whether certain painterly approaches to subject matter are too "ingratiating." Time and time again, this painter, not the visiting critic, raised critical issues troubling him, testing his articulation of the problem by restating it as if to hold it up to the light for examination. However involved in his own art, Sky Watcher continually demonstrated greater commitment to the connoisseurship of aesthetic issues than to any particular cathected object. The philosophical matter that

brought us together initially, namely, the nature of metamorphosis in art, was instrumental in transforming the studio visit itself from a simple-minded reflection of the artist's world-view to a situation animated by mutual respect for the independence of thought on a variety of topics.

Positive attraction to the Other, to the viewpoint that complements one's own, provides the stimulus for inviting dialogue. To gauge whether a conversation is a genuine dialogue (or only parallel monologues for even only a single monologue by virtue of the speaker's vetoing the words of his companion) one need only listen for "the creative process" in verbal exchange. In this regard, artists are often not engaged in a creative process at all: all the more noteworthy, then, when in the studio they encourage a give-and-take of ideas.

Rare though it may be, this need by the artist for intellectual engagement and growth has been underestimated. With one young artist, intellectual rapport grew casually and sporadically several years before a studio visit transpired. Our rapport developed undiminished even as it became obvious that our aesthetic "positions" often markedly divergent. Notably, a mismatch climaxed in his disavowal of De Stijl: "It's not natural to love Mondrian," he said; whereupon I confessed to a strong bias ever since seeing his art in reproduction as a child; Mondrian was indeed the first art I "loved." Meanwhile, his funky sculptural reliefs hanging in a loft he shared had elicited no response from me; to his recent talented, if belated, Symbolist painting, I had remained non-committal until he initiated a studio visit. Then, this artist, whose name should be the Emerging City for always exercising his sense of inquiry, his strong analytical bent, and his contempt for "bullshit" in himself as well as in others, presented his cargo of several years' canvases. As our studio visit wound down, he confessed his impatience and disappointment with the "mere" praise given him by other visiting critics and artists, for, lacking concreteness, "it gave me nothing to go by."

Here, then, was an artist who was frustrated by the truth of praise. He complimented me for giving a "useful," specifically, discriminating, analysis and evaluation of several paintings. I in turn was delighted he had responded to a tactic I had hoped would be helpful. Given his analytic mind, I let him in on my interior monologue while scanning the paintings: I thought aloud. "Considering such-and-such to be his art's aim, then it might be strengthened by so-and-so," my response went, presenting him with a series of contingencies. Extremely unusual was this artist's insatiable appetite for more and more specifically directed challenges from the critic.

When dialogue, not praise, becomes privileged, the success of a studio visit would appear to rest less on agreement than on evidence that the integrity of the critic's response matches integrity of the artist's own: weak work must be unmasked, strong work must be discerned for what it genuinely achieves. The artist will require explanations in support of aesthetic judgments, and will be on the lookout for reasons that "click" with him. Not that artists eager for discourse accept challenge on all fronts. An artist seeking dialogue may be inarticulate or else touchy about being compared

to his or her peers yet may nonetheless be content if only the studio visit becomes therapeutic. Like the student testing a substitute teacher, this artist will distrust, if not disrespect, the push-over who cannot track his situation accurately. Getting away with murder is not the goal, being found out is.

Historically, an exemplar is Eugene Delacroix. We know from his journals that Delacroix's self-esteem depended on his own highly developed self-critical acumen. So when Alexandre Dumas visited his studio, avidly taking notes, the artist confided his distaste and embarrassment at such vulgar worship of genius that would make of him "a hero in a novel." Delacroix evidently found this form of worship repugnant. Here is an example of a genuine Romantic genius who did not subscribe to an uncritical application of the Romantic notion of genius; genius is not a phenomenon Delacroix was willing to turn into a rank stereotype.

His journal also reflects Delacroix's cool attitude toward Baudelaire, who adored his art. Though he found Baudelaire "modern and Progressive," the painter remained uneasy about being attached to an aesthetic of "obscurity and confusion" that linked him with Poe's verses. One may add that Baudelaire's subjective identification with Delacroix exposed the limits of his effectiveness as a critic. Calling Manet the best of a bad lot, he failed to grasp Manet's meaning, much less appreciate it, precisely because that painter's excellence was posited on aesthetic principles radically at odds with his. Nevertheless, thanks to his own honed critical faculty, Delacroix could note in his journal that the poet/critic has given him something to think about.

A psychological explanation for artists' ability to take risks in dialogue is that they have assimilated the critical principle and made it their own, embracing it as a source of the enrichment of pleasure, not a threat to pleasure's extinction. Perhaps a supreme confidence in their ability to realize anything they set out to do inspires in some artists this sense of adventure. Yet one continually witnesses less gifted artists who, even so, have remained friendly with the superego, posing questions during a studio visit that the critic has neglected to pose, inviting intense critical engagement even though this may undermine their own control of the situation. And though paradoxically, as the existential writer Arturo Fallico says, "the art work does not come into being to be criticized," criticism is not extrinsic to art, it is as integral to art as it is to existence.

Where artists initiate or sustain dialogue, we must credit them with something more than narcissism, or, at least a gratification that is so culturally ambitious it seeks conceptual horizons far beyond pleasure. Art as enactment, according to Richard Kuhns' psychoanalytical critique of Freud, frees the artist from the stigma of stunted maturity and enables him or her to join the more comprehensive creative process of culture at large. Citing Anna Freud, Kuhns redefines creative process to include conceptual growth by which "instinctual processes connected by ideas can be brought into consciousness." Just this process of intellectualization, Kuhns says, we see expressed in style. Art as enactment is also Richard Kuhns' reconciliation



of psychoanalytic with existential values, of tradition individually constituted, of tradition in which each human is answerable for his assertions.

In that case, dialogue in the studio can be an invitation extended to the critic to move beyond description to interpretation that exposes the philosophical underpinnings of the art on view. During the last few decades we have seen the creative critic on the rise, though he is often unlikely to be welcomed by the artist unless his interpretation affectionately confirms the artist's propaganda. Deconstruction offers the most freewheeling sort of speculation moving independently of the art, but it is only the most extreme instance of a general tendency today. Increasingly, interpretation overwhelms description. Realigning criticism from objectivity to subjectivity and from production to reception allows the critic intimacy with the creative process formerly guarded so securely by the artist. Curiously, the rise of creative criticism and the theories of reception have coincided with the lessening power of the art critic to stem the tendency of fashion to supplant art history.

The myth is that the artist is the one victimized by the critic. But the critic can be rendered helpless too. Aesthetic coercion by the artist is not confined to an occasional bully. More prevalent than believed, the artist's manipulation of the critic in the guise of informing him is a source of pressure that the critic can always brace himself to expect. For this reason, the notion of the studio as site of creative struggle is so often compromised. This myth should at least be questioned. In *The Trial*, "K" discovers that the painter's garret, through it may be entered only after taking a torturous route, actually adjoins the corridors of the courts of law where he is being prosecuted; indeed, the painter is in league with the "system." Kafka knew that under certain circumstances the artist is perfectly capable of being an intellectual thug.

The temptation is to draw some causal relation between the diminishing role of the critic today and the artist's increasingly vigorous manipulation of the critic. It is tempting to speculate that the art critic is all but anachronistic in our time, his role vestigial now that the dealer and collector establish the validity of art, enabling the artist to by-pass the critic for the "advocate" — today's euphemism for publicist — to write about his art. If the critic finds the art problematic, wishing to exercise his right to test the art against the artist's intentions, he can be dumped for someone more cooperative in promoting the artist's reputation. An art writer who writes impressionistically in a way that doesn't rub, can be found to fill the bill.

Now that celebrity determines who can write himself into history, the critic is all too often seen as useful to the artist only insofar as he contributes to the artist's endorsements. An invitation to critique the art of a superstar insulted by fame and canonical status is improbable except for the long-time crony who can level with artist in confidence. Certainly with an established artist whose gallery bio weighs heavily with pages of bibliography, the dissenting critic has no sway. Chances are, under such peer pressure to reinforce the artist's "classic" stature, a critic will at best

pull his punches — perhaps speaking favorably of selected works while implying by indirection those art works left unaddressed are ineffective, perhaps by addressing problematic paintings through abstract discourse. Today, moreover, the veteran critic cannot compete even with younger recent fame. One superstar whose cynicism is well-developed stands nowadays at parties wearing a deliberately ambiguous expression interpretable as both a smile acknowledging a critic's presence, and not a smile, since the same slightly open mouth can also do for non-acknowledgment, lest he seem to be friendly to the "wrong" person. Symptomatic, too, of the power play indicating a shifting authority is an occasion when, not so long ago, I was introduced by name to a current "hot" artist, and seeing him draw a blank, I added the identifying tag of art critic. He retorted quickly, "When you're important, we'll know who you are." Stunning here is the presumption that the world and anything valuable in it begins and ends with what the artist happens to know. History prior to his birthdate doesn't exist.

But if engagement, not adulation, is what the artist seeks in his studio, he is likely to view criticism as an exciting and necessary enrichment of the creative process. His goals are not so materialistic as the artist mandating worship, for though he may be ambitious too, he views the critic as more than an agent for supplying favorable reviews and elegiac catalogue essays advancing his career. He seeks in the studio visit an occasion for work, in which conversation with the critic offers an opportunity for exposing his art to an informed public of one, without the dire consequences of public exhibition. Whereas public exhibition results in a reception characterized by silence at large and scattershot comments by way of the grape-vine, private presentation in the studio inspires sustained interpretation of the art interrogation of its aesthetic premises, and also a chance, thereby, for the artist to realize the art's potential by listening to a point of view other than his own.

Invited to the studio, the critic is obliged to do more than describe the art he finds there, but any discussion that ensues can take place only in a context of mutual trust. On the one hand, some personal defensiveness is integral to the process of being reviewed in studio and within limits must be respected. On the other, the critic is not doing his job unless he or she works to get beyond taste or market value or the rationalization of trends and visual illiteracy — the public socioeconomics practically swamping the art. There is no need to supply that public perspective, and the critic who does not distance the discourse in the studio from that is misrepresenting himself professionally.

# The Phallus Stripped Bare By Its Non-Bachelors, Even: A Conversation Between Alain Kirili and Philippe Sollers

Translated by Philip Barnard

*Author's note:*

I have always been sensible to the truth-effects revealed in the spontaneity of conversation with a friend. In this case with Philippe Sollers, editor at Editions Gallimard and, in my estimation, the most important writer in France today. During a dinner at the restaurant La Closerie des Lilas, we decided to ask the videast Jean-Paul Fargier to record and film a dialogue in the presence of my sculptures at my studio in Paris. It was Philip Barnard, the American translator of Sollers, who proposed to me that the ambience of this aphoristic and evanescent dialogue should be transcribed into English. Sollers and I meet regularly, most often in the context of drinks at the bar of the Pont Royal, one which is frequented by many Gallimard writers. It was there, on October 6, 1985, that we held the first screening of "The Phallus Stripped Bare by Its Non-Bachelors, Even."

*Philippe Sollers:* There should be a woman's voice to warm up this sculpture... With modulations that go along with all of this work... that Alain is accomplishing here... Ah! how I love all of these, these things... What a job! So how do you make them? Do you remember how you make them?  
[laughter]

*Alain Kirili:* With my hands... Or sometimes with a hammer...

*Ph.S.:* Where is that hammer, anyway? There, for example?

*A.K.:* Crack!

*Ph.S.:* Wham! And there a whack... whack! [laughter]

*A.K.:* A whack here too! And another one there, drier...

*Ph.S.:* A hammer...

*A.K.:* Drier here, more humid there... It skips better when it's wet... That's what gives the clay its wonderful capacity for recording gestures... marks...

*Ph.S.:* Living earth, yes...

*A.K.:* Living earth... Which leads to this metaphor... flesh...

*Ph.S.:* What do you call that one there?

*A.K.:* Because of this swelling right here... I have risked the term... the title, *Maternity*...

*Ph.S.:* And there, how's that done? With a knife?

*A.K.:* With a knife...

*Ph.S.:* What sort of knife?

*A.K.:* A kitchen knife... an ordinary knife.

*Ph.S.:* Here, here, and over here... if I'm not mistaken...

*A.K.:* That's right... There's an incision... Repeated three times... Here, here, and here...

*Ph.S.:* Slap slap slap!

*A.K.:* ...which I left in because, oddly enough, it seems to me that it imparts life to this clay.

*Ph.S.:* What do you think about when you strike with your knife?

*A.K.:* About nothing but the pleasure of doing it. [laughter] Do you remember, you once made a funny remark to me when I was making these clay pieces at La Guardia Place. You had come to see me working... and you found it very odd that in leaving the basement where I had worked these clay pieces... I had put on my jacket... I looked perfectly presentable in the street... almost unnoticeable...

*Ph.S.:* The perfect assassin!

*A.K.:* Just as if I were coming out of a brothel...

*Ph.S.:* A perfect assassin! The perfect crime... You see, that's what interests me in your sculpture, the way it involves an act of violence that's absolutely... fabulous... that most people couldn't even imagine... they don't realize that sculpture is an engagement that is so violent, so physical, so destructive, so... far beyond even destruction... they see sculptures, they walk around them, but only vaguely... as if in a dream, right... you've seen people in the Rodin museum... it's the same for Giacometti, Picasso, Bernini, all of them... I think people never even imagine to what degree it's an engagement of the entire body beyond the body... for me, it's the most misunderstood art... which is to say... one needs sculptures, one needs

monuments... think of the number of statues being commissioned these days, it's incredible... commemorative statues... of this or that important personage...

A.K.: If sculpture isn't commemorative, no one even talks about it...

Ph.S.: ...why does the State, why do States, feel themselves so violently implicated in sculpture... after all, it's the body that's being immortalized in a certain fashion, and... why is there at the same time this misunderstanding of sculpture... that is, of the body...?

A.K.: Another body is intolerable...

Ph.S.: What happens when a State gets involved with sculpture? For example, the French State these days?

A.K.: The French State wants sculpture that represents, that commemorates, but that is not a body... and, in this context, there happens to be a particular work that I haven't managed to put forward...

Ph.S.: Which one?

A.K.: My sculpture *Commandment*... which the State is attempting... to my profound regret... to reject... There are considerable stakes for me in preventing the State from committing such an error...

Ph.S.: What is it that bothers them?

A.K.: First of all that the work is not commemorative...

Ph.S.: That it doesn't commemorate anything from the nineteenth century...

A.K.: That it doesn't serve a political purpose, in the most immediate sense...

A.K.: What is particular to this art is its weight... there are many, many things that bring about these... curious sculptures... this bronze... the weight of this bronze... and yet a greater lightness in this plaster... still, be careful, it's quite heavy... and it's supposed to be touched... it's tactile... the gaze is not sufficient... that's very important, that the eye should not be sufficient... that suddenly tactility... the hand has its own intelligence... and speaks somewhat like writing... it is a writing... it represents nothing... and that's where the problem arises for those who want to make it correspond to an alphabet that they could share... that is, there isn't any familiarity... that's something I insist on, even in friendship... with someone I esteem... no familiarity... [*laughter*]... familiarity, I would even say, please excuse me, kills creation... the weight... is crucial for... this kind of writing...

Ph.S.: You're interested in Indian lingams... where one is dealing with phallic forms which are very... very obvious... yes... but we've had plenty of problems... both of us... with this phallus business... think of those memorable lectures and discussions in New York... and elsewhere...

A.K.: Don't you have a lingam, Ariane? [*laughter*]

Ph.S.: Right, that's it!

A.K.: Could you please bring some lingams over here... [*laughter*] some scotch? Yes... sure, I'll have a scotch, but bring some lingams too [*laughter*] because this matter requires a certain precision... you need to show what you're talking about...

Ph.S.: ...a little sexual pedagogy because... what's terrible is the way one is obliged... while doing extremely complicated things, if you will, both

of us, with these matters... one is obliged to do a lot of sexual pedagogy... indeed... of elementary sexology... [laughter]

A.K.: Ah! here comes my dear Ariane...

Ph.S.: Let's see that... here it would seem that the masculine element is in a stranglehold... just a wee bit... [laughter]

A.K.: You seem concerned! [laughter] But there's no need to be so wary...

Ph.S.: This phallus is a prisoner in irons! [laughter]

A.K.: Still... there are the yonis...

Ph.S.: Well, *yoni soit qui mal y pense!*

A.K.: The lingams escape sometimes...

Ph.S.: Is that so? Rarely... [laughter]

A.K.: What I mean is that the phallic element is very dominant here... It flows into its receptacle, which holds it... it's a magnificent art, quite badly regarded by Westerners... who avoid the phallus like... like the plague, if I can put it that way...

Ph.S.: ...who can't see this kind of sculpture...

A.K.: Each element is in its place... there's no confusion... this is not a sculpture that travesties... one element cannot be substituted... for another, but fulfills its particular function quite powerfully... the yoni receives water, and the effect of this water in the yoni, the feminine principle, allows the lingam to take off...

Ph.S.: OK...

A.K.: It's certainly a brilliant idea for a fountain!

Ph.S.: Which leads us to Bernini... but then this would take us too far... to Rome...

A.K.: There... I cannot do otherwise than to... to make it this way... this piece, you see... this piece is not about to collapse... I don't know if you see... there's no need for an armature... the thickness of the piece is what constitutes its matrix...

Ph.S.: It's going to hold up, right...

A.K.: It'll hold up...

Ph.S.: It'll remember us...

A.K.: Like so, like so...

Ph.S.: It's with us, you see, there are three of us here! ...at least... at least...

A.K.: Like so... this is not a piece of clay that is threatened in... in its frame... the clay takes shape and expands on the frame, and there is a certain ease... yes, ease... no anguish...

Ph.S.: No anguish about erection!

A.K.: No anguish about erection, yes, that's the most fundamental thing.

Ph.S.: Erection is what anguishes the others.

A.K.: And in erection... there have sometimes been expressions... of an erection that was bound to collapse...

Ph.S.: Oh yes?

A.K.: I mean for example that the artist to whom... I oppose myself the most...

Ph.S.: Go on! Who do you oppose? [laughter]

A.K.: ...would be Giacometti... who is unable to...

Ph.S.: But he's great! Eh!

A.K.: An immense artist! But he's great for ethical reasons, if you will, that are opposed to my own... Giacometti comes from a... from a Protestant background...

Ph.S.: Well well!

A.K.: ...that suffers from erection...

Ph.S.: You think he suffers from erection, do you?

