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From "catop-tricks" to "Cliff Dwellings": the Art of Barbara Kasten

James R. Hugunin

> We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building.
> —Martin Heidegger

> How I build and what I do with the vocabulary of the building are not purely aesthetic questions; they are also political statement, class identifications; they are involved in power relations.
> —David Kolb

> The appetite for architecture today ... must be an appetite for something else. I think it is an appetite for photography: what we want to consume today are not the buildings themselves, which you scarcely even recognize as you round the freeway. ... many are the Postmodern buildings that seem to have been designed for photography, where alone they flash into brilliant existence and actuality with all the phosphorescence of the high-tech orchestra on CD. ... All the more so is this true with color photography, where a new set of libidinal forces comes into play so that it is no longer even the building that is now consumed, having itself become a mere pretext for the intensities of the color stock and the gloss of the stiff paper.
> —Frederic Jameson

I

In his classic text on modern art, H.H. Arnason stresses the early Modernists' progressive movement from figuration toward increasing abstraction. Cited are Mondrian's formal experiments with trees, such as *The Red Tree* (1908) and *Flowering Apple Tree* (1912); discussed are Henri Matisse's four great bas-reliefs, *Backs I - IV* (1909-1914), and his sculpted portrait series of Jeanne Vaderin, *Jeanette I - V* (1910-1911). Of the latter, Arnason comments that Matisse, "worked from his imagination

in a progressive process of cubist simplification and transformation of the human head, first into an expressionist study exaggerating all the features and then into a geometric organization of features in the mass of the head."[1] Barbara Kasten's photographic art has, over the past fifteen years, reversed this course. Instead of moving from expressive figuration of concrete entities toward greater abstraction, Kasten's work has shifted from pure abstraction toward greater expressive figuration, and what is figured is something quite concrete, a specific place, or *dwelling* in Martin Heidegger's sense of the term. A discussion about place involves the notion of identity of self or of community and, hence, brings us into contact with two key questions of our Postmodern times: what is the self? and what is community? Kasten's work has evolved from a concern exclusively with form and process into a concern with a definition of places that can help define forms of life.

II

Kasten herself has changed communities during her career, having moved from the flat spaces of Southern California to the vertical orientation of New York. In Los Angeles, she originally studied painting and textiles, her eye becoming trained to appreciate the intricacies of two-dimensional design: shape, color, line, pattern, and juxtaposition. Her cameraless photographic work during the mid to late 1970s—often cyanotype photo-grams—she referred to as "photogenic drawings" after the name given such contact-printed "shadow" imagery by photographic experimenter William Henry Fox Talbot in the 1830s. Rather than an optical, *trompe l'oeil* rendition of the visible world, these pieces suggest the mentalist realm of pure idea. In *Untitled, (77/2)* (photogenic drawing, cyanotype with pastel, 29 x 41 inches, 1977), Kasten produced a linear image that looks very much like an abstruse geometric proof, or a two-dimensional projection of a curious three-dimensional box that has been unfolded and spread flat before us. The precise geometry of this image contrasts with the actual rents and frays in the gauzy surface of the material support itself; this is the obverse of the straight photograph where the image appears "real" and the support seems wholly "transparent." This body of work was, in general, resonate with the process-oriented, anti-purist "synthetic" photography generated on the West Coast since the mid 1960s and particularly strong during the 1970s. Specifically, the work recalls fellow Los Angeles artist Susan Rankaitas's photographically-derived abstractions; even Rankaitas's work from the late 1980s shifts enough to appear similar to Kasten's architectural photographs (viz. *Blade Wing*, 1987-1989). Kasten's abstracts at this stage in her *œuvre* were firmly rooted in a striving for Modernist innovation of form, albeit critical of the narrowly constructed Szarkowskian version of

photographic Purism/Modernism which fetishized the "intelligent eye" of the photographer.

In the early 1980s Kasten exchanged fabrics for fabricated sets, Modernist innovation for Postmodernist pastiche. Now an optically true, one-point perspective projection of a constructed scene was recorded on film, but that *mise en scène* remained "abstract." I qualify the word with quotation marks for Kasten's lens-formed imagery are optically "realistic" renditions of an "already-existing" style of early Modernist abstraction which she constructs in a room-size space filled with objects and mirrors. The variously-shaped mirrors are placed on the floor to reflect colored geometric forms, wires, and Erector Set-like constructions that are tacked to, or hanging from, walls and ceiling. At times, the fabricated-to-be-photographed sets would be exhibited along with their smaller two-dimensional counterparts. This permitted the viewer to observe how selective and transformative the camera could be *vis-à-vis* the "profilmic"[2] devices set before it. This work, coming after the West Coast proliferation of "photography into sculpture," inverted the direction of that process to "sculpture into photography."

Of this body of Polacolor ER prints, critic/historian Estelle Jussim writes: "They are theatre, sculpture, painting, light play—all masquerading as photographs. They are obsessively perfect, complex, imaginative yet completely controlled."[3] They are also quotations; viewing them one immediately sees reflections of French Modernist Florence Henri's arranged photographic abstractions (viz., *Abstract Composition*, 1929), Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, El Lissitzky's *Constructivist Prouns*, and Paul Outerbridge Jr.'s commercial color work (viz., *Images of Deauville*, c. 1936 and *Political Thinking*, 1938). For instance, *Construct LB/6* (1982)—with its symmetry, equilibrium, and polarity based on the theme and variations of triangles formed by wires, struts, and mirrors—is quite Constructivist in its assertion of sculptural space and rational production; *Construct LB/4* of the same year quotes the De Stijl palette of primary hues and neutrals, commenting on that style's linear parsimony and grim assertion of the grid by wittily skewing perfect Mondrian orthogonality by her choice of oblique camera angles that induce optical "keystoning" of parallel lines. Nevertheless, Kasten's pastiches still assert, albeit self-consciously, the Modernist tenets of plastic expression as espoused by Mondrian:

> a) in plastic art reality can be expressed only through the equilibrium of *dynamic movements* of form and color;
> b) pure means afford the most effective way of attaining this.[4]

But Kasten plays an "endgame" strategy: she merely "comments upon," plays again for a knowing audience, Modernist abstraction's original task,

that of creating a correspondence between outer and inner in the ideal space of one's contemplating consciousness (i.e., shape = feelings). These realistically-rendered abstractions only echo the motions of the inmost self as it uses pared-down forms of the visible world to express itself; they are simulated echoes produced for an audience already able to grasp Modernist codes, but unable to attain with conviction the universal contemplative position originally asserted within Modernist discourse.