A.K.: He suffers to such a degree that for him woman is a woman with her throat cut... In his surrealist period, one of his most important sculptures is the *Woman with Her Throat Cut*... the couple is done with incredible violence; the male is the knife...

Ph.S.: And your knife? What's it doing?

A.K.: Well, my knife, my knife is rather an accentuation of pleasure...

Ph.S.: Indeed, is that so! [laughter]

A.K.: It does not destroy the sculpture... On the contrary, oddly enough, I think it augments it...

Ph.S.: It glorifies it...

A.K.: Whereas in Giacometti, verticality — at a certain moment, and this is very powerful, very strong, very marked in him—verticality becomes so very little only to express the collapse of this verticality, the misery of this verticality... he swells the base, but out of all proportion! This is quite striking in his "critique of surrealism" period: in the "figurines," to be precise... but likewise in his surrealist period one finds these women with their throats cut... anything that partakes of delicacy is endangered... The *Flower in Danger* for example... a bow that is ready, if released, to destroy this little flower in plaster... It's an extremely anguished universe. Giacometti's creative tension is due to the transgression of his origins, whereas creation for me involves ease in relation to my origins. There is a force, but not a contradiction with the ethics in which I have been brought up. When one arrives in America, all ready to admire everything... their contribution has been immense, certainly, but nevertheless... there is an ethics of coercion in this country... that dominates... someone born in France can never be at home in this atmosphere.

Ph.S.: Too French...

A.K.: Which makes one look exotic! But... still, what I like about the United States is that puritanism is official here. In France it's hypocritical. In France people believe that they're still in a traditionally Catholic country... while they defrock like there's no tomorrow! [laughter]

Ph.S.: And Picasso? For you...

A.K.: Picasso... When Rodin did his erotic drawings he was between sixty and seventy-seven years old... And Picasso, in 1968, did an extraordinary series of more than 360 engravings, intensely erotic... There is something there, for me, that is very stimulating... this defiance towards age... and all the senses that are implied in creative longevity... which is a biological challenge... which more or less defies the norms...

Ph.S.: Have you, in your life, sometimes felt an extremely violent demand

that you... cease to be erotic? How is it that the pact... eh... demanding that you renounce sexuality or sex, how does it happen in your case? I encounter this all the time in my life... "Enough Already!" "Don't do that..."

A.K.: For me, not to do exhibitions...

Ph.S.: This is all I hear, every day, morning noon and night...

A.K.: No exhibitions... no biennial for me... no French museums for me... Eventually they'd like it if... if... in the end, it would be so much easier if you just wouldn't publish those books, honestly... stop publishing, Philippe... [laughter]

Ph.S.: I have to stop?

A.K.: ...and I could melt my pieces and send them to Arno Breker... [laughter] he could use the bronze... I met with his lawyer, in fact...

Ph.S.: ...and he said?

A.K.: He said that if I had a few kilos of bronze [laughter], that this would be a wonderful contribution [laughter] from France... [laughter]

Ph.S.: ... toward the German war effort!... [laughter]

A.K.: Exactly...

Ph.S.: Oops! Watch out, it went off!

A.K.: We got a little carried away there... [laughter]

Ph.S.: No... it's fine... wait a second... A little higher, Ariane... turn the music up a little higher, please...

A.K.: Now here, this is the story of Christ's body...

Ph.S.: Whoa! You'll have to apologize if you talk about that... you know... the way things are today, eh...

A.K.: Oh yes? [laughter]

Ph.S.: Now what is it you said... whose? [laughter]

A.K.: Who will become...

Ph.S.: What? What did you call him?

A.K.: Christ... yes indeed!...

Ph.S.: You said the word... and you don't deny it... that is, you don't... you say it, you name him...

A.K.: I force this liberty upon myself... [laughter] I mean...

Ph.S.: Shameful!... but yes, what is it you mean to say?

A.K.: An incarnated form of suffering... which is, nevertheless... certain distinctions must be made here... something quite different than that of an ecstatic joy [jouissance]... make no mistake about it...

Ph.S.: No! That's why there are Assumptions for the other side, right...

A.K.: Exactly! This is precisely where the distinction becomes very important... and where, although this may displease some people... where that Church which is Catholic and Roman is without a doubt... for creation... the cradle... the most important of all civilization...

Ph.S.: My! You think so!

A.K.: I have reached this conclusion... simply by looking at the works...

Ph.S.: My my! you say it just like that! Without concerning yourself about the effects it's liable to produce? The worries it will call down on you?

A.K.: Oh! you really think so?



Ph.S.: You say this in all tranquillity?

A.K.: Seems obvious to me...

Ph.S.: Obvious! OK everyone, turn off the cameras... that's it... no more... this is fanaticism... stop everything... [laughter]

A.K.: But yes, yes, we must go on... because the stakes here are crucial for understanding Picasso...

Ph.S.: By all means, then!

A.K.: The stakes are very important for understanding Matisse...

Ph.S.: Go right ahead!

A.K.: The stakes are very important for understanding Joyce...

Ph.S.: Go right ahead!

A.K.: And in the end, they have a lot to do with you, although you're playing innocent...

Ph.S.: I don't play innocent, I play guilty...

A.K.: Admit it, in front of Fargier's cameras... [laughter]

Ph.S.: I plead guilty... but this is going to cause problems for you...

A.K.: I don't think it can *really* cause me problems...

Ph.S.: Ah! You don't?

A.K.: Not on the level of the quality of my work...

Ph.S.: No, no... but socially it's going to cause problems... [laughter] Take it from an old dinosaur like me... [laughter] who once believed, in his enthusiasm, that one could say things like that... but shh... you've got to be careful... Watch out, Kirili!

A.K.: And yet I would maintain that one can understand nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, about the art of the twentieth century, if one takes a profane approach... that would be a complete and total error: the art of the twentieth century is not profane... after all, we're not just kidding around here... if Picasso and Matisse are from Catholic countries, it's not by accident... And Joyce...

Ph.S.: Still, the Americans have... started to... nibble away at you here... to nip at your heels...

A.K.: When Americans realize this, they commit suicide...

Ph.S.: You're referring to...

A.K.: ...to all of the great American artists... the writers get drunk and take the leap, sometimes, you know it better than I... the painters and the sculptors too, they...

Ph.S.: They get to a point where they begin to suspect that this is it?

A.K.: Right. There is a famous phrase of David Smith... three years before he died... he said to Thomas Hess, who asked him, "Why are you so interested in Joyce, you're well known today, you don't need to play at being intellectual... with Joyce... stop screwing around, David..." [laughter] And David replies, "Listen my friend, I'm interested in Joyce for very serious reasons... because when you're born American and Calvinist, and you want to be a sculptor, it's *better for you*... to read an Irish Catholic!" You know there are sculptures by Smith that translate this very well... his sculptures about the suffering of his country, very autobiographical, he called them *Puritan Landscape*...

Ph.S.: *Puritan Landscape!*

A.K.: This is nothing like the soft representations you find in Julio Gonzalez... Smith's mother... is a *Spectre of Mother*... that represents the whole "sunday school" side of things that he had to surmount in order to become a sculptor... this extremely coercive, repressive sunday school... The iconography of the Virgin, of the mother, of maternity... of what Protestants refer to militantly as... the feminization of worship in the Catholic church... is a matter with quite crucial stakes for us artists... whatever our religion... there are ecumenical implications... for all of the great creations of the twentieth century...

Ph.S.: And you credit all of this to a Catholic initiative?

A.K.: Do you know that in France there has only been a single person who has assumed this role *well*? It was the father Couturier... who built the church at Assy... Where, regardless of their religious origins, people could assemble... Do you know the story of the Jewish sculptor Lipchitz?

Ph.S.: Tell me...

A.K.: One of Couturier's representatives asks him, "Would you like to make a Virgin for Assy?" "I would be delighted... but... you know... I'm Jewish... — Well, if it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother us." [laughter] Modernity is religious... in its reference... When Barnett Newman did his *Stations of the Cross*, he was aiming, if I may say, at a double revolution... as a Jewish artist, but also as an artist in a Protestant country...

Ph.S.: Hallelujah!

A.K.: Yes!... indeed!... it suffices to see what goes on at a Mass in Vence... Every specialist in modern art will tell you that the chapel at Vence is a failure... For my part, each time that I have gone to the chapel at Vence, just recently for example, to a mass, it seemed to me so extraordinarily successful that I am startled by this discrepancy... and it's on the basis of a comprehension of this discrepancy that one can... perhaps see... how art is going to develop today and tomorrow...

Ph.S.: HALLELUJAH!

# The McSacred and the Profane

By Peter Plagens

What is the new public art? Definitions differ from artist to artist, but they are held together by a single thread: It is art plus function, whether the function is to provide a place to sit for lunch, to provide water drainage, to mark an important historical date, or to enhance and direct a viewer's perceptions.

—Douglas McGill, "Sculpture Goes Public,"  
*The New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 1986.

As the new darling of the new patronage, the new public art waxes ubiquitous amid almost universal favor. It is praised for social service as well as aesthetic quality; it is credited with not only the final liberation of sculpture from singular objecthood, but art itself from aesthetic distance, and the general public from a purgatory of artists' neglect and its own resentment. The new public art enables American business and government, moreover, to deal with an erstwhile adversary—the intellectually dangerous subculture of serious art—from behind such comforting buffers as "com-

munity input," advisory committees, project proposals, competitions and juries, real estate developments, and large architectural firms.

Although many works of the new public art manage to be halfway decent as art, and many of the civic machinations which make them possible relatively open and fair, the whole enterprise is beginning to ring a little false. When the public wants too much of a say in public art (e.g., when it stands up and says it wants unadorned recreational spaces instead of aestheticized plazas),<sup>1</sup> the public is as dismissable as it ever was under the reign of gallery/museum formalism. Artists, for their part, trade creative autonomy on a small scale for design-team compromise on a large scale. Worst, many works of the new public art are, for all their putatively progressive social trappings, boring and even silly—innocuous rehashes of form-follows-function blown up to earthwork scale, the sculptural equivalent of the soothing gongs and whistles of New Age music.

The problem is not simply collaboration itself, although partnership's checkered past in Western art cannot be dismissed with a facile appeal to the longer history of nonindividualized art,<sup>2</sup> nor is it site-specificity in itself (which is often, as with earthworks in outlying venues, simply a formal device, with no claims of direct social benefit). The problems are, in the short run, patronage and, in the long haul, content—or, more to the point, the lack of it.

Business and government have, and have always had, agendas antithetical to the artist's—namely profit and acquiescence—and the artist who embraces them does so at great risk to his or her art. But business and government are merely branches of our secular, pluralist, materialist (in the plain, non-Marxist sense of the word) society which requires its works of public art—however novel, useful, or even mechanically satirical they may be—to say, in the end, nothing. For if they did manage to say something, if they took a stand on something, beyond merely how nice it is for people to stroll through or around them, they would violate the abiding and deceptive tolerance of the marketplace, and possibly do grievous harm to the agendas of business and government.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. *THE FRANCHISED CITY*

The late twentieth-century American city is a kind of fast-food franchise in reverse. The individual corporate purveyors of dubious urban nourishment and certain economic uniformity collude to insure the profitability of the group. The well-being of the residential and transient public (save those managerial members of it who drive in from the safety of the suburbs and park their Bavarian sedans in guarded underground garages and go off to produce paper profits by moving other people's money around and skimming a little off the top for themselves) is largely ignored; like the customers lined up in the meat-locker mausolea of Roy Rogers take-out counters, the "public" is not considered to be a group of fully human beings, but a printout of addable abstractions who might be made to order, eat, sleep, walk, ride, buy and pay in the manner most convenient and profitable to the proprietor.

The half-baked dish that the franchised city feeds its public is a foil-wrapped version of the cherished American idea of individualism, that is, the freedom to be as rich or poor as we choose. At street level, American individualism has by now sped far beyond the *de jure* "right" of anyone to make him/herself as happy as possible through the acquisition of material goods, to the *de facto* right of every last passive victim and aggressive sociopath on the sidewalk to experience the instant gratification of Olde English 800 Malt Liquor, microwavable entrees, portable stereos, and pornographic movies.<sup>4</sup> More recently constructed public spaces have become venues for indulgence in private pleasures—eating, drinking, petting, skateboarding, listening to Walkmen, playing with Frisbees—rather than such exercises of civic sensibility as holding meetings, listening to speeches, watching parades, conducting classes, or attending civic ceremonies. Some older spaces, where the root philanthropy is buried in the soot of history (thirty years is long enough), are now filled with dirt, violence, crime and, literally, shit. Just across the East River from Manahattan's Federal Plaza—a newer public space and the site of Richard Serra's celebrated and troubled work of public art, *Tilted Arc*—there's an older plaza whose centerpiece is a statue of George Washington, and it is adrift in graffiti and peppered with the overturned hulks of burnt-out cars, some of which molder in mock homage at the foot of the Founder of this country. Periodically, the authorities remove them but, one by one, they're replaced. The supply of desperation and cynicism from which the burned-out hulks arise is, apparently, inexhaustible.

The crude voraciousness now characterizing our ethos of "personality" is but an echo of larger movements within the society, of the grinding of the great wheels (no...of the smooth humming and blinking of the computers which make electronic money transfers) in which The Deal, rather than anything tangible produced in its wake, is the grain.

Real estate is the linchpin of The Deal's power in the city because it dictates who will live and do business where and, to a great extent, how. Most large real estate developments—the architecture erected upon them and the new public art which decorates them—smack of The Deal; by the time the longtime residents are removed, the land cleared (usually of a more humane architecture than what's going up), the buildings built, and the embellishments put in place, the real money has already been made and is hard at work financing Another Deal. Whatever general social good was envisioned at the inception of The Deal remains, like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, forever in the distance.

The inclusion of a prescribed amount of low- and middle-income housing is a frequent sop thrown to the municipal government by developers (or, just as frequently, pulled like impacted wisdom teeth out of developers by civic action groups) in return for the approval of their projects. But low- and middle-income urban housing faces the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) syndrome. No matter how much money piles up courtesy of the excess profits of developments like Battery Park City in New York, it and every similar project is reluctant to entertain the presence of blue-collar and no-

collar families among its apartments, offices, boutiques, and Winter Gardens. Announced intentions of including low- and middle-income housing in the development—usually made when politicians and financiers stand smiling over the model for photographers—have a way of being gradually diluted into raising money to build the needed housing someplace *else*, in the unlikely event that a suitable location is ever found. And justice deferred is, as they say, justice denied.

Although there is, understandably, little or no genuine public sensibility in the franchised city, those in power realize there ought to exist at least the appearance of it. To this end, the new public art has been recooked in new, pseudo-populist, pseudo-progressive broths. The primary purpose of the dish is to valorize as “public” leftover spaces in large real estate deals. Many of the spaces made available to the new public art are mere bones thrown to the public by developers of skyscraper-galleria complexes. As often as not, the bone is barely edible because the plaza, concourse, atrium, whatever, is (as evident in glitzy furnishings and overpriced boutiques) meant to be enjoyed by nobody more than a couple of notches below the architects/developers on the ladder of disposable income.

(In most exurban cases, the new public art rests on uncontested land which has been turned into “sculpture parks” of one sort or another. Some sites set aside for public art are, however, badly in need of more than aesthetic transformation; Artpark in upstate New York, for example, sits over a chemical dump the rival of Love Canal, and one sculptor who worked there, Owen Merrill, says that in the spring a yellowish slime oozes from beneath the ground and subtracts layers of skin from the soles of one’s feet).

## 2. THE NEW PUBLIC ART

Although the history of public art goes back about as far as any human artifact (perhaps the first formal entrance to a cave), our usual idea of a work of public art has been, until lately, a static, outdoor aesthetic object whose only requisite to viewer access is someone’s happening upon it. (Modernism has taught us, however, that the *art* of art resides as much in the eye of the beholder as it does in the product of the artist, and allows—even encourages—a more elastic definition which includes parks and landscaping, public signage and such appurtenances as streetlamps and berms, point-of-sale displays, billboards and other large-scale advertising, public spectacles such as parades and football games, and even blockbuster museum shows of erstwhile “gallery art.”)

Twenty years ago, only the ceremonial set-back spaces around skyscrapers were embellished by public art, and then only with riskless and familiar Alexander Calder, Henry Moores, and Arnaldo Pomodoros that compose the by now infamous genre of “plop art” (that is, gratuitously big sculpture “plopped” down long after the building has been built). Nowadays, however, quasisculptural walls, beams, posts, lintels, arches, staircases, platforms, balconies, benches, chairs, tables, cages, rooms, houses, temples, towers, bridges, tubes, culverts, pools, ponds, streams, trenches, holes,

hillocks, embankments, paths, and fields by such artists as Alice Adams, Siah Armajani, Scott Burton, Charles Greening, Doug Hollis, Nancy Holt, Andrew Leicester, Mary Miss, Patsy Norvell, Ned Smythe, George Trakas, and, seemingly, ten thousand others, are cropping up, down, in and out at factory sites, strip-mine reclamations, highrise riverfront developments and civic centers from Seattle to Miami.<sup>5</sup> Critic Grace Glueck has quoted a Federal official as saying that the new public art is “the fastest-growing industry in the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

The new public art is arty but not too arty, playful but not too playful, colorful but not too colorful, and avant-garde but not too avant-garde. The putatively progressive new public art is a sort of Fisher-Price toy for white-collar adults: you can walk on it, climb on it, play on it, and eat lunch on it without actually succumbing to the vulgar thrill of consorting with Lazer Tag or Uzi replicas. On its higher plane, the new public art purports (to paraphrase one of its oft-heard justifications) to help the viewer appreciate more clearly the very surroundings of the work.

The purpose of the new public art is actually not to entertain, uplift, assist or teach the public. Its purpose is to employ the balm of high culture—specifically, *au courant* fine art—as a lubricant for the corporate franchising of the city in which the government, long removed from the direct control of the public into the hands of party machines and other vested interests, leased out large chunks of its sovereignty to corporations. The new public art is actually supposed to remind the public how benevolent is the corpo-government alliance, how salutary are the effects of economic collusion and shared profit taking, and what wonderful stability and continuity the tandem provides. The new public art says, more than it says anything else, that the art advisory council is in session, the mayor is in office, the CEO is on his boardroom throne, and all’s right with the world.

Not that studio/gallery formalism—aside from its owning up to “elitism” a little more readily—has any more conscience. In modern Western civilization, most serious art is unconcerned (except as it pertains to the artist who makes it) with such attributes of survival as food, clothing, shelter, reproduction of the species, and combat. Basically functionless, art is usually financed by some entity *without direct accountability for the expenditure of its wealth*. In previous societies, this entity has been at various times a theocratic dictator, the Catholic church, royalty, aristocracy, or wealthy merchants. In ours, it’s been the last, with the recent addition of government agencies and large corporations who, although nominally accountable to voters and shareholders, are able to put impenetrable bureaucratic mazes between expenditures for art and widows with shares and orphans with votes.

The primary example of government patronage is, of course, the National Endowment for the Arts, or NEA, founded in the guns-and-butter days of Lyndon Johnson, matured under (surprise!) Richard Nixon, turned into Southern populism under Jimmy Carter, and simultaneously regentrified and stifled under the current Administration (whose allotment for military bands exceeds the NEA’s whole budget). Whatever its minor metamor-

phoses under any foreseeable President, the NEA is, barring a total budgetary revolution, a fixture—perhaps the *sine qua non*—of the new public art. The notation, “made possible in part by a grant from the NEA,” is as much a part of the new public art as the wonderfully malleable word “piece” as a blanket term to denote individual works of that art.

Although large and medium-large corporations are ostensibly “private,” they can and do operate economically like small governments. Not only do they collect and commission conventional works of modern art with which to decorate their offices and sanitize their reputations for avarice, but they can finagle zoning variances, preferential treatment in land transactions, tax-write-offs, and other emollients necessary to the patronage of the new public art.

The politicians choose the developer who chooses the architect who may, with the help of an advisory committee, choose the artists. With no separate public hearings held concerning the new public art which is to grace the development, the public may well sense it’s being snookered again; but the developers hope that the presence of a few artists on the project will serve, in itself, to calm the public’s fears. Artists, with their assumed congenial not-for-profit humanism, are essential to the public relations altering of the popular perception of large urban real estate developments: is not a development sensitive to aesthetics in the particular also sensitive to the public as a whole?

But the new public art wouldn’t enjoy the favor recently bestowed upon it without the twin concomitants of “percent-for-art” laws and the current and growing practice of including public artists on the “design team” of politicians (sometimes strategically unacknowledged), developers, architects, engineers, landscapers, and merchants. The former are state and municipal statutes setting aside from .5% to 2% of the cost of new construction for the acquisition/commission of works of public art, and the latter tends to a group of beyond-the-studio artists who have made of themselves a veritable troupe of travelling shamans—possessed of unspecific sensibilities transcending those of mere sculpture—who are thought to humanize osmotically the projects which engage them.

And percent-for-art laws and the inclusion of public artists on design teams wouldn’t have quite the momentum they do without the propellant of publicity. We are by now inured to the more ordinary varieties of publicity, having been forewarned by Andy Warhol that everybody (and, presumably, everything) would be famous for a quarter of an hour, having been wised up by Vietnam and Watergate that the world around us is generally up to no good, and having been let down by our ephemeral drug visions of easy human brotherhood; but we are still susceptible to a more voluntary, pseudo-enlightened hoodwinking. While we suspect that the rationale behind the new public art may be, like talk-show psychotherapy, a shuck, we know most everything is a shuck and we grudgingly accept a shuck as better than nothing. We’re all too willing to believe the shucksters again, especially if they’re civic shucksters and they’re peddling ersatz progress and enlightenment.



### 3. PUBLIC ARTISTS

The ancestors of studio artists and public artists walked the same historical road. At the end of the *quattrocento*, the artist was still largely a technician attached to a guild. In order to float the slack time between altarpieces, he accepted body 'n fender work on carriages and armor. In the fifteenth century, the hold of the guild system began to loosen and the artist, fast on his way to the modern myth of genius, began to make a distinction between his work—art—and that of the mere artisan. His patron was not altogether displeased, for it coincided with his growing acceptance of the belief that the artist was inherently distinguished from the ordinary person.

[I]n the range of delicacy and freedom of the connections he is able to make between different elements of his experience...his impulses...represent conciliations of impulses which in most minds are still confused, intertrammelled and conflicting. His work is the ordering of what in most minds is disordered.<sup>7</sup>

So...

Charles V stoops to recover the brush which Titian drops, and thinks that nothing is more natural than that a master like Titian should be waited on by an emperor. The legend of the artist is complete. There is doubtless still an element of coquetry about it: the artist is allowed to swim in the light so that the patron can shine in the reflection.<sup>8</sup>

By the eighteenth century, the notion of artistic genius had been codified into a catalogue of dizzying show-off skills which, as with Mozart or Fragonard, the artist could call upon at will. By the onset of the twentieth century, the myth of the genius of the artist merged seamlessly with his practice.

It is, however, of the essence of the modern notion of genius that there is no gulf between the artist and his work, or, if such a gulf is admitted, that the genius is far greater than any of his works and can never be adequately expressed in them.<sup>9</sup>

For all its very real faults, modernism completed the Western artist's quest of aesthetic autonomy. The modern studio painter or sculptor enjoys the hard-won and often financially inconvenient right to try to have his or her product *mean* whatever it wants to, regardless of owner, venue, or larger program.

In the version of this ideology trickled down to the new public art, the artist is simultaneously a unique being who, on the basis of talent and sensitivity, is expected to lend something ineffably humanizing to a gigantic real estate maneuver, such as Battery Park City, and to be a political reformer who, against the phalanxes of bankers, builders, lawyers and architects, stands up for Everyone. This heady mixture has understandably caused some public artists to think they've discovered in the bargain a shortcut to the art-historical pantheon: since they've signed a contract to do a piece of public art to be built of sturdy outdoor materials for the long haul, the

public is thought to be morally obligated to keep the work around forever. And since artists, unlike architects or contractors, undergo no bar exams nor are they required to display diplomas or licenses, their qualifications are their sensibilities, as manifested in previous public pieces or, failing those, gallery exhibitions.

The new public art is, at this juncture, a recent enough growth industry that its practitioners' histories almost always reach back into the world of Minimal art, into galleries and large but nevertheless portable objects for sale, but just old enough to have engendered its own special troupe of skilled labor. Members of the travelling band of new public artists (the term is currently used to indicate an aesthetic specialty, in a manner similar to "painter" or "sculptor"), who go from arts council to arts council, municipality to municipality in answer to calls for public works of art, often regard themselves as separate from, if not actually morally superior to, the old fashioned "studio artist." They claim, in effect, that public art is a more socially responsible form of art because it addresses a broader, more democratically formed audience.

The new public artist tends, however, to gloss over the conflicts between his/her idealized avant-garde role as the antenna of society and the actual one of corporate consultant blessed with an insight about the aesthetic needs of something called "the community"—a loose federation of residents, passersby, and, of course, the hard-hat workers on and around the project. But, by lending their precious bodily fluids to the cultural lubricant required by the corpo-government alliance, the new public artists are only a tad less responsible for the social consequences of the projects than the architects. A contrary view might assert that artists can't remake the world *before* they begin to work; they must work in the world as it is, and hope to reform it through their works of art. A somewhat cynical corollary would also have it that all patronage is tainted patronage, and that some of the best artists in history have worked for some of the worst employers. But watch the proponents of those arguments flinch as the cursor on a list of potential patrons for public is flicked, one by one, from the Battery Park City Corporation to the State Department, to Donald Trump, to some multinational corporation whose main order of business is destroying the Brazilian rain forest, to the Department of Defense, to the royal family of Saudi Arabia, to the Government of South Africa, to...? Is there *nobody* who might employ a new public artist whose daily deeds would involve that artist in an unsavory complicity? If so—if art is nothing but art no matter what the patronage—then the new public art loses any claim to moral superiority over the strictly formalist, art-and-politics-don't-mix, bank lobby abstraction and plop art it purports to have made obsolete.

The new public artist is likely to respond that the studio artist is equally guilty of ignoring the social consequences of his/her art by making baubles for the private use of the same patron. The fallacy in this defense lies in the difference between the conditional and future tenses; the work of studio art *might*, in the hands of a reactionary patron, do some indirect social harm, such as getting the patron's name honorifically on some museum

lending labels, while a work of the new public art, with its usual concomitants of publicness, permanence, gigantism, and *lebensraum*, almost certainly *will*.

The new public artists nevertheless exude a quiet confidence that, owing to large size and publicness, their work is also more important as *art* than studio products. If they shuffle their feet and deny such a conceit, it's on the assertion that—like the masons, welders, diggers, and steeple-jacks with whom they work—they're just hard-hats on the job. Unlike their fellow workers, of course, they don't want union cards and they *do* want individual credit. (In the early 1970's, however, Robert Morris and Craig Kauffman started something called the "Peripatetic Artists Guild," an outfit offering to create site-specific pieces for an hourly wage, materials, and travelling expenses. That it didn't fly was as much due to an inherent desire on the part of patrons to separate the fine art they bought from the construction labor that produced it as it was to any disingenuousness on the part of the artists). To hear the new public artists tell it, they're the same ol' visionaries modernists have always been, now disguised as nice-guy team players (God forbid the reverse!), and they speak in an amalgam of the patois of both, one perilously close to the argot of the social worker.

Such sentiment, together with an abiding faith in collaboration,<sup>10</sup> would be all to the good if a truly moving, subtly spectacular, and unexpected work of art were to be the result of allegedly *ex nihilo* collaboration with an architect and a landscape architect. Preliminary indications are, however, that the prized South Cove in Battery Park City will contain merely a pretty good—albeit quite large—example of Miss's familiar style, slouching toward functionalism.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. SACREDNESS

The central problem, as adumbrated above, is that no matter how much sociological research is attempted, public art does not derive from the same ideology as the community's. The public artist's community is still mostly art and artists, and the community's community is something else. There is no necessary link between the two, and efforts to create one often end up (as public service) either awkward or patronizing, or (as art) compromised and tepid. The centuries when, for instance, a great Catholic artist (who may have been less than devout, but who was hardly a nonbeliever) embodied in his work the ideology of the Holy Roman Church for the benefit of the faithful but illiterate masses are gone. They have been replaced by an age of sophisticated, liberal, upper-middle-class artists repackaging the growth-economy ideology of the franchised city in the sugar shell of aesthetic tolerance for either, depending on the location of the work, a) common-sense, lunchbucket working people or b) sophisticated upper-middle-class, conservative managers and their subalterns. In neither case does the audience really *believe* what the art has to say—if the art has anything to say at all.

In the unlikely event that a new public artist is able to break with the corporate agenda of the project of which he/she is a part, and even if the

artist is able to forge or find a tentative link (by temporarily lodging and breaking bread with the community affected by the work), the probability remains that, without the introduction of sacredness,<sup>12</sup> it is impossible to create a socially meaningful *and* aesthetically significant work of public art in an industrialized Western democracy which prides itself—indeed grounds itself—on secular, materialist pluralism.

In the face of its concomitant certainty that the work of public art will be believed in wholly by very few, and only half-heartedly by any large segment of the audience, the patron pressures the artist to make the work popular, i.e., to pitch it somehow to a low-middle common denominator.<sup>13</sup> The patron and the new public artist relabel acquiescing to this pressure as “responsiveness” to a public larger than a mere gathering of gallery-goers; they add in passing that it’s about time modern art came out of its ivory museum into the light of day. The new public artist persuades him-/herself that he/she is only acting in harmony with the vibes from the “community,” *for* “accessibility” (which means you don’t have to go to a gallery or museum to see it) and *against* “elitism” (which usually means a sweetening of function has been added to post-Minimal sculpture so it will appeal to an audience greater than that for gallery art).

While the art world—or those stubborn, hermetic, quarters of it which still insist on a little autonomous gristle in modern art—notes that any “successful” piece of public art must be popular with the general public, and implies that popularity necessarily means inferiority, the new public art defends its demi-sculptures, demi-landscapes, demi-parks, and glorified benches as simply good for the public, in the same way that clean air and measles vaccinations are. Folks are not only supposed to be entertained, relaxed, and diverted by the new public art, they’re in for subtle education and cultural uplift. Should this be true, the unintentional irony is that such social amenities are not had through the *content* of the new public art—because it has none<sup>14</sup>—but through design, i.e., an expanded version of the formalist characteristics of allegedly uncaring studio art. (Granted, some of the new public art does have content—literally written across its face, as with the work of Siah Armajani or Jenny Holzer—but the impact of it is largely negated by the nagging old problems of a) attaching words coherently to visual structures, and b) even if successful, turning art into just another missile in the public’s bombardment by printed words, i.e., politically progressive advertising, but advertising nevertheless.)

It’s a neat tautology: the content of the new public art is the goodness of the fact that the new public art has no real, and therefore no possibly offensive, content.

The root of the dilemma is that a secular, pluralist society is unable to take a public moral stand other than that the society should continue to be secular and pluralist. A work of public art containing full-blown, traditional nationalist patriotism, for example, will offend any group which thinks that traditional patriotism leads to war and that war must be avoided at almost any cost; a work of full-blown pacifism will offend traditional patriots who believe that a nation’s known willingness to take up arms as a last

resort is the only real deterrent to its being conquered. Neither view can be permitted to stand alone in a work of the new public art.

That there are two radically different works of public art in Washington, D.C. claiming to be the most appropriate Vietnam War memorial is a case in point. Maya Lin's dark, funeral walls are, however beautiful and moving, too implicitly pacifist for many traditional patriots, and the presence of the supra-lifesize sculpture of the three soldiers would have been unthinkable for those who regard the war as anything from a strategic mistake to attempted genocide without the never-again implication of the walls. The society which commissioned both cannot, on its ground of pluralism, admit to being proud of its part in the war or ashamed of it. Except in their subaudible intonation that the massive shedding of human blood is a very serious matter indeed, the Memorials tend to cancel each other's implicit message. Taken as one work (which, *de facto*, they are), they are without a moral position. Maya Lin's Memorial, which is probably the best twentieth-century work of public art in America, is not at fault; the point here is that, in the end, the society which commissioned it could not drink it down full.

The missing adhesive that might prevent a work of the new public art from fracturing under the burden of our society's indecision about what it stands for, is commonly held, transcendent belief. But if the commonly held belief is merely one of nationalistic or ethnic superiority, the resulting art will be militaristic in some form, celebrating the actual or desired dominance of a given nation/people over others; the work will end up merely mean; it will lack humanity.

What is needed is a sense of sacredness. Do not misunderstand: the problem is not that we lack a Church,<sup>15</sup> or that we don't allow the Church to speak for all of us. We still have a Church, but the Church is hollow; nobody who has anything to do with the new public art really believes it and, worse, it doesn't believe itself. Forced to cling dogmatically to its diminishing share of political power until the day that it manages to believe itself again, it reveals itself as decidedly untranscendent. The Church is just the stock exchange with a steeple. The Church's grounds are no longer sacred; we just try to refrain from pursuing certain activities on them, or at least change the sign over the door before we disco-dance among the pews. No statue of Moses, Jesus, or George Washington will forestall the tide of vandalism—that of commission by spraycan and that of omission by the cold vanishing of any public sense from the plazas of the franchised city; likenesses of holiness or greatness no longer inspire awe. Awe is the most important ray of sacredness emitted by a work of public art, and a work of art which, in the secular, pluralist society, attempts awe constitutes a profound disturbance. And if there's anything the new public art does not wish to do, it's disturb.

##### 5. ANOTHER NOTE ON TILTED ARC

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* is a curved wall of Cor-Ten steel (a material which rusts, quickly and uniformly, to a decorative matte) twelve feet high and 120 feet long which bisects a plaza adjacent to the Senator Jacob K.

Javits office building at Foley Square in lower Manhattan. The other embellishments of the plaza are an ugly, dysfunctioning circular fountain (its tank is painted electric blue), views of the Kafkaesque ordinariness of the building, and views of the somewhat picturesque low-lyingness of the street and commercial architecture opposite. The site was graced with *Tilted Arc* in 1982.

More than one thousand disenchanted Federal workers, however, signed a petition requesting the work's removal from Foley Square on a plethora of grounds, including aesthetics (the big, brown, stained wall's being dreary, monotonous, and claustrophobic), safety (the sculpture's affording miscreants a visual baffle), oppression (the sculpture's taking away from them the chance to enjoy lunch or coffee break with a reciprocal view of pedestrians on the corner), and politics (*Tilted Arc's* being insinuated into their lives with no opinion asked of them beforehand). In the ensuing brouhaha, liberals wanted to pillory the Federal government for everything from putting the work up in the first place to caving in to pressure to take it down, art lawyers wanted to protect the sanctity of artists' contracts (although this one provided, according to the Government's argument, that *Tilted Arc*, as property of the United State Government, might be legally conveyed to the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., for display and preservation), art dealers wanted to keep the shine on the aura of their goods, and other artists wanted to point out how much worse most other Federally-owned sculpture was. Opponents of the work had such hidden agendas as teaching Serra (who is, at times, the angry Gully Jimson of public art) a lesson in humility, vitiating the whole practice of modern art boondoggles, and parading the clout of organized public workers.

Lurking beneath both the attacks upon, and defenses of, the work was the issue of profundity or, if you will, awe: the work's the out-front, bare-knuckled link to what the artist seemed to imply *should* be a kind of sacredness surrounding the curved steel wall itself and, by aesthetic osmosis, the surrounding plaza. Because of its untimely assertiveness among all the new public art which attempts to blend in with its surroundings, some critics contend that this 1980's Richard Serra was a thoughtless knock-off of the Serra of the 1960's when, to modify Phil Leider's description, he walked into the house of American sculpture, found the Minimalists gone on a blueprinting errand, and set up shop. Could it be that the intrusion of a large, simple un-pretty form into a characterless public space is by now a gestural echo of actual profundity?

Cleverer detractors said sure. But they were wrong; the real reason *Tilted Arc* causes so much indigestion way down in our late twentieth-century secular, pluralist guts is that we perceive, much to our discomfort, that it is an *ad hoc* religious work of art in a setting where such a thing is tacitly forbidden. Serra is after bigger game than shocking the bourgeoisie through conundrum or flamboyance; *Tilted Arc* is not R. Mutt's urinal or Christo's aureola'd islands. Serra intends to bring the viewer up short, to awe him or her through the sheer plastic drama of the insertion of the wall of steel

into the plaza; he means to lend, without recourse to formulaic and didactic iconographic finger-pointing, a moral dimension to an amoral space. He intends, without resorting to art historical formula, to make that space as sacred as he can.

*Tilted Arc* attempts sacredness through aesthetic arrogance, and fails—nobly—because it is still so much art, in the high modernist tradition. Whereas *Tilted Arc* fails, the new public art doesn't even try.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The subtle burden placed on the new public art by the society which sponsors it is unbearable. It is asked, in sum, to be popular with the general public, inoffensive to minorities, profit-inducing (if connected with a private development), administration-enhancing (if connected with a civic one), and, somehow, aesthetically meritorious. By trying to have it all ways, the new public art is often mediocre (if expansive) as art, and less-than-frank as public relations for the same old social order.