In summary, these works were realized through contemporary photography's widespread practice of profilmic fabrication, a strategy earlier at the service of a formalist ploy to problematize scale and make space ambiguous or contradictory, but more recently at the service of a rational space containing more determinate objects and situations. They were a reaction against photography's penchant for capturing a slice of the "social reality," passing beyond photography's current dilemma over the plethora of "existing familiar subject matter" by exercising a Postmodernist penchant for pastiche;[5] they gradually progress from abstract, ideal space toward a sense of place as Kasten begins to include suggestions of architecture detail (e.g., a column) in her scenography. Transitional works, these later studio set-ups segue into Kasten taking as her subject architecture itself and as her studio the surroundings of the buildings she records.

III

The majority of Kasten's work exhibited at Loyola University's Fine Arts Gallery, Edward Crown Center, in Chicago (October - November 1987) extended her past interests with constructed, abstract environments into actual architectural spaces. Often the buildings she photographs are associated with either high culture or high finance, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the World Financial Center in New York. An exception is Loyola's Art Deco Madonna della Strada Chapel photographed in the summer of 1990; the latter, a spiritual place, is a transitional work bridging the photographs of the earlier secular architectural sites and those later of the sacred Pueblo sites. In the series "Architectural Sites," documentation and fabulation are more inextricably, and interestingly, bound together. Large Cibachrome prints (50 x 60 inches is the largest) replace the smaller Polacolors; their coloration, more saturated than the earlier "Constructs," relies to a greater extent on vivid artificial lighting filtered through colored gels than the color of the object *per se*. This is no small lighting task; during the shoot of the Madonna della Strada Chapel as many as fifty tungsten lights, with wattages up to 10,000, were managed by twelve technicians under Kasten's direction, while large mirrors were inserted at specific points in the composition to reflect different surfaces and colors (a video

tape of the shoot documents this lengthy procedure and is shown along with the final photographs). Color becomes less an inherent quality of objects as in earlier work (yet Kasten must pay careful attention to the nature of the reflectances of the surfaces she directs the light upon) and becomes a floating signifier within the architectural space, which takes on a highly theatricalized appearance. Whereas the color schemes of Kasten's "Constructs" series are, on the whole, balanced, those of the "Architectural Sites" are discordant, saturated, and make use of simultaneous contrast; there is often a Veronesian intoxication with intense, iridescent hues.

In the former series, the subjective element dominates as the photographer shapes both construction and her photograph of it. In the latter series, however, the photographer must confront a more recalcitrant subject—a building—and can only subdue it to suit her vision within the limits the architecture and the site permits. Her architectural subjects—"already-existing" designs like her citations from the history of Modernist painting—glint and gleam, and fracture (via selective reflection) the surrounding space. Meanwhile, Kasten's theatrical lighting casts a spectrum of highlights from acid yellow through madder orange to magenta and Venetian red, and shadows that secrete malachite green, indigo blue, and topaz. One marvels at the ability of a photographic emulsion to render such seductive hues (see Jameson quote in this essay's epigraph).

In keeping with her earlier formal ploys, coherent architectural space has here been rendered less certain, a bit less "rational" than would appear in the model or an architectural drawing. Optical trickery, via dioptrics and catoptrics, takes apart and reassembles the architecture and its surrounds. What Vincent Leo in the mid 1980s did to Robert Frank's photographs from *The Americans* (1959)—cut-up and reassemble them to form a single image—Kasten's does to major architectural sites through purely optical means. This manipulation and its effects upon the architectural site as now experienced through Kasten's intervention is especially pronounced in *Architectural Site 4—July 10, 1986, E.F. Hutton Building* (37 x 28 inches, 1986), where the image simultaneously retreats and comes forward: the site appears to recede in space, yet the dominant hues—red, magenta, and yellow-orange—are warm colors that advance toward the viewer, an advance underscored by an arrow-shaped mirror that points toward the print's viewer, even as the arrow's rectangular stem suggests spatial recession by "keystoning" away from the viewer. Just off dead-center, at the point of greatest spatial recession, a trapezoidal shape glows the brightest yellow-orange, advancing aggressively back out of that space toward the viewer. To achieve this and other spatial aporias, Kasten has her assistants cut large variously-shaped mirrors (one circular

mirror measured twelve feet in diameter) and fit them into her visual scenarios at the specific sites she photographs—gargantuan "catop-tricks" which turn specific, functional architectural spaces into a hyperreal optical sensoriums more concrete than her "Constructs" abstractions, but less specific than her Pueblo sites in the "Cliff Dwellings" series that follows.