You have understood nothing about our movement if you do not see this [said a radical reformer on another continent, a generation ago]: What swept across France—to the point of creating a power vacuum—was not the spirit of professional demands, nor the wish for political change, but the desire for other relations among men. The force of this desire has shaken the edifice of exploitation, oppression and alienation; it has frightened all men, organizations, and parties directly or indirectly interested in the exercise of power, and they are attempting by all means to suppress it. They will never have done with doing so.<sup>16</sup>

An unadulterated wish for other relations among men used to be an oft-spoken tenant of modern art. Today, due to the interests of toothless post-modernity, urban site-specificity<sup>17</sup> and the simple opportunity for orthodox public notice, many new public artists are all too eager to sell this precious artistic birthright for a mess of public pottage.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A flyer announcing a public hearing before the New York City Planning Commission, which took place on December 10, 1986, contrasted the Battery Park City plan for itself ("Virtually No Outdoor Active Recreation Space") with the alternative offered by Community Board No. 1 ("Emphasizes Creation of New Ballfields, Tennis, Basketball and Handball Courts and Children's Play Areas").

<sup>22</sup>The 'artist in his studio' has prevailed in popular mythology as the prototype culture hero since the 19th Century [sic]. Isolated, insulated, esoteric, rebuffed, and touched by the muse, his romantic image still persists. This 'Agony-and-the-Ecstasy-Lust-for-Life' characterization may be consistent with our post-Renaissance heritage; but it has little to do with the previous 6000 years of civilization and the artist's less-embroidered position within the collective arts. Pyramids, forums, cathedrals, and campos depended upon a complex fusion of ideas and a detachment from the familiar ego trip. Eulogized for this anarchistic tendencies rather than his social involvement, the artist today suffers a considerable degree of cultural schizophrenia. The environmental and group arts which increasingly dominate international vanguard activity clearly signal a redefinition of the role of the artist."

—*On Site*, vol 1., no. 1, New York, n.d., p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>For [architect Cesar] Pelli, the issue of art had to be carefully worked out 'because much art today I would call "antipublic" art, insofar as the artist feels that his or her main role is to make a statement that will somehow shock you or challenge your assumptions about civilized life [emphasis mine]." ' In Diane Bell and Anselm Talady, "Battery Park City," *Artists and Architects: Challenges in Collaboration*, Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>"In the *ancien regime*, public experience was connected to the formation of social order; in the last century, public experience came to be connected to the formation of personality." In Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 24.

Although Sennett's book is much more than a treatise on the conflict of publicness vs. personality, one of his main thrusts is: with the development of personality as an individual good, and with intimacy (that is, baring one's personality, warts and all, to other people) following as a presumed social good, we have gotten ourselves a public probably incapable of little, if any, truly public behavior. One has simply to think of the negative connotation of the word "impersonal" (which Sennett uses in a favorable sense), to understand the pass to which we've come.

<sup>5</sup>"The art of the object [e.g., Calder] has given way to an art of place [e.g., Michael Heizer], to an art of *social* place." Scott Burton, speaking at *Setting Sites: Process and Consensus in Public Art*, SUNY Purchase, Purchase, New York, October 24, 1987.

<sup>6</sup>Grace Glueck, "Art in Public Places Stires Widening Debate," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1982.

<sup>7</sup>I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1924, p. 7, as quoted in Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000*, London: Studio Vista, 1971, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup>Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Vol. 1*, Vintage, New York: 1957, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup>Hauser, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup>"If you want to go into public spaces, if you want to integrate with public spaces, [you] have to collaborate with the process," Mary Miss *Setting Sites*, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>"How can you possibly make a judgement on the basis of photographs and models?" the reader might well ask. The answer is: only tentatively. But a voiced tentative reservation about a work is no more careless than tentative praise based on the same peek at preliminaries. And there has been plenty of the latter, with no complaints about premature opinions forthcoming from either the artist or the Battery Park City Corporation which, after all, doesn't pass out press kits to promote silence.

<sup>12</sup>"I mean by the word something a little more elastic than "holy"; I mean a sense of awe—elicited either through what a work of public art takes as its subject or, rarer still, the very form and substance of the work—which would have the viewer tingle and tread lightly, if not actually step back. You have your short list, I have mine, and I suspect that the only work of the new public art on either is Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial.

<sup>13</sup>"There has always been an element of tension between the quality and the popularity of art, which is not by any means to say that the broad masses of the people have at any time taken a stand against qualitatively good art in favor of



inferior art on principle. Naturally, the appreciation of a more complicated art presents them with greater difficulties than the more simple and less developed, but the lack of adequate understanding does not necessarily prevent them from accepting this art—albeit not exactly on account of its aesthetic quality. Success with them is completely divorced from qualitative criteria. They do not react to what is artistically good or bad, but to impressions by which they feel themselves reassured or alarmed in their own sphere of existence. They take an interest in the artistically valuable, provided it is presented so as to suit their mentality, that is, provided the subject matter is attractive.” Hauser, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup>Or , if it does, it’s a cosmic version of Home, Mother, and Apple Pie:

[With *Dark Star Park*] I am continuing my concerns with the architectural form of the tunnel and its various symbolic ramifications—birth, death, transition, etc., and with illusions of ordinary perception, especially perception altered by curvilinear forms.

Nancy Holt, quoted in Bell and Taladay, “Dark Star Park and Astral Grating,” *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>Again, elasticizing a work, I do not mean by “Church” any one or several of the major organized religions proper; I mean, broadly, the belief in a historical, intervening God who, against the evidence of the Holocaust, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Bangladesh and all the rest, is purported to be guiding humankind toward goodness.

<sup>16</sup>Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism, the Left-Wing Alternative*, Penguin, London, 1969, quoted in Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>“Some sculptures that are no longer site-specific: the *Venus de Milo*, *Cleopatra’s Needle*, *Emperor Vespian*, the *Charioteer of Delphi*, Michelangelo’s *David*, *The Burghers of Calais*, the Easter Island heads, Olmec heads, and the horses of San Marco.” George Rickey, *Setting Sites*, *op. cit.*

# Living With It: Michael Graves's Portland Building

By Kristina S. Olson

Architect Michael Graves's Portland Building (Portland, Oregon, 1982) is almost as impressive as the amount of rhetoric it has generated. Heralded as the first major monument of the postmodern style the Portland Building has been the object of a storm of architectural criticism.<sup>1</sup> The boldly-colored and symbolically-decorated exterior of the building has been thought of as replacing, for good or ill, the stark glass and steel box of the modernist skyscraper. The symbolic structure has itself become a symbol for the postmodern movement.

But stripped of all the hyperbole, with what kind of building have Portlanders been left? It is debatable whether or not the Portland Building lives up to the lofty goals its designer set for it. For the employees and citizens who must interact with the building daily, it offers a dubious alternative to the modernist box it proposes to replace. If Graves's building is to serve as a model for future public structures, its failings as well as its triumphs must be evaluated. Now that the waves of debate surrounding the construction of this notorious building are at an ebb, it is time to take

a look at the final product. It is time to assess what it is like to live with the Portland Building and what its meaning is for postmodern architecture.

Before examining the building in detail, some information on the city that commissioned this unusual work will offer background on the debate the building incited. Portland, Oregon is a medium-sized northwestern city situated near the juncture of two major rivers and located between the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade Mountain Range. Its downtown area, on the bank of the Willamette River, is composed of unusually small (200 foot square) blocks which form a grid that is oriented towards Mt. Saint Helens to the north and Mt. Hood to the west.<sup>2</sup>

Portland's varied architectural scene is no stranger to controversy. In 1948 Portland architect Pietro Belluschi's Equitable Building, recent recipient of the prestigious 25-Year Award from the American Institute of Architects, was erected.<sup>3</sup> It is now considered the father of the "curtain wall," glass-box office tower but, at the time, it stood in marked contrast to Portland's typically white Beaux Arts department stores, banks and office buildings. It is against Belluschi's type of modernist structure that Graves's building reacts. In fact, a whole series of recent building projects in Portland, including the Justice Center, Pioneer Courthouse Square, Lloyd Cinemas and the Koin Tower, sharply contrast with the many glass skyscrapers around town. As a result, Portland can be seen as a microcosm of the battle between modern and postmodern architecture, with Graves's building being the first shot fired in the struggle.

In June of 1979, the City of Portland began a nationally advertised search for design-build teams interested in participating in a competition for the Portland Building. Historically, the City's offices were scattered, and the goal was to consolidate them in this new structure. The 15-story building would occupy an entire central-downtown block, situated between Whidden and Lewis' unusual City Hall of 1895 and the same firm's Multnomah County Courthouse of 1909-13.<sup>4</sup> The Portland Building faces the reflective-glass facades of the modern Standard Plaza and Orbanco buildings, while three blocks of city park flank its final, Fourth Avenue side.

The Portland City Council was very clear about the type of building it wanted. The building was to be both a positive symbol of the role of government in civic life and a distinctive structure to continue Portland's tradition of architectural innovation. In the "Design/Build Competition Statement of Purpose," the Council outlined its objectives for the building.

The Portland Public Office Building shall be:

- A symbol of excellence
- A facilitator of communication between the citizens and their government
- A display case for the resources and services that the City offers to and provides for its citizens
- An inspiration to the staff
- Appropriate to the service and implementation function of city government
- Open

- Exciting
- Efficient
- A strong, direct, bold design solution
- Expressive of the humanity of the individuals who will use the building<sup>5</sup>

Though Graves's design attempted to successfully address these objectives in an innovative way, an analysis of the existing building will show that it is far removed from these noble goals.

The process for choosing a plan for the Portland Building was a lengthy and controversial one. The City held a national design/build competition that was juried by a committee composed of local politicians and business people. Architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee acted as advisors. The field of applicants was eventually narrowed down to three teams: Pavarini/Hoffman/Graves/Roth of Princeton, New Jersey; Dillingham/Erickson/SRG from Vancouver, British Columbia; and the Burrows/Wright/Mitchell-Giurgola/BOOR team of Philadelphia. All teams were making substantial commitments since they were guaranteeing construction time and costs. They would be expected to absorb any cost overruns themselves. The space and budget requirements had been strictly set by the City. The structure was to have 362,000 square feet of floor area and it was to house City services with publicly accessible functions including retail spaces, an auditorium, a restaurant, meeting rooms and art gallery on the first two floors.<sup>6</sup> Cost was set at \$51 per square foot and the total allowance could not exceed \$22.4 million.

Graves's proposal received the commission because it was the only one to fall within the specified budget, it provided more floor area and because it had Johnson's endorsement for its innovative design. Then-mayor Frank Ivancie supported the plan in part because it was the most avant-garde and he was looking to leave his mark on Portland. Initially, City Council members balked at the shocking design and they asked to have a second competition between Graves and the more conservative Erickson team. In April 1980, a slightly toned-down version of Graves's proposal received the final commission (the crowning temples and free-swinging garlands were removed). The structure was completed and dedicated in October 1982.

For Graves, getting the Portland commission was a major professional coup. Though he had been a practicing architect since the sixties, Graves had never completed a large-scale project. As a professor of architecture at Princeton University, he had been known mostly for his teaching and for exhibitions of his architectural drawings. His completed projects included houses, additions, showrooms and office spaces, but no major buildings. This lack of building experience is part of what made the Portland City Council so nervous about approving his design.

Even though his built projects numbered so few, Graves already had quite a reputation as one of the most progressive young architects in America. Within the last ten years or so, Graves's style had changed drastically. His

early work was comprised mostly of Cubist-inspired designs that are derivatives of Le Corbusier. His formal preoccupations were an interest in transparency, the interpenetration of planes, and the perception of volumes.<sup>7</sup> Today, Graves's buildings show quite different interests. As in the Portland Building, he now infuses the vocabulary of the Classical tradition into weighty, impenetrable geometric forms that are reminiscent of the visionary architecture of the late Enlightenment (such as that of Boullée and Ledoux, two of Graves's architectural models).<sup>8</sup>

The winning design for the Portland Building, then, generated such controversy in the architectural community and caused so much anxiety among City Council members and Portland citizens because the building and its architect represented a new trend in public architecture. Whether or not one agrees to the label of "postmodern," it is apparent that today's architects are moving away from the unadorned structural expressions of mid-twentieth-century architecture in search of a more meaningfully articulated style. Expressing the feelings of many antagonized Portland architects, Pietro Belluschi read a letter to the City Council during its public hearings on the building. The modern architect's displeasure with the postmodern can be heard in Belluschi's address. He claims that, with the advent of the postmodern style:

There is no longer any distinction between ugliness and beauty at least in the old sense; everything is permissible; innovation need not spring from any deep experience. Discipline, the back-bone of architecture as a civic art, is ridiculed. They [postmodern architects] have discovered that frivolous means get immediate attention, and that fashions need not last. They tell us that content and expression, function and form have no more fundamental a connection in architecture than in scene painting, dressmaking or hat design. So they demolish the hated glass box and erect the enlarged juke box or the oversized beribboned Christmas package, well knowing that on completion it will be out-of-date.<sup>9</sup>

Before turning to a specific examination of the Portland Building, it is important to lay out what the debate between modernism and postmodernism has meant for architecture.

The postmodern style depends for its definition on being against or beyond the modern. In architecture, the modern style manifested itself in geometric, spare, and unornamented designs in the tradition of the Bauhaus. The modern architect's faith in industrial building materials and his progressive vision for architecture's impact on society were not inherently misguided ideals. However, all too often the modernist's "visions," or those of the inheritors of the modern credo, produced nightmares. Examples include St. Louis' alienating Pruitt-Igoe housing project which had to be destroyed or the materially nonfunctional John Hancock Tower in Boston (most of the mirrored-glass windows in this sixty-two-story skyscraper had to be replaced because they had a tendency to pop out). Peter Blake, a practicing architect and critic who was schooled in and was a one-time ardent disciple of the modern ideal, reveals these and many other modern

disasters in his book *Form Follows Fiasco*.<sup>10</sup> Quoting fellow turncoat architect Constantinos Doxiadis, Blake enumerates the modern building project's "crimes against humanity:"

One: the most successful cities of the past were those where people and buildings were in a certain balance with nature. But high-rise buildings work against nature, or, in modern terms, against the environment. They destroy the scale of the landscape and obstruct normal air circulation, so causing automotive and industrial discharges to collect in pockets of severe pollution which cannot easily be dispersed.

Two: high-rise buildings work against man himself, because they isolate him from others, and this isolation is an important factor in the rising crime rate. . . .

Three: high-rise buildings work against society because they prevent the units of social importance—the family. . . the neighborhood, etc. — from functioning as naturally and as normally as before.

Four: high-rise buildings work against networks of transportation, communication, and of utilities, since they lead to higher densities, to overloaded roads, to [more extensive] water supply systems — and, more importantly, because they form vertical networks which create many additional problems — crime being just one of them.

Five: high-rise buildings destroy the urban landscape by eliminating all values which existed in the past. Human symbols — such as churches, mosques, temples of all kinds, city halls, which once arose above the city — are now below the skyscrapers. We may not agree that God or government should rise above man, but are we ready to agree that symbols of capital gain should rise above everything else...?<sup>11</sup>

These are the faults of the modern movement that the postmodern architect hopes to correct or, at least, not to repeat. The goal now is to place primary importance on making the building communicate with its users in a meaningful way. Rather than continuing to construct buildings which divorce themselves from their environment and from our architectural history, the postmodern architect tries to link his building to these continuums. Back in 1971, architectural critic Charles Jencks predicted this renewed interest in communication that would become the foundation of the postmodern movement:

Since the West is fast approaching a condition where subsistence poverty is a minority affair and where there is an "information explosion," or a superabundance of communicating systems, it seems natural that a tradition will evolve which can help explain the environment to men. Thus I have predicted the rise of the Semiological School in about 1990 which will grow out of the idealist tradition and see its main purpose as making the "information rich society" comprehensible.<sup>12</sup>

Jencks' prediction has proved to be correct, though Graves's Portland Building is ahead of it by about ten years.

Jencks has since become the major chronicler of the postmodern style. He faults the moderns for their antihistoricist bent, writing "A characteristic deficiency of modern city planning was its inability to provide images of

cultural continuity."<sup>13</sup> In the postmodern style, with its quotation of past styles and return to symbolism, Jencks finds the communication and continuity for which he was looking. However, the postmodern does not represent a complete break with the modern. As in other areas of contemporary art, postmodern architecture is self-reflexive and incorporates modernist elements into its design. As Jencks points out, postmodernism is, a "Double coding: the combination of modern techniques with something else. . . in order for architecture to communicate with the public and the concerned minority, usually other architects."<sup>14</sup> Postmodern architecture also shares in some of the modern idealism. The faith in architecture's ability to communicate cultural messages is a powerful element in postmodern design.

The Portland Building is the first major public structure to adhere to these goals of postmodernism. In this context, the standard interpretation of the Portland Building has been given by those critics who approve of the building. Graves summed up the distinction between the modern and postmodern styles in his own discussion of the building's intentions:

Modern architecture of the past 30 years has little by little eroded the street by virtue of open plazas and point block towers. . . . While it was thought that the early buildings of the Modern Movement in architecture would, by these plazas, offer more light and air in the new "hygienic" city, the effect of groups of such buildings has been the erosion of the street; its commercial and social life has been reduced and, in some cases, destroyed altogether. It was also thought in the Modern Movement that shifting from classical ideas of human and landscape metaphors in buildings to the technical metaphor of the machine and the representation of technical advancements or "progress" would enhance a new social order. Though we now know that this quasi-utopia [n] condition has not occurred, we also know that we suffer the alienation caused by the singular and monolithic idea of the machine representation in the current austere building forms.

It was our intention to offset these tendencies of the loss of the street and loss of the mimetic surface in buildings by first bringing the base of our building to the immediate context of the sidewalk through a shipping loggia on Fifth Avenue and also to describe the form of our building in more associative and familiar forms than is the prevailing practice.<sup>15</sup>

These associative forms are primarily on the exterior of the Portland Building. The overall structure is meant to be read anthropomorphically. That is, the three-tiered base of the building translates as "foot." The main part of the structure is the "body." The existing building top is really a decapitated version of Graves's initial design. For cost reasons the crowning temples that would have formed the "head" were never built. The uppermost, recessed floor is its poor substitute. Graves hoped to link the color scheme of the building to its natural environment. The blue-green base relates to water and vegetation, the terra-cotta body to earth and the blue "roof" or top floor represents the sky.

Much has been made of the symbolic elements on the facades of the

Portland Building as will be seen in the critical response shortly. The creamy-beige and lightly rusticated surface is punctuated with small, dark, recessed windows. These windows present a play between solid and void, exterior and interior, that has fascinated Graves since the early houses he designed. On the main, Fifth Avenue, facade, two colossal, abstract pilasters are topped by projecting "capitals," all of which are surmounted by a huge, flat "keystone." These classical elements were meant to be a metaphor for the functions of the building: the middle floors of governmental offices were to support two floors of rentable commercial offices at the top of the building. The reflective-glass window behind the pilasters is both a reference to the modernist facade, and favorite building material, as well as to Portland's commercial and climatic link with water. The "colonnades" of pilasters on each of the Madison and Main facades are strung together with flattened classical garlands that are a traditional civic symbol of welcome according to Graves. Graves has also inserted a primitive hut form, originally planned to be much more elaborate, as a look-out at the top of each keystone.

The historicizing of Graves's ornamented exterior is in direct reaction against the mute, modernist facade. He has gleaned elements from architecture's pasts, such as the pilasters, keystone and garlands, and combines them in a new way. This nostalgia for past styles and emphasis on symbolic meaning are the postmodern elements that have brought the building so much attention.

Critics who like the building have made various readings of its symbolism. Architect Paolo Portoghesi finds an almost psychoanalytic regression to a state before separation in the building's historical program:

Graves' work lets us experience first-hand just how far the "search for lost architecture" takes us, far from a passive revisitation, toward the creative discovery of a "fleeting" memory that paradoxically becomes the only space open to the future.<sup>16</sup>

If the overemphasized historical elements can be read as "caricature" or "parody," an issue that will be discussed later, that is providential for Portoghesi because it, "makes separation less painful."<sup>17</sup>

Gavin Macrae-Gibson thinks that the associative forms on the building are part of a new attitude of the "sublime" in architecture. He states that it is the viewer's response to the anthropomorphic elements in the Portland Building and his reading of its symbolic forms that give rise to this sublime attitude:

It is in the combination of the empathetic response to the building's mass and the intellectual response to its surface elements that the secret life of the building is to be found.... Graves eschews the sensibility of silence for the language of the sublime.<sup>18</sup>

For Macrae-Gibson, this sense of the sublime rises out of Graves's stylistic manipulation of the historical forms he incorporates in his design, like the four-story tall keystone:



Graves carries this atomization of classical elements to new extremes, fusing the cult of the colossal with the fragmentation developed in the landscapes of Cezanne and brought to its apotheosis in Cubism. For the Portland Building forms no ideal, classical unity but is a balance struck between warring fragments. Thus, the landscape of the roof is as separate from the cube below it as the building's shaft is from the street... It is not the cosmic harmony of the Renaissance, the Nature of the Enlightenment, or the machines of Utopian modernism but the nature of the new sublime that holds the fragments of the Portland Service Building in uneasy unity.<sup>19</sup>

It is the building's fragmentation that brings its classical elements up-to-date and makes it part of the schizophrenic present. Macrae-Gibson's summary of the building's symbolism approaches the ridiculous when the reality of the structure is faced:

In the primitive huts of the main facades, Graves depicts a human journey from classical Greece with its temples to the anonymous person in the modern city. Individual man, vulnerable and threatened, charts his course alone, at first facing his nakedness in nature and at the end facing his own creations. The sublime now represents the foreboding, not with which man considers the power of nature, but with which he looks upon himself as superhuman. The explosive force of the gigantic pilasters, with their rushing flutes rising out of darkness, and the spreading horizontal bands above, like energy emitted from the capitals, blasting the keystone from civilization's arch, irradiating alike the iconic human body and his mythic shelter, the beginning and the end of time — this is the twentieth-century version of the sublime.<sup>20</sup>

Macrae-Gibson's opinion may be an extreme of the kind of criticism the Portland Building has given rise to, but it is important to keep in mind that it is the type of ideal many consider the building to live up to. As will be shown, the reality of the structure may actually support a far more negative interpretation.

The now standard critical praise of the Portland Building is summed up by Jencks:

The Portland [Building] still is the first major monument of Post-Modernism, just as the Bauhaus was of Modernism, because with all its faults it still is the first to show that one can build with art, ornament and symbolism on a grand scale in a language the inhabitants understand.<sup>21</sup>

Jencks should not have set aside the faults of the Portland Building so quickly. In fact, as will be shown, these faults impinge upon the lives of those who interact with the building daily and frustrate the goals that both the City and the architect wanted to achieve with this structure. It is questionable whether or not Graves's design solves the problems of the modernist office building as it intended to do. A tour of the building with an eye toward its defects will help give a more balanced assessment of the reality of the structure.

It should be noted that blame for any problems probably does not lie

with one source. Architecture is by nature a collective effort and as such is vulnerable to the whims and errors of many. Problems can be attributed to the skimpy budget, the management group responsible for construction, and to Graves and his associates. For whatever reason the faults of the Portland Building are many and they should be examined closely before any further forays into public, postmodern building are attempted.

This examination will begin with the interior of the Portland Building and then move to its exterior. Little has been written about the interior design of the structure and yet it is the interior spaces of architecture that have the greatest impact on its users. Discussion of the exterior will be left for last since the interpretation of its meaning raises the farthest reaching questions about postmodern architecture in general.

To begin, then, the very doors of the Portland Building are disappointing. There is only one major entrance and it is on the Fifth Avenue side. The entrance consists of three sets of double doors which are recessed beneath the dark shopping loggia of the building's base. Only the kneeling figure of *Portlandia* above signals the presence of the doors. Few other visual cues are wasted on this most important initial point of public contact. The doors themselves are of smoked glass set in unremarkable black frames — hardly the symbol of openness the City was looking for. The original push-bars that opened the doors proved to be non-functional and the City has already had to replace them with long, wooden handles.

It is strange that Graves has produced such a bland entrance. He claims to be very much involved with making the entrance to his structures a ceremonious one. In an interview with Graves, Barbara Lee Diamonstein claims that his architecture, "Has always dramatized everyday experience; entering a building has been a ceremonial drama in each of your buildings."<sup>22</sup> It is hard to believe that the immediate context of Diamonstein's comment is a discussion of the Portland Building. It is impossible to call the actual doors to this building dramatic.

Graves responds to Diamonstein by saying that his interest in the ceremony of entering a building came about as, "a negative reaction to the simplified or stripped down idea of the 'modern' threshold."<sup>23</sup> When faced with Graves's doors "in the flesh" it is hard to imagine that they could be much more stripped down. They are no more ornamented than the doors on a typical International Style office building. Also, just above the main doors, leaching from the blue tiles has run down over the building's name plate.<sup>24</sup> So the modernist's problem with industrial materials has not been solved in this postmodern design.

At least the entrance way prepares one for what lies on the other side. The lobby is, "dark, dingy, doesn't welcome visitors and has been compared to the inside of a swimming pool."<sup>25</sup> It is, "a tortuous way to start a visit to the building."<sup>26</sup> In fact, the City is so disappointed with the lobby that it is already planning to renovate it.<sup>27</sup>

There are many problems with the design of the lobby. The visitor is immediately greeted by an imposing security desk to the left and an information desk to the right. Lighting is incredibly dim and the black, terrazzo

floor and total lack of natural light increase the darkness. The lobby *does* open up to the art gallery above but still manages to feel cramped.

Paul Goldberger, the architectural critic for the *New York Times*, has a positive interpretation of the entrance way. He writes that:

The public rooms and the sequence of entry spaces on the main floor, which were all designed by Graves, are superb. They offer homage to the formal, two-story entry vestibules of classical courthouses, but the motifs are all Graves's own.... These interiors rely heavily on color, on a carefully controlled processional sequence through changing and tightly defined spaces, and on an attempt to use fabric, wooden moldings, and wood and plaster to evoke traditional forms of ornament. The end result is a most extraordinary balance of nobility and ease. There is a certain sternness to these Graves rooms. For all their color and decoration, they create a powerful presence.<sup>28</sup>

Goldberger's description is only partly accurate. The rooms are colorful, but the paint colors tend toward the somber and, in the dim light, appear to be even darker. The moldings are not made out of wood, but of painted aluminum. The overall effect *is* one of sternness, rather than of welcome. The Portland Building's lobby seems better suited to the jail on the other side of the park blocks than to the home of the City's offices. Graves does get away from the alienating, unarticulated interior spaces of the modern designs, but replaces them with spaces that are oppressive. This hardly seems appropriate for a structure dedicated to civic functions.

There is a surprising dearth of signage in the lobby and throughout the building. Many confused visitors are left standing in the equally dim second lobby or they must return back to the information desk in search of assistance. Although, clearly, the City should be responsible for adding adequate signs, Graves's design did not make room for this necessary feature.

Architect Robert Venturi addressed the issue of signage in his study, *Learning From Las Vegas*.<sup>29</sup> Like Graves, Venturi also was reacting against the faults of the modern architects who place form above all other considerations:

Architects object to signs in buildings: "If the plan is clear, you can see where to go." But complex programs and setting require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.<sup>30</sup>

Graves has repeated this modernist "sin." He seems to think that heavily articulating a space will make it obvious where to go. In reality, this simply does not happen. We are a society that places primary faith in the spoken and written word for conveying information. Without signs to provide cues, people are lost in architecture of the scale of the Portland Building.

The continued tour of the first floor reveals further problems. The City's innovative one-stop Permit Center, which is the desired destination of many visitors, is located back in a corner on the far side from the lobby and it

is not directly accessible from the outside. To reach this important office, the visitor must move through the narrow bottleneck of the centrally located elevator corridor, around the dining area and make an unmarked right-hand turn. Again, it is the City's fault for not marking this path more clearly. In fact, doing just that is in the plans for the lobby renovation. But it is the architect's fault for not considering more carefully the functions of the building in his design. Graves has placed concern for design over concern for the user. His attitude is not that different from that of the authoritarian modernist.

At the back of the first floor is an open-dining area that sits atop a raised dias made necessary by the entrance to the parking garage below. This strange, elevated space marks the end of the entry procession. The ceremonial movement, so important to Graves, leads the visitor through the lobby and the elevator corridor to an eating area. It is a rather anti-climatic end to the journey through the building. In fact, the dias has the effect of putting the City's employees on display while they eat lunch or sip coffee. Consequently, the area is almost never used. Graves's claim that the dining area, "Will provide a visible and lively meeting place for the employees in the building," is far removed from the reality of the space.<sup>31</sup> Graves's lofty goals of invigorating public architecture with symbolic content have led to this bizarre element. But surely no significant meaning arises from placing lunching employees on a pedestal. It can only be interpreted as a joke, as if it is meant to serve as a way for visiting citizens to keep tabs on slouching City workers. Though Graves is known for his witty designs, this jab at those who commissioned his building seems in bad faith.

Ornamentation of both the first and second floors is problematic as well. The wall surfaces are covered with tile, painted wall board, and aluminum moldings. Paint colors are similar to those on the building's exterior: blues, pinks, white, and brick red. Almost no surface is left unarticulated. Here, Graves's attitude is very different from the modernist's near religious faith in the flat, unornamented wall. Unfortunately, the semicircular aluminum moldings that project from almost all wall surfaces (at a height of about four and a half feet) are rather intrusive. They inhibit loitering and the casual conversation held while leaning against a wall, and can be a painful rebuke to the uninitiated building user. Though the building is only a few years old, these interior ornaments already show signs of extreme wear. There is evidence of chipped plaster and gouged moldings everywhere. Either the decorative materials were not up to the job or Portland citizens are extremely hard on their buildings.

Malcolm Quantrill brings up an interesting issue about Graves's sense of the wall in his study of *The Environmental Memory* in architecture.<sup>32</sup> Graves has stated his interest in exploring the narrative potential of the wall in much the same way as it was treated in the Roman house, that is, to suggest views to spaces beyond the wall.<sup>33</sup> Quantrill points out that Graves's handling of wall ornamentation derives from his cubist-based sense of painting. This means that he applies a two-dimensional theory to three-

dimensional space when he moves to architectural design:

Michael Graves's work consciously attempts to reinstate the wall in its narrative role, but his interest in the narrative potential of the wall seems more painterly than architectural, his drawings and compositions more obviously kin to the wall as a two-dimensional surface than as part of the volumetric world.<sup>34</sup>

This interest of Graves can result in some wonderful visual surprises. But it may also create "inappropriate" architectural ornamentation. That is, his wall designs can seem like purposeless cut-outs that only serve to emphasize the opaqueness of the wall. Quantrill sums up this problem:

Graves' idea of the wall's narrative potential is undoubtedly a valuable one. What is of equal importance, however, is the need to distinguish between the appropriate roles of interior and exterior walls, of *within* and *without*. This also implies a necessary distinction between a view from the room and a view of the room — the composition of the room's enclosure within a wider landscape.<sup>35</sup>

Another good idea gone bad is the shopping loggia on the periphery of the first floor. It is a resounding flop. The store fronts are all set back from the street by the width of the continuous ambulatory that winds around three sides of the building. The loggia is so deep that it makes the shops almost invisible from the street. This makes it hard to lure customers. The ambulatory terminates at a blank wall, creating an unfortunate bit of unintended symbolism, that is, of a road going nowhere. Initially all store windows were made of the same dark glass as that of the entrance doors. Most shops immediately replaced these windows with clear glass to allow for some kind of visibility to the street.

The access to stores from inside the building is actually worse than the exterior approach. Signs above two doors in the central room indicate the way to the retail shops; the corridors behind the doors are barren, uninviting passages that open to the stores.

The ultimate test of retail space is, of course, its financial success. At the Portland Building, four operators have already quit the two restaurant spaces (as of June 1987) and B. Dalton Bookseller, a major retailer, has given up its store.<sup>36</sup> At this point the City is having a difficult time maintaining these commercial aspects of its building. The design is largely to blame.

The only rear exit from the building is through fire stairways on either side of the garage entrance. These extremely unceremonious portals are virtually unmarked and yet heavily used by those who know of their existence. It is true that the City only wanted to pay for one major entrance, but it is a shame that no door significantly relates to the park side of the structure.

The opening that *does* face the park is the gaping hole of the garage entrance on the Fourth Avenue, that is, rear, facade. If Graves's anthropomorphic model is followed out, one cringes at the symbolism here. The price of marring the facade with this opening was probably too high. The lower-

level garage offers one scant floor of parking that is entirely inadequate for the building's users. Heavy leaching is again visible on the parking entrance. There is also a problem with accessing the parking lot from inside the building. The elevators stop on the first floor and require one to find the stairway (another hidden treasure) to get to the cars below.

Problems with the design continue on the second floor. When the visitor emerges from the elevators he can either proceed toward the conference rooms at the back of the building or to the art gallery at the front. The gallery is almost non-functional. For the few visitors who do discover the tucked-away mezzanine gallery, the experience must be less than satisfying. The space is wrapped around a central opening that looks down to the main lobby. A very narrow corridor for viewing the art results. Graves's intrusive, anthropomorphic wall forms seem almost like substitute gallery viewers. They certainly inhibit movement through the space. In addition, the lighting is again poor, the noise from below disturbing, and it is impossible to get a perspective on the art displayed in this cramped area.

The large, semi-circular auditorium on the other side of the second floor is also insensitive to its users. The room is very dark and somber, more conducive to napping than to lively debate. The conference rooms to the right are both hard to locate and hard to use. Sight lines are interrupted by columns and the side walls must be used to project slides or to hang visual aids during presentations. This means that, when an image is referred to, everyone must turn to the left. These rooms have been difficult for the public employees of the building to work in effectively. Public meeting rooms on the other side of the auditorium are dreary and poor signage is again a problem.

Many of the flaws of the first and second floors can be laid at Graves's feet, for he was in fact responsible for their design. His reaction to user complaints has, however, been occasionally quite callous. He has said, for instance, that if the design of the art gallery detracts from the exhibitions, "that it is probably more a comment on the art than on the gallery."<sup>37</sup> Overall, Graves is quite pleased with the final product of the building claiming that it is "a modern take on the language of humanism."<sup>38</sup> For those humans who must interact with the Portland Building, this "take" is remarkably insensitive to their presence. The building has become a work of art that, like the gallery, doesn't allow its users a functional perspective.

Graves is not responsible for the City offices above the second floor. They were designed by Zimmer, Gunsul, Frasca Partnership. The layout of these floors is rather standard, but also riddled with problems. For example, the space dividers are too short to allow much privacy for employees and their design inhibits rearrangement. The raised, stationary utility outlets also make it difficult to change the office configuration. Standard employee amenities, such as coffee rooms, were not initially provided for and various provisional solutions have arisen out of need. The average restroom, though striking in its black and white tile design, is cramped and already shows signs of wear. As with the ground floor, the offices lack adequate signage. Only the Environmental Services offices on the fourth floor have incor-

porated appealing design programs that successfully play with Graves's motifs. Graves's presence does continue to be felt in these upper stories in the form of the windows. The typical four-foot square window (Graves wanted them to be even smaller) fails to take advantage of the possible light and vistas. But this is only the first type of window. The exterior design makes for unrhythmic and inconsistent window patterns on the interior, especially in the offices that look out through the narrow strip windows between the pilasters. Some of these windows of varying widths are covered by a bar or are entirely blocked by the hulking figure of *Portlandia* outside. Graves's emphasis on the exterior design has, consequently, had a crippling effect on the interior. The windows have been read as "turretlike apertures that reinforce the feeling that one is in a fortress, not an office."<sup>39</sup>

Graves's design has proved to be as insensitive to its users as any modernist "disaster." The small windows and the smoked glass were required, to some degree, to make the building energy efficient.<sup>40</sup> But the City and Graves should have struck some kind of balance. For all its flaws, a modern tower like Belluschi's Equitable Building does give its workers lots of light and views outside. Any architect designing in Portland should keep in mind that this city is overcast most of the year. Office workers need natural light to combat the sense of cabin fever and light-deprivation. Graves's design hardly takes these conditions into consideration.

The one element in the building that has elicited a generally positive response by the public is the sculpted figure of *Portlandia*. The concept for the sculpture was Graves's own and he considered it an integral part of his exterior design.

It had been the standard practice for the architect to have control over a building's sculptural program since the turn of the century.<sup>41</sup> But during the reign of modernism, when architectural sculpture was *verboden*, this prerogative of the architect was rarely exercised. It is only in the postmodern period that we begin to see examples of figurative sculpture again incorporated into the building's design as a significant feature of that design.