In "Architectural Sites," modern building construction, so universally conditioned by optimized technology, has been further altered by optimized photographic technology. Kasten provides these sites, multi-million dollar paeans to the status quo, with a compensatory facade, an aesthetic front that cosmeticizes what is already a cosmetic face-lift of the corporate image by the building's architect. A masterly expression of painterly form and color—translated through photographic technology into a smooth, flat surface—results in a "real life" scene being transformed into a scenography cut free from its physical and socio-political moorings. This placelessness was reiterated and emphasized when Kasten used one of these sites as a *mise en scène* for a dance performance she choreographed and scored to the sounds of bells *recorded at various locales around the globe*. The original site, capable of being experienced daily by the public—"the space of human appearance," Hannah Arendt terms it—is globalized, transformed into a fugitive stage-set that simultaneously reveals Kasten's "private" visions and aestheticizes powerful economic and cultural institutions. These fabulated scenarios result in images that embody two of Jean Baudrillard's three modalities of simulation:

> I. The deconstruction of the real into details ... flattening, linearity and seriality of the partial objects.
> II. The endlessly reflected vision: all the games of duplication and reduplication of the object in detail.[6]

Thus, specific architectural sites are changed, despite the identifying titles, into a general placelessness that seems less a Platonic ideal and more like our current "Postmodern Condition," in which we, instead of inventing new styles, "maneuver the pieces of the old to express and undermine their unities."[7] In terms of architecture, Charles Moore has expressed this historical moment in relation to personal housing, remarking that:

> Easy travel, books, glossy magazines, films, and television have revealed an almost unlimited array of styles our own houses might embody. ... In the absence of dreams all choices are reduced to pseudo-choices, no significant choices at all.[8]

It is this absence of dreams that Kasten later addresses in the "Cliff Dwellings" series (1990).

The aesthetic ideal of the geometric ordering of space—in prisms, straight lines, and circles, the emphasis on the profile against the sky (as once espoused by Le Corbusier and other International Style architects)—is taken to a second-order (metacommentarial) level in Kasten's "Architectural Sites" where it is both challenged and celebrated. The unifying discourse of architectural Modernism is variously refracted as it filters through the artist's reflections on the history of forms. But one may argue that this style-scavenging vision, although it strives to achieve the ideal of universal beauty, actually reflects our compensatory attempts to cope with our worrisome experience of a decentering, post-industrial society steeped in simulation and suffering a legitimation crisis in its cultural, political, and economic spheres. For instance, a large cosmeticized re-vision of Los Angeles's elite Postmodernist Museum of Contemporary Art, *Architectural Site 10*, emphatically repeats in its composition pyramidal shapes, suggesting a celebratory theme and variation on signifiers of aesthetic and institutional hierarchy and stability—this at a time when such hierarchy is challenged, when such stability totters. The myriad of mirrors Kasten employs provides the viewer with a diversity of perspectives on the site, suggesting that our identities are plural and excessive, but the incisive compositions unify this plurality within the scope of a private vision. These are, then, conflicted compositions that are attempting to come to grips with the problem of place and our place inside that place, a conflict displaced from the external world onto the textual, that is, into Kasten's enormously seductive prints. Her "Cliff Dwellings" is an attempt to resolve that conflict by an appeal to mystical notions of place whereby "*every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model.*"[9]

IV

In Kasten's "Cliff Dwellings" series shown at Chicago's Ehlers-Caudill Gallery (November - December 1990), pastiche and the catoptric fabrication employed in her previous photographs vanish. This exhibition of nine 30 x 40 inch Cibachromes followed closely upon a display a month previous at Loyola University's Fine Art Gallery. This earlier show contained selections from her "Constructs" series, but it mainly showcased *Architectural Site 21* (1990), her large Cibachrome print of the Madonna della Strada Chapel (Andrew Rebori, architect). Along with the display of this print Kasten hung still photographs, a video tape describing the complex process of photographing the chapel, and a four-color poster from the 4 x 5 inch transparency she took of the chapel, including the display of the various stages of printing this offset lithograph. In addition, Kasten permitted viewers to glimpse a few prints from a new body of work shot (with permission of tribal authorities) at the Puyé Cliff Dwellings in New Mexico.

In the Ehlers-Caudill foyer, Kasten displayed the large print of the Madonna della Strada Chapel. The photograph, shot after her initial trip to New Mexico, functions as a bridge between her earlier transformations of Modern and Postmodern architectural sites and the more recent revisioning of Southwest Indian dwellings. Although belonging to her "Architectural Sites" series, this image of the chapel "already suggests an altered artistic vision"[10] characterizing her most recent work. Here the photographer only employed one mirror, reflecting nature—trees colored by spotlights with gels—rather than man-made forms. The overall transformation of the chapel is less fragmentary than seen in other "Sites" and, hence, is less disorienting. It is built upon the arcs and converging lines which appear to form the suggestions of the letters "B" and "V" of "Blessed Virgin" within the composition. The arcing forms of the chapel seem to emerge blossomlike from the large V-shape dominating the composition and they are framed so as to ascend as if steps from nature below (a nature reflected in a mirror below) to a higher realm (the smaller room of the chapel in the upper right of the frame). The color scheme runs from deep purple through cyan to magenta, the predominant hue being the blue associated with the Blessed Virgin's garment. Here Kasten's forms signify more the probity of a spiritual awakening and progression toward the transcendental, a unifying force, rather than merely a hedonistic delight in the varied offerings of a splendiferous visual *haute cuisine* suggestive of the delirium of today's plurality of language games and practices.

In selectively enframing this "temple" to the Blessed Virgin and in asking us to contemplate her sanctuary, Kasten's activity plays on two Latin terms: 1) *templum*—a sector carved out on earth and related to the heavens, a special place which can be seen from any point, and from which any point can be seen, that is, an *imago mundi* from which our word "temple" is derived; and, 2) *contemplari*—which is derived from the Latin *templum* and means a looking-at that sunders and compartmentalizes.[11] Thus, Kasten's dioptric and catoptric enframing of the chapel, made from a carefully chosen point of view, optically sunders the architectural space of a site that has already been sundered from the realm of the everyday and made into a sacred place. As such, this large print appropriately introduces the eight other photographs exhibited at Ehlers-Caudill whose subject was the ruins of sacred dwellings and kivas built by the ancestors of the Santa Clara (Tewa) Pueblo Indians and situated north of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The "Cliff Dwellings" series still expresses Kasten's interest in site and in geometry, but now weds these to an ancient cosmology that attaches great import to its geometrical orientation to dwelling: "*the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the*