Public sculpture's civic role was shaped by the "City Beautiful" movement at the turn of the century in this country. In his book on *The Improvement of Towns and Cities* of 1909, Charles M. Robinson insisted that public sculpture makes powerfully clear to the population of "the city that is beautiful" that there is a "higher sense...that demands the devotion, loyalty, and pride of its citizens."<sup>42</sup> Public sculpture in effect represents these civic values. Robinson wrote that public sculpture should 1) instruct by embodying ideals and principles in allegory, symbolism or historical scenes, 2) record history, and 3) be decorative.<sup>43</sup>

In his proposed building description, Graves called for exactly this type of symbolic figure that would be in:

association with the city and its emblematic symbol found on the city seal through a proposed artwork included in the building's program. Though the figure found on the seal of the city represents "Commerce," she, with her trident in one hand and shaft of grain in the other, might more broadly be thought of as an extension of the water resource and

the land brought together in the naming of the city itself. Like the symbol "Galatea," such emblematic references have classical beginnings and are, in turn, extended to refer to a broader base of culture in our town [sic] time. The original Lady Commerce might now be thought to represent not only the city's commercial life but also its government, its culture, and its industry. In the broadest sense, Lady Commerce could be thought of as "Portlandia."<sup>44</sup>

The resulting sculpture wears its symbolism well. The 25' high, hammered copper figure kneels over the main entrance. She holds a trident in one hand while the other is extended in a welcoming gesture to the visitor below.

*Portlandia* is the work of Washington, D.C. sculptor, Raymond Kaskey, who won a juried competition for his design. The idea for the sculpture was initially scrapped for cost reasons but was later revived by the Metropolitan Arts Council. Jury members, including local sculptors and representatives of city arts institutions, who settled on Kaskey's classical design did complain that his sculpture seemed ignorant of any artistic development in the last 150 years and was "academic sculpture in the most possible sense."<sup>45</sup> But, according to the response chronicled in local newspapers, most citizens accepted the figure as a viable symbol for their city.<sup>46</sup> In fact, when Kaskey exhausted his awarded funds before the sculpture was completed Portland citizens readily responded with contributions of \$30,000 and a local businessman offered to transport the work from Washington for free.<sup>47</sup>

When the completed sculpture finally arrived, it was cause for a spontaneous town celebration. The local paper reported that:

Sunday was "Portlandia" day in the City of Roses as thousands of people lined Willamette River bridges, the harbor wall and Southwest Taylor Street to watch the parade of the sculpture to its home on a portico of the Portland Building.... People in the crowd broke into cheers and applause as the statue was lifted over the harbor wall by crane and positioned on a truck. There were more cheers as it moved along Taylor Street and as it was raised onto the Portland Building.<sup>48</sup>

*Portlandia* does seem to have served as the "public relations" figure for the building. Unlike the esoteric and functionally flawed elements on the interior, *Portlandia* seems to speak in the vernacular tongue Graves was aiming for in the rest of the structure. Graves also is the farthest away from his modernist fathers with the sculpture of *Portlandia*. Where the moderns advocated ornamental silence, Graves has devised a didactic figure in the Beaux Arts stylistic tradition. Though his design may strike some as out of date, *Portlandia*'s form and function have been warmly embraced by the general population.

It is a sad comment on the building that only this sculpture seems to be "Expressive of the humanity of the individuals who will use the building." The grandiose intentions of the entire building have been reduced to this lone figure. Jencks unwittingly noted this reduction:



If Post-Modernists refuse to accept either [Modernist] agnosticism or its visual equivalent — the bland, technocratic facade — then they have to discover credible ideas in the building's programme, or of the particular society for whom they are designing. Graves did this with his sculpture known as 'Portlandia', the woman who used to personify the civic hopes, virtues and trade of the citizens, in the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, a re-examination of the exterior of the building reveals the most critical problems. Much of the literature on the Portland Building has stressed its semiotic function. That is, its ability to signify civic virtues and ideals. But to the average citizen, the building's message is often missed or interpreted as a caricature of the classical symbols it evokes. This latter issue is a serious one. As Malcolm Quantrill points out:

The counterargument [to a positive reading of the building] would suggest that it may have been Graves' purpose to have the building exterior express its inner warmth and friendliness. Without engaging in a medieval disputation on the expressive details of the Portland building, we may nevertheless question their devaluation of narrative potential into a picturesque, not to say pictorial display.<sup>50</sup>

This issue of what kind of message the building really puts forth has been the troubling concern of many Portland citizens. The local newspaper's art and architecture critic found the structure insensitive to its surroundings. "In terms of scale and reference to Portland's political heritage as exemplified by City Hall and the County Courthouse, Graves's building looks out of place both in size and style."<sup>51</sup> Even more distressing is the negative reading of the exterior by many local citizens. A man who works in a neighboring office structure asks:

What's that building saying?... Nothing. It makes no statement. It's confused.... Little teeny blocks for windows as well as long strips of windows. No central motif, like two or three people designed it.... I expect to see someone peek out of those windows to see what's going on in the world...but you can't see in. It's like a fort, like the Nixon government.<sup>52</sup>

Such a comment must be very disturbing to the City Council. After all, one of the expressed goals for the building was that it would be, "A facilitator of communication between the citizens and their government." If the structure is interpreted as being as monolithic as its modernist forbearers, then the postmodern architect's mission has failed.

The postmodern architect's expressed goal has been to reinvigorate public buildings at the semiotic, or symbolic, level. The purpose of quoting past architectural symbols is that they are things the average building user should already understand. The postmodern architect assumes that we have a pre-modern architectural vocabulary buried within us. All he has to do is create forms that link to these "words" and combine them in syntactical relationships that we can then "read." Charles Russell has discussed this at length in reference to postmodern art in general:

The work of these postmoderns is characterized by an emphatic self-reflexiveness. It presents itself as a direct manifestation of aesthetic language investigating itself as *language*; that is, the text or artwork points to itself as a particular expression of a specific meaning system, as a construct that explicitly says something about the process of creating meaning. Instead of presuming and attempting to speak about or illustrate the phenomenal world, the artwork regards itself as the primary reality. There is little effort to (re)present the world, so the artwork devalues the referential dimension of language. Rather, meaning is turned back upon itself as the artwork explores itself as a mode of meaning, of cognition, of perception and expression. Insofar as it seeks a world of significance external to itself, the world is described as a network of socially established meaning systems, the discourse of our culture.

This is, consequently, an art of extreme abstraction. Specific messages are secondary to the process of creating those messages. At most, there is only a glimpse of a shared experiential reality. There is little effort to (re)present the world...instead to focus on how that reality is dependent upon the conventions of aesthetic and social discourse to be understood.<sup>53</sup>

Graves has exhibited this hermetic obsession with his own forms in the Portland Building. He has abstracted the symbols of classical architecture to an extreme degree. The emphasis in Graves's building is on the design components and on their relationship to one another, not on the message that they are supposed to carry. Examples of this empty or confused communication include the dining pedestal and the wall forms on the building's interior. Consequently, Graves has placed importance on the signifiers over the signified. That is, he emphasizes the architectural form, not its symbolic meaning. This is what has made his building hard to understand. Graves himself is aware of the dangers involved in making symbolic designs. He has written:

It is the decoration that represents us in architecture?... When the abstract code takes over, when it becomes too elaborate or difficult, it starts to deny us access to the language and to exclude us, ourselves, from the argument.<sup>54</sup>

The colossal forms on the exterior of the Portland Building may be so overemphasized that their meaning is lost. Such an element as the keystone is removed from its usual size and context and, hence, seems divorced from its usual meaning. Malcolm Quantrill discussed the importance of keeping the link between symbol and meaning in tact:

In order for a work of art to express the spirit of man there must be something beyond visual imagery; the surface structure must be underlaid by a deeper structure. The something beyond surface appearance is a link with man's subconscious, a link between existential appearance and imagic memory. A syntactic framework may describe the ordering of an environmental grammar and outline the rules for its elements. But such a system of signification is still abstract. Human responses, however, depend upon the way in which the signals arranged in a conceptual framework are actually received. The conceptual or theoretical framework,

the semantic rules of a work of art, must also embrace a perceptual syntactic framework: together they must connect with the consciousness of the perceiver.<sup>55</sup>

As was shown in the interior of the Portland Building, Graves has failed to connect his intended meaning with the symbolic forms. This is not to say that the structure has no meaning. The building's symbols can, in fact, be interpreted as a parody of the classical virtues they were meant to represent. Charles Jencks has even identified this type of parody as one of the strategies of the postmodernist. He claims that what distinguishes postmodernism from revivalism is irony, parody, displacement, complexity, eclecticism, realism or any number of contemporary tactics and goals.<sup>56</sup> But is it appropriate for a building that is home to governmental offices to make a parody of civic virtues?

Graves's work is interpreted as parody because it breaks so radically with symbolic conventions. Quantrill's statements on this issue can be applied directly to Graves:

Breaking with convention, or opposing it, implies an understanding of what that convention is, and requires the capacity to build upon rather than derive from that convention. Lacking that understanding and capacity, many architects today have returned...to an eclecticism eschewed by the founding modernists as sheer parody... Thus, at the end of the twentieth-century the poetic imagination has become impoverished and we are struggling once again with elementary problems of grammar and syntax. There is simply no poetic image or symbolic structure beneath the eclectic surface of appearance.<sup>57</sup>

The flatness of the facades of the Portland Building emphasizes the shallowness of its symbolism. The box-like structure with the tiny, punctuating windows appears to be empty. This exterior impression, coupled with the design flaws of the interior, give rise to an appearance that the Portland Building is a hollow structure with garish images plastered to the outside. As such, the building resembles nothing so much as advertising packaging.

The logic of advertising has been applied to the Portland Building. That is, a basically cheap and plain form (a 15-story box) has been dressed up in colorful decoration to make it appealing to the public. British critic Martin Pawley describes this as adding

investor-readable features to otherwise utilitarian buildings. These features cover a vast gamut from glass-fibre columns and cornices in the London suburbs to the famous *el cheapo* paint job on Michael Graves's Portland Public Services Building.... What has re-entered the architectural vocabulary as a result of Post-Modernism is not architectural history but *investment graphics*.<sup>58</sup>

If one accepts this reading, then the signs of keystone, pilaster and garland are analogous to corporate insignia or advertising symbols. What the bull is to Merrill Lynch, *Portlandia* is to the Portland Building: an image with

previous associations applied to a new product, in this case a civic structure, to persuade the consumer of the product's worth.

Paolo Portoghesi points out the political ramifications of treating government buildings as consumer products. He thinks that government institutions are the only acceptable mediation in democratic society between cultural production and consumption. So, if the logic of advertising is applied to these institutions, then:

An attitude of this kind would be in tune with the revisitation of negative thought and with the disappointed conscience that substitutes the obliging proof of the degradation of bourgeois culture, of its reduction to the mass consumption of the 'already produced' for the removed revolution.<sup>59</sup>

In this scenario, our civic structures are treated like any other consumer good. As such, allegiance to them will be as transitory as the winds of fashion.

Graves's attitude, then, can work against the values he claims he wanted to uphold. His Portland Building is utterly alien to its users rather than a symbol of public pride. It is a gravestone to all the City Council held dear, as they stated in their opening statement of purpose. Charles Newman sums up this demoralizing state in his description of the postmodern aesthetic in general:

Post-Modernism has then come to represent the final battle in the century's war of attrition between Formalism and Realism, those totally aestheticized antinomies shorn of their historical context — a violent adjacency of the idols of pure expressivity and pure accessibility, which reflect more often than not an atmosphere of intense demoralization.<sup>60</sup>

For some critics, such as Bill Risebero, it is the postmodern architect's esoteric symbolism and elitist attitude that are so demoralizing. Risebero writes of the style in the past tense when he discusses the issue of commodification in postmodern architecture:

The choice of such a style as today's academic diversion was an equally elitist gesture [as the newclassical style]; appealing mainly to the *cognoscenti* who could appreciate the witty historical references. The bourgeois architect might have failed in the recent past, and still be failing, to come to terms with the social problems of the city, but there could be no denying that he was a master of witty historical reference. His work now demonstrated all the complexities of modern alienation. In place of the simple, personal relationship between user and artisan of the pre-industrial world, there was now impersonal commodity production.<sup>61</sup>

Risebero's views may represent the extreme of those who criticize the postmodern style, but they raise important issues.

The charge of elitism is a strong one for contemporary architects to answer. It was Graves's expressed goal to create a user-friendly building with identifiable symbols. But the obscure and paradoxical symbolism of the Portland Building and its dark, anti-functional interior do not live up

to this goal.

In conclusion, it does not seem that the ideas of the postmodernists offer the only vision of hope for public architecture. Removing our buildings from the bland hands of the modernists and renewing them with symbols quoted in a vernacular tongue can reinvigorate our built structures with meaning. This is important because public buildings are a very visible way that social traditions and history can be passed on in our culture.

Quantrill calls this nostalgic aspect of architecture its "environmental memory." He writes that:

Environmental memory is our need or desire to relate previous periods, societies, and cultures and our attempts to understand the social patterns and rituals that characterized them through their monuments and artifacts. One of the principal attributes of form—architectural form, or interior form — is that it is capable of connecting us to the deep well of human consciousness, keeping open the channels of historical continuity by the myths, ideas, rituals, and events which it represents.<sup>62</sup>

Without a sense of history we lack this cultural identity.

Psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva has pointed out this important role of culture for government in an essay on postmodernism.<sup>63</sup> She writes that one result of the twentieth-century ambivalence between the state and morality can be that the state abandons its moral prerogatives and "plays its part indirectly through technocratic liberalism."<sup>64</sup> Postmodern architecture can offer a positive channel for this moral prerogative.

However, Michael Graves's Portland Building is *not* the model for other public buildings to follow. The ideals of its designer were noble but the resulting product is abysmal. The interior spaces are so riddled with problems that parts must already be remodeled. For all its fancy packaging, the exterior has proved as alienating as any modernist facade, though for quite different reasons. Rather than no message, the Portland Building presents one of parody, commercial manipulation, and political elitism. If the building continues to be advertised as a success, then the design flaws will only be repeated. There is still hope for future postmodern building projects, but Portlanders are left to live with theirs.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See the Introduction in Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 5-8 and J. Pastier, "First Monument of a Loosely Defined Style: Michael Graves' Portland Building," *AIA Journal* 72 (May 1983): 232-237.

<sup>2</sup>Gavin Macrae-Gibson, *The Secret Life of Buildings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 74.

<sup>3</sup>Leslie B. Ariel, "Building Blocks," *Willamette Week*, 14 May 1987, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Macrae-Gibson, 74.

<sup>5</sup>Bureau of General Services, *The Portland Building* (City of Portland, 1985).

- <sup>6</sup>Tod A. Marder, *The Critical Edge* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), 163.
- <sup>7</sup>Martin Filler, "Michael Graves: Before and After," *Art in America* 68 (September 1980): 99-105.
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>9</sup>Gideon Bosker and Lena Lencek, *Frozen Music: a History of Portland Architecture* (Portland, Oregon: Western Imprints, 1985), 247.
- <sup>10</sup>Peter Blake, *Form Follows Fiasco* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>12</sup>Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 63.
- <sup>13</sup>Charles Jencks, *Architecture Today* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1982), 158.
- <sup>14</sup>Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 14.
- <sup>15</sup>Bureau of General Services, *The Portland Building* (City of Portland, 1985).
- <sup>16</sup>Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodernism: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 90.
- <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup>Macrea-Gibson, *The Secret Life of Buildings*, 84.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 89, 90.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>21</sup>Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 7.
- <sup>22</sup>Barbara Lee Diamonstein, *American Architecture Now* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 49-62.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>24</sup>"Water Marks," *Oregonian*, 18 March 1983, C10.
- <sup>25</sup>Marc Levenson, "Portland Building assailed as very userunfriendly," *Oregonian*, 7 June 1987, B1.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup>Paul Goldberger, *On the Rise* (New York: Times Books, 1983), 164.
- <sup>29</sup>Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1977).
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>31</sup>Bureau of General Services, *The Portland Building*.
- <sup>32</sup>Malcolm Quantrill, *The Environmental Memory* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987).
- <sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 57-75.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>36</sup>Levenson, "Portland Building assailed as very userunfriendly."

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Alan Hayakawa, "Graves gleeful with Portland Building," *Oregonian*, 10 October 1982, C6.

<sup>39</sup>Elaine Cogan, "Variety scarce in interior of the Portland Building," *Oregonian*, 12 October 1982, 5.

<sup>40</sup>Vladimir Bazjanac, "Energy Analysis: Portland Public Office Building," *Progressive Architecture* 64 (October 1981): 108-109.

<sup>41</sup>Michele H. Bogart, "In Search of a United Front: American Architectural Sculpture at the Turn of the Century," *Winterthur Portfolio* 19 (Summer/Autumn 1984), 175.

<sup>42</sup>Charles M. Robinson, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 219.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>44</sup>Bureau of General Services, *The Portland Building*.

<sup>45</sup>Andy Rocchia, "Sculpture jury upset, but likely to pick one anyway," *Oregon Journal*, 1 May 1982, 2.

<sup>46</sup>Rolla J. Crick, "Thousands bid 'Portlandia' warm welcome," *Oregonian*, 7 October 1985, 1; "Donors give statue a light touch," *Oregonian*, 6 October 1986, A1; Alan Hayakawa, "Arts panel approves Kaskey 'Portlandia'," *Oregonian*, 2 October 1982, B1; Alan Hayakawa, "Portlanders help copper lady in need," *Oregonian*, 15 January 1985, C4; Ellen Emry Heltzel, "In praise of 'Portlandia'," *Oregonian*, 2 December 1985, C1.

<sup>47</sup>Hayakawa, "Portlanders help copper lady in need."

<sup>48</sup>Crick, "Thousands bid 'Portlandia' warm welcome."

<sup>49</sup>Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 7.

<sup>50</sup>Quantrill, *The Environmental Memory*, 75.

<sup>51</sup>Alan Hayakawa, "Building's a bane to city," *Oregonian*, 10 October 1982, C6.

<sup>52</sup>Steve Erickson, "... While critic's slowly alter theirs," *Oregonian*, 20 December 1981, C1.

<sup>53</sup>Charles Russell, "The Context of the Concept," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986), 183.

<sup>54</sup>Quantrill, *The Environmental Memory*, 59.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>56</sup>Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?*, 15.

<sup>57</sup>Quantrill, xxi.

<sup>58</sup>Martin Pawley, "Back-Seat: Economic Foundations of Post-Modernism," *Architectural Review* 176 (August 1984): 63.

<sup>59</sup>Portoghesi, *Postmodernism: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society*, 75.

<sup>60</sup>Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>61</sup>Bill Risebero, *Modern Architecture and Design* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), 242.

<sup>62</sup>Quantrill, *The Environmental Memory*, 48.

<sup>63</sup>Julia Kristeva, "Postmodernism?," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1980), 136-141.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.



# David Salle: The New Gatsby

By Donald Kuspit

“Absolutely real — have pages and everything. I thought they’d be a nice durable cardboard.... It’s a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella’s a regular Belasco. It’s a triumph. What thoroughness! What Realism! Knew when to stop, too — didn’t cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

The Speaker is a skeptical guest at one of Gatsby’s parties. He suspects that Gatsby is a big fake, and so he expects everything associated with Gatsby to be fake. But the books in Gatsby’s mansion are real, if unread. Gatsby’s fakeness is of a peculiar sort: he knows what’s real, but he uses it in a “fake” way. The books are real, but they’re for show — and, as the guest suggests, you can’t expect a showman to really have read them. They exist to make an impression, not to be taken seriously. What must be taken seriously is the seriousness with which they’re put on display.

Salle’s approach to pictures, as suggested by this, is that of a Gatsby kind of reader. The pages of the picture-books in Salle’s library have been cut,

but it is not clear that Salle has read the books. He has skimmed them, and torn pages out of one or another, and put them together into his own scrapbook pictures. It's a kind of proof of his presence — a new, very American, way to say "Kilroy was here" — if not of his understanding of the texts. Kilroy didn't exactly conquer or comprehend, but he put his mark on the sights worth seeing, making them trophies of a sort. All the pages are more or less interesting, but we don't know exactly why, or what their point is taken together. There isn't any, except to create an impression of seriousness. It is a demonstration of showmanship, which no doubt has a subliminal personal logic. The point of Gatsby's display of authenticity was to create the persona called Gatsby, rumored to be an Oxford man, rumored to have killed. Surrounded by superstitious gossip, Gatsby drifted "coolly out of nowhere" and became "someone," although nobody knew exactly who. Similarly, Salle's scraps of imagery are like bits of whispered gossip, generating the aura of his mysterious presence, mysterious significance.

One of the strategies by which Gatsby gives himself the aura of illicit significance — the very center of his persona — is by having his parties well-stocked with females who have the latest, name-brand look of detached beauty, as well as with females who have a more vulgar, accommodating look, suggesting their readiness for any and all kinds of sexual activity. But both, equally seductive, looks are part of woman's, and Gatsby's, showmanship — a mechanism of her, and his, persona, with its promise of guiltless, transgressive pleasure — rather than a guarantee of sexual substance. Similarly, Salle's party pictures are well-stocked with female figures whose visual accessibility is no guarantee of their will to sexuality. (All but four of the forty-three pictures in his recent retrospective featured females, if not always in starring roles, but almost always in a state of undress. Similarly, the female figure was the dominant theme of his concurrently exhibited watercolors.) They may be sex objects in appearance, but their appearance is an aspect of their, and Salle's, opportunistic showmanship. The pretence of sexual overexperience and wisdom in Salle's pictures — he supposedly prefers dead to live passion — is just that, a pretence, on the order of the books in Gatsby's library. Salle's females are "real," but their sexuality is not self-evidently "cutting." It is a closed book. They are showpieces, not sexpots.

Salle gives away his strategy of pictorial construction in several works, perhaps most notably *Coral Made* (1985) and *Footmen* (1986). The film footage is more of interest for its seriality than for its female subject matter. Serial repetition is inherently ambivalent in import: it suggests that the subject matter is interesting, but it presents it in an indifferent way. In a sense, it is a desperate attempt to generate aura while suggesting its disintegration, as though each frame was a fragment or splinter of aura. Also, the accumulations of serial repetition are a simple but effective way of achieving the single, over-all, stunning effect showmanship aims at. The illusion of singularity is created by the very mechanism which denies it. When the principle of repetition is maintained without the substance — Salle does

not literally repeat the same thing, but the same type of thing — the effect is more dramatic and intriguing. This is Salle's trick, perhaps most successful when the variation is most complex, as in *Fooling With Your Hair* (1985).

It is as though Salle has a variety of computer programs available — the female pose programs, the art history programs are the most prominent — and he flashes the images on the surface of his picture, typically in split-screen fashion. (At one of Gatsby's parties, a *Jazz History of the World* is premiered. Similarly, Salle's orchestration of art history and of female figures can be understood as a kind of jazzy (rock?) history of art and sex.) The computer permits one to play with the images in various archives or memorybanks, and even though the collective memories are not one's own, they are in effect personalized — in a way reminiscent of what David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* called "false personalization" — by the play. Whether the hypothetically (hypocritically?) free play of signifiers leads to their cancelling each other out, as has been suggested, is debatable, but there is no question that some principle of play—however petrified in principle, however reified in its results — is at stake in Salle's pictures. Salle is an other-directed artist creating a lonely crowd of images in an attempt to show he is inner-directed. It is this that is the real source of the uncertain effect of uncanniness his pictures create, not their supposedly ironical juxtapositions, which keep us guessing as to their import. The specificity of the juxtapositions is less to the point than the overall effect of near chaos that they generate. It is the structure of the picture as a whole that counts, for it makes transparent the disintegration of — or difficulty integrating — the self they are about.

Nonetheless, specific juxtapositions do convey a message. It is typically about the relationship of male to female, with the high art mode representative of the male principle and the low art mode—supposedly closer to life — representative of the female principle. Thus, *View The Author Through Long Telescopes* (1981) puts a painting of a male golfer by Kuniyoshi (a self-portrait) next to a series of sketches, drawn from an advertisement, of female models in different outfits.\* In a typical Salle paradox, the high art image is real in effect, the low art advertising image is fake in effect. This is not because of Kuniyoshi's realism; in *Pure Difference* (1982), the assertive high art gestures, imagistic or not, have more "reality" than the realistically rendered female nude. Indeed, for Salle, high art, through its "abstract" assertiveness, generally finesses—undermines — low art/low life. The masculine activity of high art is, as it were, a way of transcending the "immanent" images of life. In *Gericault's Arm* (1985), the colorful arm and abstractly shaped vessel "triumph" over the partially nude female figure. Can one say that Salle is deliberately using high art "ideas" to repress haunting erotic images? His works seem to show repression in process, as though the abstract objects were an equivalent — substitutive gratification — for the superficially gratifying, but ultimately ungratifying female images. Salle seems to offer us art as a necessary substitute for life, although in *Fooling With Your Hair* — and similar works — he seems to be confronting you with a choice between high art (upper

tier) and low “art” or life (lower tier). The choice is not always so-clear cut, but the iconography of Hercules’ Choice between the paths of virtue (art) and vice (life) seems operational in Salle’s work.

How autobiographical in import this is or is not is debatable, but the exhibition catalogue includes a “staged photograph” of “David Salle and Model, Life Drawing Class, Hartford Art School” (March 1979). The female model is more naked than not, and Salle turns his gaze from her — looks into the distance. I find the picture instructive in its preoccupation with looking and not looking, and a paradigm for Salle’s work as a whole. Salle is closer to the photographer, and his aversion of his glance draws attention away from the model and to him, the artist. I suggest that is what Salle’s whole enterprise is about: to “outwit” the model — to renounce her flesh, while remaining physically on her level. As with Gatsby, Salle’s showmanship exists in the name of a certain renunciation. Daisy is never to be his, except on the stage of his own theatrical fantasy.

Salle’s St. Anthony’s Temptation complex, his “negative voyeurism,” as it were — looking in order not to see, possessing in a staged (artistic) representation as a form of emotional avoidance — is comprehensible in terms of Freud’s conception of the simultaneity of sadism and masochism, that is, “the impulses to look and be looked at.” Salle has the impulse to look at female nakedness — to penetrate it, whether from the front or rear (many of his females are viewed from the rear) — but he restrains himself, turning it into the impulse to be looked at. (Another way of understanding his ambivalence towards the sight of the alluring female figure is to say that he is counterphobically drawn to what he has a phobia towards.) This conversion is part of the “narcissism of small differences” — his artist’s desire to feel more important than his haunting subject matter, to suggest his superiority to it. The subtle, and subtly assertive, redirecting of attention away from the “model” to the artist, the subject matter to the art — the other to the self — is also the heart of his Gatsby-like showmanship, and perhaps the paradigm of art.

\*The golfer is Japanese, the women are American. Although they are both “classically” dressed, they are inherently alien. While the work bespeaks Salle’s sense of the artist (“author”) as an outsider playing on a classy/sexy sociolinguistic golf-course dominated by female signifiers, it also articulates the tense competition between Japan and America — the Japanese colonization of America, and Japan’s threat to American economic hegemony. The picture implies a potential Japanese “rape” of America, and evokes the World War II conflict between Japan and America. Many of Salle’s pictures can be understood as similar “commentary” on the topical realities. That is, they have a sociopolitical import, which is part of their allegorical character. At its best, a Salle picture is a Chinese box of meanings. Meaning is fitted within meaning; despite their difference in “size” — some are more obvious (blatant) than others — there is no clear sense of one having emotional and intellectual priority over the other. For example, in *View The Author Through Long Telescopes*, it is impossible to determine whether

the Japanese/American theme has a greater significance — “scale” — than the male/female theme. It is hard to say whether the one difference structures the work more than the other, or is more indispensable than the other. This kind of “con-fusion” or concentration is crucial to the success of a Salle picture, which depends more on density of meaning than on subtlety of physical execution or even on the characteristic stylistic ingeniousness which is Salle’s trademark.

# The Nude and Erotic Art: The Pick of the Crop Reviewed

By Rudolf M. Bisanz

After decades of neglect and suppression, interest in the nude and erotic art shifted into overdrive in the later 1970s and early 1980s. Artists' involvement continues to soar, but that of writers has since then segued into low. Now we are crowded by a bumper crop of books that informs but also bewilders readers. In the meantime, the issue, paramount in art and criticism, fascinates as always. This, then, looks like a roseate pause for taking stock when the subject seems poised for renewed expansion after having scaled a high plateau in scholarly and critical discourse, exposure in print, and just simply general curiosity.<sup>1</sup>

The following sampling contains ten books and a "classic" revisited. I have chosen them for quick review as a matter of personal choice, high production quality or wide dissemination. In addition, I was guided by the integrity of scholarship and editorial management, differentiation in methodology, diversity of interpretations or significance of intellectual content. May this offering serve as an introduction to the many typical and a few outstanding issues that make up the subject, as a reexamination of some standards of judgement, and as a critical guide to selecting from the

huge mass of relevant publications.

Art critically, the issue of Kenneth Clark's classic study of the nude pivots around his opposition to the view that prevailed well until World War II, namely that the study of the nude must be a purely intellectual pursuit.<sup>2</sup> Clark's psychologically motivated empathy with the subject, in combination with his erudition and aesthetic discernment, involve the reader right from the first chapter, "The Naked and the Nude." Here, in a bold departure from traditional art criticism, he offers his challenge to convention, especially to Samuel Alexander's cerebral idealism regarding the nude. It is an alternative aesthetic based on the sensual experiencing of the nude: "No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator...erotic feeling." Moreover, he feels that the nude as a "serious subject for contemplation," is the exclusive province of the Western Classic tradition and does not appear anywhere outside of it. In the eight chapters that follow, Clark endeavors to show "how the naked body has been given memorable shapes by the wish to communicate certain ideas or states of feeling" and, in the process, gives order to a welter of such embodiments of ideality into major thematic groupings. Among the most important of such groupings he counts Apollo, permutations of Venus, and the nude as symbolic representation of various "states", e.g. energy, pathos, ecstasy, etc.

Clark's chapter on the "Alternative Convention," i.e., the Northern Romantic European tradition from the Flemish primitives to Rouault's grotesque prostitutes, is antithetical to the body of the text, as it seems uneasy to reconcile those extremes of critical *Weltanschauung*. Least satisfactory, the final chapter, "The Nude as an End in Itself"—perhaps it was an afterthought—throws together precariously disparate styles and traditions from antiquity to Brancusi under the thematic heading of "significant form" and in an art critical equivalent of *insalata mista*. Clark's chosen maxim is based on a seminal apologia of Modern formalism penned by the nineteenth-century German art theorist Conrad Fiedler. It was later refined and popularized by Roger Fry for the English speaking world. Surprisingly, neither predecessor is rewarded for his troubles by being mentioned or included in an otherwise very impressive "List of Works Cited." Quibbling aside, Clark's study is a celebrated milestone in the interpretation of the nude, ushering in a new era in the evolution of the subject in art history and criticism. The book's great riches of ideas, topics, and sources are made easily accessible by Clark's lucid prose and, in my edition, an exhaustive index. Nearly 300 plates illustrate many instances of the gamut of the great art and major artists discussed.

In Clark's more recent *Feminine Beauty*, some 170 postage-stamp-sized black and white reproductions illustrate female beauty ideals from Ancient Egyptian tombs to twentieth-century movie marquee.<sup>3</sup> These accompany a polished text by a master writer by way of an introduction to a splendid collection of large choice plates, many in color. The volume, dealing with nudes as well as draped models, features, in addition to works by the great masters, some rare nineteenth-century beauties by unpublished artists. Although this book may have been a minor effort on the part of the late

art historian, even a potboiler by Clark seems to soar above much else that appears in print nowadays.

Pompeian life, religion, customs and mores prior to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 spring to life in a breathtaking collection of all-color photographs in Michael Grant's study.<sup>4</sup> The text of *Eros in Pompeii* by the distinguished specialist of Roman art is rich in the kind of political, social and culture-historical data and insights that forms the necessary conduit to understanding the subject. Enter the magical world of pagan superstition, ritualistic sexual encounters, mystery cults, apotropaic hermes, satyrs, and nymphs. Figures and figurines of ithyphallic dwarfs, Priapus, Pan, and sundry hermaphrodites in all media and technical applications further enliven the erotic action of the Ancients. Significantly, this is also the most knowledgeable introduction to the important collection of Roman sexual and erotic art at the National Museum of Naples known to all travellers as the "Secret Rooms."

A "thousand-and-one" plates, many in color, catalogue and illustrate the colossal volume by the Kronhausens.<sup>5</sup> The book commemorates the first large scale, officially sanctioned, and publically sponsored exhibition of erotic art ever curated and seen by large audiences in Sweden and Denmark in 1968 and 1969. This courageous pioneering achievement features the Kronhausen's own extensive collection as well as a great many objects on loan. It covers Primitive, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese erotica, the emphasis being on Western and, especially, Contemporary art. The two psychologists and amateur historians bring to their monumental undertaking the perspective of their profession. Therefore, they understandably stress in their probing commentaries the social, therapeutic, and behavioral aspects of their subject, candidly erotic art. In their justification for their remarkable exhibition they correctly emphasize that "erotic art expresses the demand for sexual freedom — a freedom vital to individual happiness and mental wellbeing. And sexual freedom, in turn, cannot exist without a high degree of political and economic freedom as well. In that sense, erotic art carries a truly revolutionary message: it demands no less an extension of freedom, not only in the sexual area but in every sphere of social life."<sup>6</sup> In short, the practice and enjoyment of erotic art is a litmus of social success and political liberation.<sup>7</sup> They believe that the value of erotic art is defined by its "socially redeeming merits" by virtue of the fact that it "educates," makes "one think and feel," that it is medically beneficial, psychologically "therapeutic" and culturally informing and, last but not least, that it "frequently appeals to our sense of humor."

While the Kronhausens neglect the nineteenth-century by and large, still they surprise with some seldom or never seen, straight-forward erotica by such luminaries as Sergel, Rowlandson, Fuseli, and Rodin, for example. Alternatively, such "specialists" of the erotic genre as Rops, Bayros and Viset, are also given their deserved recognition. A great many twentieth-century artists appear here with hard to find or heretofore unpublished paintings and drawings. So do, for instance, Dix, Schoff, Grosz, Dali, Corinth, Ernst, Picasso, Pascin, Appel, and Klimt. Clearly featured are Masson and



the Franco-German Hans Bellmer who has been the most pyrotechnical stylist of the highly erotic in recent years. Most better known Pop-Art and Photorealism-related British and American artists as well as numerous women artists favoring the erotic in their art are well represented, as are many Swedish, Danish, German, and Japanese painters and graphic artists who are less well known but deserve to be seen.<sup>8</sup> On the negative side, a lot is shown that may fascinate psychologically but is clearly poor art. As to the representation of the non-Western traditions, the book rounds up the usual list of suspects by surveying most major historical trends and contemporary practices and doing so more than adequately well.

It may be noteworthy to point out that the Kronhausens have established the International Museum of Erotic Art in San Francisco, which is, as far as I can tell, the only institution of its kind anywhere. The museum embodies their attempt at democratizing the enjoyment of this type of art which, as they correctly observe, "has for far too long been the exclusive prerogative of the wealthy and privileged classes — as, for that matter, has sexual freedom in general." Moreover, they wish "to extend these privileges to the average citizen." They had gathered valuable background knowledge in one of their previous books, *Pornography and the Law* (1960), establishing them as arbiters of taste and experts on the meaning and legal theories of obscenity as they are interpreted in this country. This expertise serves the authors well in presenting the reader with sophisticated but also meaningful and constructive arguments on the contested relationship and uncertain boundaries between erotic art and pornography.

Professor Piero Lorenzoni's perspective focuses more on subject and content than aesthetics in his remarkably unself-conscious, clear and fresh survey of French eighteenth-and-nineteenth century erotica by an irregular selection of major and minor painters, draftsmen and illustrators.<sup>9</sup> He demonstrates that country's celebrated capacity for endowing representations of the most explicit sexual encounters with charm, wit and grace as well as refinement of form, painterliness, and an infectious *joie de vivre*. France's partiality for the erotic surfaced as early as the Middle Ages — several telling reliefs and woodcuts illustrate this — accelerated during the Renaissance — the school of Fontainebleau can be glimpsed with several exquisite samplings of amorous pleasures — and attained its full stride in the eighteenth-century. That era opened up the subject as part of a much wider philosophical, political and economic emancipation of life styles under the aegis of the Enlightenment. Aside from such notables as Fragonard, Boucher and Watteau, numerous now forgotten artists then practiced a highly descriptive yet never really vulgar art of love making and of piquant variations on the theme. At the same time, French literature, as well, occasioned a veritable avalanche of erotic productions — novels, plays, poems, studies — that seemed to have kept scores of illustrators — many are shown here — fully employed.