World."[12] Her imagery redoubles the aura of the irruption of the sacred that results from detaching a territory from the surrounding milieu and making it qualitatively different. She accomplishes this by re-presenting such a sundering in photographic terms—the sundering produced by vantage point, frame, and detail—without using mirrors. Although architectural form is still the subject, it is now of things built in the past, of things build to be a form of "dwelling" in Martin Heidegger's sense of that term, rather than that of the *spatium* or *extensio* of mathematicians and geometers. As Heidegger states in his 1954 essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" (the absence of commas in Heidegger's title is meant to suggest the unity of these three elements):

> ... spaces receive their being from locations and not from 'space.' ... Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling.[13]

In his introduction to Heidegger's essays in *Poetry Language Thought* (1971), Albert Hofstadter explains Heidegger's point further:

> Language makes the connection for us: *bauen*, to build, connects with *buan*, to dwell, and with *bin*, *bist*, the words for be. ... If man's being is dwelling, and if man must look to the way the world fits together to find the measure by which he can determine his dwelling life, then man must dwell poetically.[14]

"If the world is to be lived," writes Mircea Eliade apropos the sacred sites Kasten was permitted to photograph, "it must be founded. ... The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world."[15] It is well known that the Pueblo dwellings and kivas have cosmogonic value rooted in ritual orientation, construction of sacred space, and color designation. Specifically, the location of Pueblo dwellings are viewed in Pueblo tradition as originary Places of Emergence of the tribe from the underworld:

> There may be as many Places of Emergence as there are Pueblos. In each case, it seems that when the people arrived at the surface of this world, they faced new dangers as they began a search for the Center Place of the Earth Navel, aided again by the supernatural, heroes, and animals. When the Center Place was finally located, it became the permanent home site of the group. Thus, every Pueblo may be a sacred site.[16]

From the Center Place of the Pueblo radiates two sets of quadrants: the cardinal directions of the compass—*Kikyami* (north), *Koami* (south),

Bunami (west), *Hanami* (east); and, another half-way between the first, an intercardinal quadrant; add to these the very significant zenith (The Above) and the nadir (The Below)—for this is how the Pueblo experience time, the world rolling like a hoop, head-over-heels in cycles.[17] At the extremes of these quadrants are situated the four sacred mountains, the sacred flat-top hills, and the four principle Shrines of the Directions. In addition, each point of the compass has its characteristic color, differing from tribe to tribe. In Tewa symbolism blue-green = north, red = south, yellow = west, east = white.[18] Significantly, these hues predominate in Kasten's stage-lighting of these ruins (generators were brought in to power the many lights). In addition, various aspects of the kiva have symbolic meaning: the kiva wall = the circle of the sky; the entry ladder = a rainbow connecting heaven and earth; and the four main roof beams = four sacred trees used by the ancient Pueblo people to climb up from the underworld. As in her "Architectural Sites," Kasten chooses to photograph a site already overlaid with the design of an architect—so her interpretation of that site becomes a second-order "aesthetic discourse" para(site)ic on the first—but rather than the rationality of contemporary building which is a self-assertive imposition of human will on things regardless of their own essential natures, Kasten here celebrates an intuitive mode of building rooted in the "fourfold of things," the notion that, "[b]y a *primal* oneness the four—earth and sky, divinities and mortals—belong together in one,"[19] which leads to a state where "poetically man dwells."[20]

The profane architecture she had previously photographed contained space that could be delimited as per the whim of architect and photographer. The Puyé ruins, however, are the result of a very different mode of sundering and, as such, demand a wholly different type of photographic "sundering" on the part of Kasten. Thus, the photographer eschews her "catop-tricks," reduces her palette to the hues of the Tewa color-coded coordinates, and more subtly, except in one instance, defamiliarizes her subject matter. The results are images that appear to intensify the mystical significance these locales already have for the Pueblo—they even beckon us to journey toward death and rebirth.

Kasten's installation of the Puyé photographs (all made in 1990) at Ehlers-Caudill was in two parts, running on opposite walls of the gallery space. To the left hung three prints on two adjoining walls; they introduced the site in general terms: 1) *First Light* simulates dawn at the site (actually, it was dusk) with a view toward a sacred mountain (possibly *Tsi'como*) as Kasten trains spotlights selectively across the dwellings, intensifying nature's own light; 2) *Axis Mundi*—in title, composition, and subject (a ladder, the rainbow linking heaven and earth)—evokes the cosmological image of the *universalis columna quasi*

sustinens omnis, that is, the pillar of the universe which supports all things and opens the road to the world of the gods (also known as Jacob's Ladder), the axis defining the Navel of the World;[21] 3) *The Cliffs* is a medium shot of the site and the closest in appearance to the artist's earlier treatment of modern architecture in its pronounced flattening of space, in its panoply of vivid color playing across the nightscape.

Catacorner to this array, five prints were positioned across two adjoining walls: 1) *Darkness* is a medium shot of the ruins that highlights the edge of a cliff dwelling, drawing attention to the steplike features of the structure silhouetted against a jet-black sky, black signifying for the Pueblo the originary darkness of chaos before the creation produced order; red-violet and blue gels light the scene, defining details by specific zones of applied light; 2) *Place* situates us just above the kiva, catching a glimpse of its inside, each zone of space glowing with unworldly, symbolic color; 3) *The Center* takes us down a ladder into the kiva itself, disorienting us spatially as it does so: Is this The Above or The Below? Are we facing the zenith where the sun reigns during the day, or aimed at the nadir in the earth's depths where the Pueblo once came and where they return upon death? All we know for certain is that we are situated at the Pueblo's Center Place, of which Eliade reminds us, "the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World."[22] Thus Kasten's positioning of her camera's eye, herself, and (by extension) us at this Navel of the Earth is a preparatory stage in this photographic journey in which one symbolically dies and is reborn into a new mystical awareness; 4) *The Breath of Death* finds Kasten including in her shot the projection of a distorted slide of a bony-white skeleton onto the irregular surface of an adobe wall, a surface "painted" deep blue by Kasten's light and breached by a hole filled with a yellowish hue; the skeleton may refer to *Masau'u*, or Skeleton Man, the Pueblo god of fertility and death who adopts various roles, such the trickster and the definer of boundaries (roles also played by Kasten as she photographs this site) and, finally, it is said that to look upon *Masau'u* is a portent of imminent death (at this time Kasten's father was dying);[23] thus, for Kasten, this projected skeleton man functions on several symbolic levels; 5) *Ruins*—a dark foreboding pervades the print—it is as if the night came out of the background and installed itself within the picture as the ruins of dwellings—shards of thought—array themselves gridlike across the nearly horizonless image in a crisscross of blue masses and white lines; the visual field is so defamiliarized one could be looking at a telescopic or a microscopic exaggeration of form; either way, the unrecognizability of the subject matter may be compared to what Aldous Huxley called a vision of the absolute "Things-in-Itselfhood," a transformation of the everyday that, Huxley notes, artists have accomplished with some regularity:

> Nature at the middle distance is familiar—so familiar that we are deluded into believing that we really know what it is all about. Seen very close at hand, or at a distance, or from an odd angle [or in tonal reversal, as seen in this print], it seems disquietingly strange, wonderful beyond all comprehension.[24]

This last print in the series is unique in Kasten's *œuvre*; it is, in fact, an angled-down view of the dwelling ruins that nearly eliminates the horizon line and relies on darkroom trickery for its effect: the black and white landscape *negative* (rather than color transparency) Kasten initially shot was printed through blue filtration onto Cibachrome paper, producing a direct positive (in this case, negative-to-negative) image in which the shadows remained white and the highlights took on a deep blue cast. In employing this tonally reversed artifically-colored print as a convention to signify the netherworld or altered-states of consciousness, Kasten follows a long line of photographic predecessors: Jean Cocteau, who used the effect to signify Hades in his film *Orphée* (1946); Clarence John Laughlin, who used negative imagery in his combination print *The Altar of Creation* (1959); Van Deren Coke, who equated spectral apparition and negative tones in *Ghost of Vogue* (1971); and, Jerry Uelsmann, who often employed the tonal reversal in his combination prints to suggest altered-states, as in the triptych *Reminiscing about the Future* (1972).

The complete sequence of Kasten's installation at Ehlers-Caudill takes the viewer in stages, via photographic conventions, from the specificity of locale—in which the *subject/object* split is maintained as *photographer/scene photographed*—toward the transfiguring vision of the mystical union between Self and Cosmos—where the *subject/object* dichotomy is symbolically merged through darkroom manipulation in the final print, resulting in the photographic *fusion* of terms that were earlier opposed: *photographer/scene photographed.* This represents a marked turning inward on Kasten's part, developing out of, but opposed in spirit to, her earlier "Constructs" and "Architectural Sites." In those earlier works, light both literally and figuratively reflected from surfaces—no emphasis on a "behind," "above," or "below"—all was mere fleeting appearance. In her "Cliff Dwellings," light is still literally being played across surfaces which reflect it, but it now *seems to be* emanating from within the objects in increasing degrees as we move through the sequence (something of this emanation of light, albeit in monochrome, may be seen in Richard Misrach's mystical-looking photographs constituting his 1976 Stonehenge series).

Although Kasten's aesthetic has concerned itself with building—whether in her earlier "Constructs," her "Architectural Sites," or her more recent "Puyé Cliff Dwellings"—she has moved from a materialist manifestation of the hyperreal (Postmodernist scenography) toward an

idealist symbolization of a spiritual "hyperreality." This is what Eliade terms more properly "hierophany," the manifestation of the sacred, a presencing around which the Pueblo have constructed their "dwelling" on this earth. If the experience of sacred space "makes possible the 'founding of the world'," [25] then Kasten can be seen as attempting to *situate* her aesthetic in this profound "dwelling" in two ways: 1) literally, by situating her camera *in situ* among the dwellings and sighting through it; and 2) metaphorically, by yoking the photographic act of sundering and delimiting (producing a pictorial formulation, *Bildung* in German) to Heidegger's special usage of the term:

> The nature of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locations by the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.* ... Here [lies] the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things.[26]

Consequently, if her earlier treatment of architecture was unwittingly complicitous with our placelessness—that Postmodern "discontinuous indeterminism" harped on by Jean Baudrillard—her newer work, absorbing the profound "situatedness" of the Pueblo, follows the spirit of Heidegger's metaphysical insights concerning the true dwelling where people must, in opposition to Baudrillard's nihilism, "ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell.*" [27]

The places Heidegger describes—in relation to proper dwelling in which space and man are mutually implicated with each other in a phenomenological sense—[28] are, as David Kolb in *Postmodern Sophistications* (1990) says, "intensely locale." (Kasten's earlier photographs are of sites suggesting universality, but the Puyé site is intensely local.) Heidegger's examples of dwelling places are "all contained within mountain valleys that provide natural limits and centers." (Kasten's Puyé site is such a place.) Such places, concludes Kolb, "encompass the whole of life of their inhabitants"; they "are not domestic enclaves, but whole, though qualitatively distinct, worlds." [29]

Like Heidegger, Kasten suggests that natural archetypes can guide our building/*Bildung*; like Heidegger's thinking, Kasten's art privileges meditation, not dialogue; like Heidegger, Kasten seeks a true home for us where some inner harmony with our true self-identity and deepest needs will be achieved. This profoundly contests the deconstructionist notion of place. Kolb explains: "For Derrida and others the desire to be at home in a place is an attempt to close the gap between us and some centering values and ways of life, as if we could overcome the distantiations and divergencies [sic] that make it possible for us to have a way of life at

all."[30] As Kolb notes: "There is no way to embody the center, which is always deferred; the indwelling center has always no longer been where it was supposed to be. The unity of dwelling escapes us."[31] In other words, Kasten's photographic visions must remain just that, dreams of place, that in reality we can only inhabit by dancing "on the borders of the almost-places we have."[32] If we are to actually address the concept of place in, as Paolo Portoghesi put it, a "world now emerging [that] is searching freely in memory, because it knows how to find its own 'difference' in the removed repetitions and utilization of the entire past,"[33] the artist today must offer us more than archetypal guidance. There is no longer any unified mode of dwelling (despite what Heidegger hopes) waiting to be uncovered, but neither must we be content with our social inhabitation becoming (as Kasten's "Architectural Sites" suggests) a commodified simulacrum of itself. Perhaps photographically interpreting the various designers and architect's models for alternative modes of housing for the "homeless" (read, the "evicted") would be a start.[34]

Notes

1 H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), 116-117.
2 The word is taken from film theorist Christian Metz and refers to all that exists in front of the camera prior to exposure.
3 Estelle Jussim, *Constructs* (Boston: Polaroid Corp., 1985), n.p.
4 Piet Mondrian, cited in Arnason, 235.
5 The phrase was coined by Los Angeles artist Jerry McMillan in the 1970s to describe the exhaustion of photography's traditional subject matter, and prefigured the interest in rephotography so popular today.
6 Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra," *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), 144.
7 David Kolb, *Postmodern Sophistications: Philosophy, Architecture, and Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 100.
8 Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, and Donolyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses* (New York: Holt, 1974), 132.
9 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and the World, Inc., 1959), 45.
10 Abigail Foerstner, "Photography: Barbara Kasten finds the mystical in ancient cliff dwellings," *Chicago Times*, sect. 7 (Nov. 11, 1990): 95.
11 Martin Heidegger, "Science and Reflection," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 95.
12 Eliade, 43.
13 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry Language Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 154.
14 Albert Hofstadter, "Introduction," *Poetry Language Thought*, op. cit., xiv.
15 Eliade, 22.
16 Jerry J. Brody, *The Anasazi* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 67.
17 Hamilton A. Tyler, *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 173.
18 Brody, 117.
19 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 149.
20 Hofstadter, "Introduction," xiv.
21 For an elaboration on the *axis mundi* see Eliade, 35-37.
22 Eliade, 43.

23 Tyler, 3-5
24 Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), 83.
25 Eliade, 63.
26 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 160.
27 Ibid., 161.
28 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 156, writes: "space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. ... Even when we relate ourselves to those things that are nor in our immediate reach, we are staying with the things themselves."
29 Kolb, 151.
30 Ibid., 156.
31 Ibid., 156.
32 Ibid., 157.
33 Paola Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 13.
34 An exhibition of such proposals, models, and documentary photographs of the, often, prefabricated constructions was shown at Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery in the Fall of 1991.

Reflections on/of Richard Estes

Matthew Baigell

> Nothing is certain in this Postmodern age.
>
> —Buck Browning
> Colorado River Raftsman
> July 5, 1991

This was the last thing I expected to hear after shooting another rapid at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Unaccountably, or perhaps because I had not looked in a mirror during the previous week and because the raft had just floated over a glass-smooth stretch of water before entering a particularly turbulent part, I thought immediately of those paintings by Richard Estes which show a sheet of window glass parallel to the picture plane, those paintings in which you can see through the glass—often into a luncheonette interior—as well as what is reflected on the glass behind you. I thought about why these works had not been accepted into the discourse on contemporary art even though, despite traditional use of paint on canvas, they reveal various Postmodern qualities. Although I was travelling light, I had, evidently, brought all my baggage with me.

Let's call them the window paintings. Estes painted about thirty of them from 1967 until the mid 1970s.[1] They are, to my mind, his strongest and most important work and warrant serious and sustained consideration. Of all his works, these are the most interesting to speculate about and the paintings which raise the most unanswerable questions.

They are usually frontal, or, at least, the glass window is frontal and extends most of the width of the canvas. Often a bit of the street before the window is shown. As you look through the window you can make out interior forms and objects such as countertops and stools (or whatever the interior is used for) and walls sometimes covered with shiny, reflective mirror-like materials. As you look *at* the window, you see reflections of the street behind you—streets both parallel and perpendicular to the window and therefore to the picture plane, signs, and writing which appear mirror-imaged in reverse, and bare traces of people walking, their shadows falling on the window or on objects within the interior. Because the perspective behind the viewer is the reverse of that within the interior,

the further you peer or seem to peer into the interior, the more distant you see what is behind you. That is, at the same time that you see most deeply into the interior, you also see what is most distant behind you. Without turning your head, you can see what is both in front of you and what is over your shoulder. This means that projected space merges with reflected space. What you are looking at and what is behind you are both superimposed and juxtaposed.

What you do not see is an image of yourself standing in front of and staring at the window, or, with the exception of *Double Self-Portrait* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), can you find an image of Estes standing in your place or next to you. (In *Double Self-Portrait* he appears twice—once full-length in the window reflection standing passively next to a camera on a tripod and once, bust-length, reflected in a mirror-like surface within the interior.[2]) In the transference of the image from his photographs to the painting, he and/or we have been painted out.

Estes has not been helpful in explaining these works. Like other photo-realists, his comments about his art have been consistently deadpan. He chooses to paint city scenes, he said, because he lived in a city (New York City). "You look around and paint what you see." Concerning reflections, he found them to be "rather rich and exciting—and stimulating to do." They opened, he thought, possibilities. His elaboration of this point indicates that his concerns were purely formal ones: "the eye tends to focus either on the reflection or on the interior, but both can be painted with equal emphasis." He largely omitted figures from these works because the viewer might begin "relating to the figures and it's an emotional relationship. The painting becomes too literal whereas without the figure it's more purely a visual experience."[3]