The emphasis of the book lies clearly with the nineteenth-century — two thirds of the contents. In that century the French genius for recording and artistically transforming the most subtle permutations of sex life and infus-

ing the resulting product with keenness of observation, energy and buoyancy of style reached its fruition. And here again, we encounter many highly talented but now mostly forgotten artists alongside a surprising number of leading ones. Among the latter: Isabey, Gavarini, Ingres, David, Courbet, Millet, Daumier, Deveria, Tassaert, Broc, Gauguin and, of course, Toulouse-Lautrec. All of these were unashamedly direct in their depictions of the most intimate scenes and sexual ribaldry and merrymaking when the spirit so moved them. Lastly, however, Lorenzoni's chief contribution may be in outlining a little social history of French morals and manners as reflected by aphrodisiacal art and defined by god Eros.

"Uneven and unsatisfactory; lack of real intellectual argument or depth of research; discussion of symbolism often very fanciful; brief bibliography; well illustrated."<sup>10</sup> While this laconic capsule by Peter Webb may sound harsh, his judgement does not stray too far off target in characterizing Edward Lucie-Smith's *Eroticism in Western Art*.<sup>11</sup> Organizationally, the division of the vast material which is covered here in two parts — a chronological account (Chapters 1-8) and an iconographic analysis (Chapters 9-15) — seems to signal troubles ahead. These actually materialize when we learn that this division is arbitrary and cumbersome in addition to being redundant and repetitive. Accordingly, the same artists are dealt with repeatedly under different chapter headings when a single comprehensive discussion would have been much clearer and more orderly. In this scheme of things, the chapter headings themselves do nothing to diminish but, rather, add to the complexity and random effect of the contents: "The Open Secret," "Cruel Fantasies," "Erotic Metamorphosis," "Lust in Action," "Symbols and Disguises," or "Here Comes a Chopper," may arouse curiosity but are misleading, virtually interchangeable with one another, and as nearly open-ended and vague as matters.

A sympathetic reading of the book will, no doubt, reveal many instances of knowledge, insight, and even wisdom that have the potential to open fresh and exciting new perspectives on numerous erotic issues and "displaced" erotic symbolism in art. Still, on the whole, the text is obdurately whimsical and, lastly, does not fulfill its initial promise to deal with the subject with scholarly rigor and in depth. But Lucie-Smith is to be congratulated for his superb choice of plates, some 280 in all, by mostly very well-known artists who explore nearly every conceivable nook and cranny of sexuality and its variations and deviations. These range from anal eroticism to zoomimic encounters and virtually every recess in-between, including bestiality, castration, homosexuality, lesbianism, narcissism, *pet-engueule* (assy-versy or "69"), prostitution, rape sadism, sadomasochism, satanism, slavery, transvestitism, voyeurism, a.m.o. Lastly, the bibliography is a study in misapplied frugality — eight entries! — and wholly inadequate for a quasi-university press volume (Oxford) that aspires to educate and to the role of major text book on the subject. The technical quality of the plates is what one would expect from the "World of Art" series to which this book belongs: it is poor.

Lucie-Smith's other entry, *The Body, Images of the Nude*, is very similar

to Clark's *Feminine Beauty* but seems to lack his incisiveness, brio, or sense of direction.<sup>12</sup> The 159 full color reproductions, all of excellent quality, feature a broad selection of idealizations of the human body including works by Raphael, Dürer, Palm Vecchio, Titian, Rubens, and Watteau as well as Renoir, Klimt and Hockney. The thematic rubrics by which this very subjective selection of artists and works is ordered, e.g., "The Rational Nude," "The Uneasy Nude," "Passion and Pallor," or "The Fleshly Nude," do not, by and large, convince with their logic. They are simply too loose and vague. It seems to me that most works cited as examples of one category could just as easily do the same for another, if not for most of them. We should be grateful for some superb nudes — all hard to find in sources, especially in good color — by such masters as Gros, Hersent, Gerôme, Alma-Tadema, Bouguereau, Maclise, J. Collier, and Christian Schad, a neglected but technically sophisticated artist of New Objectivity in the manner of Dix.<sup>13</sup> But one also senses in this book the kind of hesitancy, timidity and orthodoxy on the part of the author and his publishers that seem to be the accustomed intellectual province of makers of beautiful coffee table editions.

Post-Trentine repression of Christ's sexuality in word and picture was so complete as to erase the very memory of the subject well into our own days. From the doctrinal sphere, these suppressive teachings spilled over into humanistic studies and, eventually, into art history where total repression of the subject resulted in generations of scholars who, according to Leo Steinberg, had been "educated into incomprehension."<sup>14</sup> The pictorial evidence that he amasses to support his claim that artistic representations of the sexuality of Christ and of the Christ Child were very widespread and that they played a key role in church dogma of the Trecento, Quattrocento and Cinquecento, together with the documentary support that he gathers to bolster his case, are as incontrovertible as they are surprising: why could such a study not have been written decades ago and why could his findings not be an accepted part of any sensible basic introduction to Renaissance art by now?

Answers to this puzzling question, if there are any, raise more doubts and controversy than insight. Art critics have failed to enlighten art historians on this issue, and *vice versa*. Psychologically this may be a case of the Emperor's clothes *redux*. Certainly, it is a case of blindness and delusion of astonishing scope, duration and prevalence. But the doctrinal justification for prominently displaying — indeed, intentionally featuring — the genitals of Christ in Renaissance art and Steinberg's interpretation of this practice, are clear, incisive and, with the benefit of hindsight, self-evident. Christ was "born true God in the entire and perfect nature of man, complete in his properties, complete in ours." "...just as Christ's resurrection overcame the death of a mortal body, so did his chastity triumph over the flesh of sin." "How could he who restores human nature to sinlessness be ashamed by the sexual factor in his humanity?" "It follows that Christ's exemplary virtue and the celebration of his perpetual virginity again presupposes sexuality as a *sine qua non*."<sup>15</sup>

In the process of presenting the pictorial evidence for his assertions, Steinberg develops a whole new system of iconographic meanings which all center in the sexuality of Christ: exposure as revelation; exposed genitals as harbingers of the Passion; Christian artists' resistance to showing circumcision and, thus, to displaying a physical imperfection in Christ; circumcision as prefiguration of the Crucifixion; the prophetic function of Christ's genitals in the Epiphany; Mary's precognitive protection of the Christ Child's genitals; the Christ Child's self-touch of his genitals as emblem of sacrifice; Christ's infantile erection as portent of adult physical potency; Christ's erection as symbol of the Resurrection; telling configurations of Christ's loin cloth as elaborate sex symbols; the gestural grasp of his genitals by the Christ-Schmerzensmann and of the Dead Christ as dual references to the Circumcision and the Crucifixion. Among the artists shown: Simone Martini, Hans Baldung Grien, Michelangelo, Filippo Lippi, Giotto, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Giovanni Bellini, Verrocchio, Mantegna, Botticelli, Palma Vecchio, Veronese, Roger van der Weyden, Lucas Cranach.

Steinberg's account of a fascinating "oversight" in modern art history is as original in its concept as his scholarship is thorough. He evinces a complete sense of the reciprocity, mutuality and necessity shaping the twin-Christ in his dualistic gestalt: as the natural man *and* mysterious presence as he was then understood by the clergy and interpreted by artists. The nature of Steinberg's subject is absolutely central to Christian beliefs and art. It is for these reasons that his brilliant essay may well be counted among the small handful of most important studies in Renaissance iconography done in the past fifty years. Art historians and critics are cautioned to keep their eyes wide open, lest they again be caught seeing only half the evidence in plain view on the canvas.

In his introduction to Bradley Smith's sampler of *Erotic Art* Henry Miller opines that "even in 'obscene' works of art we look for the touch of the master."<sup>16</sup> An so it is, from the cheerful sexuality of Thomas Rowlandson, the allegorical eroticism of Chasseriau and Ingres, the great Realists' (Daumier, Courbet) uncompromising robustness all the way to Mel Ramos's fastidious "*Touch Boucher* —" Ursula Andress straddling a sofa Bridget Murphy-style — and Allan Jones's pneumatic, streamlined and lacquered lovelies: the artists keep a taut balance between the subject — sexuality — and art — control of line, management of color, perfection of composition, command of design, aesthetic order. Unfortunately, this cannot be claimed for all works shown here, as all the brilliant Watteaus, Lautrecs, Groszs, and Segals, etc. are interspersed with a lot of inferior material, including cursory cartoons and caricatures of doubtful aesthetic merit. This uneven collection, for all its valuable parts, is further imbalanced by the inclusion of a small number of excellent but arbitrarily chosen erotica from China, Mongolia, India, and Japan. A cornucopia of erotica in a high gloss coffee table book is Smith's second entry in the amatory art book sweepstakes.<sup>17</sup> By keeping his terse commentaries to a minimum, his companion volume leaves all the more room for pictures. His selection of artists is subjective but lively while his groupings of works into chapters is,

in his own words, "arbitrary." The reproductions are of excellent quality and range from the best in the genre to doubtful specimens. Among the former: Picasso, Kitaj, Dix, Grosz, Ishimoto, Fuchs, Schiele, Rouault, Wunderlich, Grützke, Delvaux, Rauchenberg, Ramos, Lindner, Wesselman, Ernst, Bellmer, Calder, Cillero. Among women artists: Tice, Fini, Manning Heard, Edelheit, Frank. Among the more hopelessly scurrilous: Horst Jansson, Larry Rivers, Giger, Mead, and Bona (Madame Andre Pierye de Mandiargues). A self-confessional little essay by Henry Miller complements the brief yet mature and worldly text portions. In offering this unabashed book to the public, Smith follows his own critical advice: "There is nothing abstract about erotic art. The artist is out to define male and female sexuality; the subjects are recognizable. The surface scene may be as thin as ice, but down below the sexual fires burn brilliantly. The viewer may wonder what the artist means but he never has to ask what the painting is about."<sup>18</sup> *D'accord; einverstanden.*

Peter Webb's *The Erotic Arts* appears to be the most complete and authoritative scholarly survey of the erotic arts available in a single, inexpensive volume.<sup>19</sup> By and large, Webb succeeds in organizing a vast amount of heterogeneous elements making up the social, psychological, political, historical, and aesthetic sum-total of the subject. And he does so, for the most part, succinctly, in some detail and in logically ordered fashion. Assisted by several other scholars who examine discrete sub-parts of the unwieldy material — e.g., "Sexual Themes in Ancient and Primitive Art," "Decadent Art," "Erotic Themes in Victorian Literature," "Eros and Surrealism," "Eroticism in the Performing Arts," etc. — Webb paints a colossal panorama, revealed in the arts, of sexuality, the most abiding and universal human concern and preoccupation. He does so with equal emphasis in the areas of art, literature, the performing arts, including opera, dance, music, and theater, and the popular film, photographic and print media.

The geographic range of the book is mondial and includes the primitive and ancient cultures, the classical world, the leading schools of the Orient, and Western art from the Middle Ages to the twentieth-century. As to the latter, the author is to be congratulated for having turned up some surprisingly frank erotica by, among others, A. Carracci, Parmigianino, Giovanni Battista del Porto, Jacoppo de Barberini, Hans Baldung Grien, A. Coypel, Boucher, Fuseli, Turner, and Ingres. Special sections in the appendix treat of such matters as erotic literature in the Renaissance, restricted collections in England, interviews with artists (Bellmer, Allen Jones, Hockney, Moore), censorship in the cinema, and an excursus on the cultural trends of the erotic in recent years. In yet another section, Webb argues against censorship while contending that, apart from art, pornography has its own distinct merits and socially redeeming features and should be accessible to those whom it gratifies. While there is little to disagree with on that count, Webb's insistence on dealing with pornography right alongside art blurs the issue of the distinction of the two and confuses the reader about the author's aesthetic standards. The critically annotated bibliography with its

close to 700 entries (ca. 380 in art) also reaches for inclusiveness.

While this important book is conscientiously researched, massively documented and of huge informational value — the 19 page index aids in this regard, one nonetheless feels as though Webb would have been more comfortable compiling an encyclopedia, preferably one of several volumes, to satisfy his penchant for completeness, rather than writing a conventional monograph. The actual result is a hybrid between these two forms, satisfying the full requirements of neither. Because only 122 pages are devoted to Western art (only 31 to the whole of the Orient), the text is pockmarked by important omissions and can, therefore, hardly be considered adequate or thorough art history even by the standards of a “rapid survey.” On the other hand, due to his insistence on giving it its day in the sun, pornography permeates the whole texture of the book. Of course, its coverage can hardly be considered exhaustive to a degree that the systematic, multi-volumed and well illustrated encyclopaedic *Sittengeschichten* seem to be.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, his selections from literature and the performing arts, etc., suffer from an even greater degree of arbitrariness than his choices in art and pornography. And then, there is the quality of the picture material chosen for inclusion. For someone who constantly criticizes other authors for the poor quality of their plates and their foggy aesthetic horizons, Webb’s book, for all its excellent choices, is also weighted by merely occasional works, Kitsch, near-trash, or just junk.

In his zeal to dignify with deep sociological undercurrents perfectly straight forward depictions of sexuality, or to detect, due to his apparent lack of familiarity with the subject, subliminal eroticism in trivial illustrations, Webb sometimes overreaches. For example, why try to explain a perfectly innocuous offset from a German children’s advent calendar (1971), where a little girl in a forest, in the company of gnomes and cuddly cartoon-like animals, collects a shower of gold coins in her apron as a “conscious or subconscious...reference to the Danae legend”?<sup>21</sup> According to a popular fairy tale — *Die Geschichte von den Sternthalern* — Zeus had definitely not targeted the poor waif for rape. She merely wished to reap the largesse of a kindly universe for her moral goodness. In short, Webb reconstructs a historically (and *volksmündlich*) “deconstructed” tale achieving reverse though, in this case, perverse meanings. Webb’s book may lack a distinct focus, be scattershot in its approach and organization, random in its inclusiveness, inconsistent in its aesthetic standards, and suffer from occasional lapses of good judgement and even from inaccuracies. Yet it is still the most comprehensive modern study of its kind and deserves full credit for boldness, imagination and industry. In the past, the nude and erotic art, if they were touched on at all in the general literature on art, have always been dealt with as a “delicate” subject for discrete handling. While relevant college texts are still innocent of the topic’s immense ramifications, a great many frank and forthright “trade” books have appeared in the last dozen years that have, for the first time, shown a glimpse of the vast dimensions of the subject in the history of art and the contemporary art scene. In the process, art historians and critics have embroiled the subject in vir-

tually all phases of methodology: aesthetics informed by psychology (e.g., Clark), cultural anthropology (Grant), social history (Lorenzoni), iconology (Lucie-Smith), psychology/sociology (the Kronhausens), social art history (Webb), etc. (Amazingly, Marxist art critics in East Germany have even asserted that art based on free imagination, including sexual fantasy, is a legitimate form of social realism. Its presence signals socialist mental health and its cathartic benefits serve as a psychopolitical weapon against capitalism. By repressing the erotic in art the bourgeoisie suppresses the economic and political well-being of society at large.) No doubt, the next phase will be the deeper involvement of the topic in deconstructivism, a process that has already begun in earnest. Can a return to old fashioned idealism *à la* Samuel Alexander be far off?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Recently, Timothy J. Clark (*The Painting of Modern Life*; Princeton University Press, 1984) has reinvigorated the debate about nudity in art; his revisionist (Marxism-inspired) art history interprets the nude as "barometer" of the social, economic and political "temperature" of nineteenth-century France (compare below, footnote 7).

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Clark, *The Nude, A Study in Ideal Form* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), notes, bibliography, index, pp. 575.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Clark, *Feminine Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1980), index, pp. 199.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Grant, *Eros in Pompeii, The Secret Rooms of the National Museum of Naples* (New York: Bonanza Books, Crown Publications, Inc., 1982), bibliography, pp. 170.

<sup>5</sup>Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, *The Complete Book of Erotic Art*, Volumes 1 and 2 (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1978), index, pp. 312 + 270.

<sup>6</sup>Kronhausen, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>East German art critics actually apply that lesson of liberation in an ironic twist of history and logic. For the radical turnabout in the aesthetic climate of East Germany in the late 1970s—the spectacular shift from the frugality, sobriety and "production" orientation of the "old" Social Realism to the total license and (seemingly) unrestricted personal freedom of the "new" — see Gunther Grass, Uwe M. Schneede, a.o., *Zeitvergleich, Malerei und Graphic aus der DDR*, catalogue (Hamburg: Verlag Gruner and Jahr, n.d.g. — [1982]).

<sup>8</sup>A minimal list of foremost twentieth-century women artists favoring the art of nudes and the erotic in painting and graphics should include Blok\*, Edelheit, Fini, Frank, Fried\*, Golden, Greene, Grete, Grossman, Havers, Heard\*, Hunter, Iannone\*, Manner, Martinez, Mayer-Erlebacher\*, Marisol\*, McIlvan\*, Neel, Nessim\*, O'Keefe\*, Persson, Piccini, Polk, Sakel\*, Semmel\*, Sleight\*, Sutton, Tanning\*, Tice\*, Tyrell, Wegener, Wilke (\* = American).

<sup>9</sup>Piero Lorenzoni, *French Eroticism, The Joy of Life* (New York: Cresecent Books, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1984), pp. 104.

<sup>10</sup>Webb (see below), p. 525.

<sup>11</sup>Edward Lucie-Smith, *Eroticism in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), bibliography, index, pp. 287.

<sup>12</sup>Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Body, Images of the Nude* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), pp. 176.

<sup>13</sup>For additional insightful reading and good plates on the erotic productions of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists including Grosz, Dix, Wilhelm Ohm, Karl Hubbuch, Rudolf Schlichter, and Christian Schad see Gregory Hedberg, Peter Selz, and others, *German Realism of the Twenties; The Artists as Social Critic*, catalogue (Minneapolis: The Minneapolis Art Institute, 1980).

<sup>14</sup>Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1983), bibliography, index.

<sup>15</sup>Steinberg, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>Bradley Smith, *Erotic Art of the Masters, the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries* (La Jolla, California: Gemini-Smith, Inc., n.d.g.), bibliography, index, pp. 206.

<sup>17</sup>Bradley Smith, *Twentieth Century Masters of Erotic Art* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1980), bibliography, index, pp. 222.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Peter Webb, *The Erotic Arts*, new edition (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1983), bibliography, index, pp. 569.

<sup>20</sup>For example, those by E. Fuchs, G. J. Witkowski, H. M. Hyde, I. Bloch.

<sup>21</sup>Webb, pp. 128-129.





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