Just how much a visual experience he intended the paintings to be and by extension the city itself can be suggested by comparing Estes' thoughts with those of Edward Hopper. Their interest in light was similar. Hopper once said, "maybe I'm not very human. What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house."[4] Estes said "I've always considered light to be the real subject of painting."[5] But they part company in what light was to illuminate and in their responses to it. Hopper, describing as much his work as Charles Burchfield's, asked of the later's studies of buildings, "is it not the province of work such as Burchfield's to render to us the sensations that form, color, and design refuse to reveal when used exclusively as an aim in themselves, and which works fail to encompass?"[6] By contrast, Estes denies to his work emotional content by insisting "I don't think my paintings have much emotion. They are rather straight forward."[7] And Estes, rather than allowing his buildings and street scenes to suggest meaning beyond even the use of language to describe any mood they might suggest, prefered to

keep the visual separate from the emotional. "Even though you might have these ugly structures, nasty, smelly cars and dirty streets, when you look at it all as a picture you don't think of that: you look at it as visual organization. In a way this is the real abstraction—to abstract the visual from the reality and just look at that without the emotion within the subject."[8] Estes wanted as few mediating agents as possible, even language, to stand between the viewer and the works. "I just feel that this is the way I want the paintings to look. ... I don't think about those things because they're just words. Language is a very limited and flimsy thing."[9]

Estes clearly rejected narrativity, despite his multiplication of and apparently intense regard for details. Even his insistence on maintaining a clear focus on all objects revolves around his desire to deny narrative meaning. He has reasoned that if some objects were fuzzy and out-of-focus, the viewer would be directed to look at what was in focus. This would make "very specific what you are supposed to look at, and I try to avoid saying that. I want you to look at all. Everything is in focus."[10] He emphasized his denial of any sort of hierarchy of forms, or, to say it differently, he emphasized his desire for an impartial all-overness of effect and of object definition when he said "I don't think I've ever done a painting looking at it as a whole. Most of my paintings are worked out as details, and I can only hope that the whole thing comes together. But I can't deal with it all at once."[11]

What this seems to mean is that Estes is really not concerned with any sort of story line and that on a formal level he wants at the same time fragmentation and wholeness, multiplicity and unity, and that he cannot be held accountable for a painting's ultimate order. "I can only hope the whole thing comes together." His disinclination to accept final responsibility is not unlike his ambiguous statements concerning his own intentions. On the one hand he once indicated that his goal was "only to set down on canvas or paper what was before me."[12] On the other hand, he has indicated that when working from photographs, he selects, adds, subtracts, and imitates, since he wants the painting to be more like the place than the photographs of it. He wants more than what the photographs can offer.[13] And what could Estes possibly mean, in view of the sometimes unresolvable complexities of forms and space in the window paintings when he says "in art you have to introduce structure, so we can see in an ordered way because that is what we get satisfaction from."[14]

Other questions that can be raised without knowing where the answers lie include: is he really that disassociated from the narrative content of his work? is vision the only narrative? is his insistence on formal qualities a way to assert himself as a painter despite his photographic sources? has he painted himself and his camera out of the picture for the same reason? does he use the paint medium as a way or reasserting himself as an artist

in the creative process? why does he insist on using an old-fashioned medium, painting, to imitate the look of a modern medium, photography? On a different level, we might ask are these the quintessential contemporary urban paintings of the urban person literally absorbed and swallowed up by the overwhelming proliferation of objects and sights of the city? has the urban person literally disappeared—a disembodied substance—into the forms of the city, no longer able to do much of anything but focus intently and obsessively on a tightly controlled range of forms and not even be able fully to comprehend these spatially?

No doubt, there are other questions to be raised, but rather than ask more questions, or try to suggest answers to them, which would only raise more questions, I would rather consider the works in regard to Postmodernist notions in order to establish a broad context for dealing with them as well as to suggest the seriousness with which they should be considered.

For a working definition of the term "Postmodernism" I will rely here on distinctions between Modernism and Postmodernism made by Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction.*[15] McHale suggests, broadly speaking, that Modernism is concerned with epistemological questions while Postmodernism is concerned with ontological ones. That is, Modernists will ask questions such as "how can I interpret this world of which I am a part? what am I in it? what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another and with what degree of reliability?" Postmodernists, by contrast, foreground questions such as "which world is this? what is to be done in it? which of my selves is to do it? what actually is a world? what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? what happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation and when boundaries between worlds are violated?"

Although one might question the validity of using for visual material the criteria and questions developed for written material, McHale keeps his discussions quite loose, readily admits that a particular work might have both Modern and Postmodern qualities, that an author's work over a period of time can change from one to the other, and that the entire issue of Modern and Postmodern is not necessarily one of chronology, but of intention and emphasis. He provides, therefore, a guide and a set of questions rather than strict categories which can easily enough be used for considering visual material.

Parenthetically, by considering the differences between Modernism and Postmodernism to be as much as matter of intention as of chronology, one can argue that the seeds of Postmodernism can be found in collage Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism, and that Abstract Expressionism, despite its debt to Surrealism, is the last of the great Modern movements because

of the artists' concerns with self-definition and self-understanding. The first important American Postmodernists are, therefore, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Kaprow.

Staying with McHale for the moment, he considers one aspect of the Postmodern novel as describing a world completely destabilized. Here he refers to works by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Carlos Fuentes among others in which "there is no identifiable center of consciousness through which we may attempt to recuperate the text's paradoxical changes of level and other inconsistencies."[16] Now I do not want to make mechanical analogies between McHale's analyses of literary works and Estes' window paintings, but there is something here to consider. Estes did say, as indicated earlier, that "my paintings are worked out as details. ... I can't deal with it all at once."[17] Within the restricted range of visual data with which Estes works, this is borne out by the fact that he denies, or severely limits, a visual center of focus, let alone a narrative one. We cannot always organize the window paintings in our mind's eye in a spatially coherent way, or reconstruct them in an orderly manner, since Estes seems to be methodical in his ordering of spatial disorder. He presents the work but insists on a non-resolution of the spatial and narrative possibilities as well as an unwillingness to be responsible for the appearance of the whole in a logically organized manner. We become more aware of the artist as a force setting loose spatial and narrative ambiguities in the window paintings than as an organizing presence.

And just as Estes superimposed what is seen in the interiors through the window with what is seen on the window, so McHale describes several novels with similar co-existing realities. The easiest example to use here is from a part of a story, "The Invention of Photography in Toledo," from the book *Da Vinci's Bicycle* (1979), by Guy Davenport in which "exploiting the homonymy between Toledo, Spain, and Toledo, Ohio, Davenport superimposed the two cities, their topographies, histories, and cultures." One passage will suggest how he did this. "'Originally a part of Michigan until Andrew Jackson gave his nod to Ohio's claim, the fierce violet of its stormy skies inspired El Greco to paint his famous view of the city'."[18] Estes' juxtapositions and superimpositions are not as spatially nor probably as psychologically discontinuous as Davenport's, but in his own way and using the utterly banal imagery of interiors one normally walks by with hardly a glance, Estes makes the windows into liminal borders between the here and the there, between the reality of what is actually seen through the window and the fiction of what is behind, between appearance and reflection, between the ultimately measurable spaces of the interior and the unmeasurable spaces of what is behind. It is reasonable to extend this trope to consider that what is seen through the window (the interior)

symbolizes civilization, since it is measurable, and what is behind the viewer as wilderness or the unknown. Or one could argue that what is both through and behind the window is a reconceptualization of America in urban terms, both knowable and unknowable, both visually cacophonous and strangely aurally silent, one which forces you to concentrate on insignificant particulars, but denies your physical and spiritual presence from the scene both because of the impersonality of the painted surfaces as well as by your literal absence from the street. You become a disembodied eye without even the filter of a mind which takes in every visual datum that appears before you. Or we might say that that which is through the window is epistemological because ultimately knowable and that which is behind is ontological, or perhaps it can be said that there is at least an oscillation and an ambiguity between epistemological and ontological views and between levels of reality. Perhaps, despite Estes' assertions to the contrary, he even intended an ambiguous content to the window paintings. Perhaps not. In any event, the mingling of seen and reflected objects disengages our eyes and minds from the normal syntax of seeing and thus provokes this kind of continuous speculation.

To which paintings can Estes' window paintings be compared? I think less to Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* than to Monet's "Waterlilies" in the Musée de l'Orangerie.[19] Both Monet and Estes painted transparent surfaces and what was reflected on them. But Monet's ambiguities of space have more to do with a person in search of something than a person manipulating self-consciously his own intentions and our responses. Monet painted and sketched in front of nature and tried to convey the experience of what he saw and felt. "I want to succeed in expressing what I feel," he wrote in 1908, and four years later he said "I only know that I do what I can to convey what I experience before nature."[20] Paul Claudel, the literary figure, perhaps best described the effect of Monet's paintings when he wrote that Monet, after studying light his entire life, "finally addressed himself to that most docile, that most penetrable of elements, water, which is at once transparency, iridescence, and mirror. Thanks to water, he became *the indirect painter of what we cannot see*."[21] Since Monet recorded changes in weather so quickly and fleetingly in the "Waterlilies" paintings, he invites the viewer to meditate simultaneously upon the past, the present, and the future, as well as upon the nature of reality. The paintings, by showing the murky depths beneath the water, what is floating on the water, and what is reflected on its surfaces, alludes to the comingling of matter and spirit, of physical reality and transcendental meditation. The paintings can become a palimpsest to be read as intimately as the viewer desires. As much as the paintings might record weather conditions, they also provide a personal space for reverie.

Estes' window paintings, by comparison, are incomplete records of the larger unit of the building, the block, the neighborhood. They also include not inferences, but quotations of things seen in reflection. Self-referential puzzles of pictorial space which inhibit any sense of experience but that of establishing some sort of visual equilibrium, they alienate the viewer in that they isolate scenes from any narrative context. The fact that Estes derives his images so closely from the surface appearance of photographs indicates, to me, at least, his desire to isolate and deny lived experience. Rather, he heroizes the photograph by copying its surface effects. His paintings, then, are simulations rather than representations of lived reality. He offers the feel and shape of what he sees, the memory of actual experiences, but not the record of actual experiences. Sensations of the actual have atrophied. For Estes, the present moment is already an item of nostalgia, a nostalgia of sight. It is as if one knows it is snowing outside by hearing about it on a TV weather report even if one has just come indoors.

Although critic Bob Rogers was referring to photographs, his comments apply to the window paintings when he said that photographs deny "the collective journey narrative." He goes on to say that "separated from this historical context [the collective journey narrative], the image cannot make sense, and the result is a feeling of disjointed, surreal, fragmented time, the insignificant made timeless. ... The lens's dispassionate monumentalization of trivia and its equally dispassionate trivialization of everything else derives in great measure, from taking the image out of its social/cultural context and looking at it as an isolated curio or work of art."[22] Estes' second-hand images only compound Rogers' observations. This is not to say that they are bad or wrong. On the contrary, they speak immediately to the Postmodern condition of fragmentation and of considering things in multiple contexts as few other works do. It would also seem, by extension, that the window paintings reflect the urban experience writ large—the daily assault of multiple and insistent images, the concern to blot out all but what is directly in your path of movement, the often compulsive desire not to relate your immediate experience to the larger experience of the street. As much as Monet's paintings are autobiographical and allow for autobiographical musings, Estes' paintings are not and do not. He has, in effect, painted himself out of his canvases. The paintings remain; he is gone.

By eliminating his touch and even his biography from the window paintings, he has allowed himself, following Foucault's suggestions concerning the absence of the author, to disappear into their impersonal surfaces and to be subsumed by the camera, as if the camera made the choices of subject matter and organization for him.[23] Estes becomes less the creator of the window paintings than a mediator who has mastered the

codes of photography. Although there is no narrative in the traditional sense in these paintings, the viewer becomes aware of the way Estes "narrates" the paintings based on the codes of photography—the inclusiveness of detail of the photographic negative and the slick surface finish of the print. Of course Estes made all the choices, but he presents the window paintings as if he were the camera's silent partner by his effacement before the photographic image.

By denying his own physical presence in the paintings, Estes sabotages our understanding of the point from which space, and therefore graspable reality, is measured. His position, and ours, evaporates as we try to locate ourselves. He denies the assertion of a logical space by paradoxically manipulating space into something unmeasurable and ultimately unknowable. Such close examination of space, then, is ultimately a subversive ploy to deny the artist's place in his own work. In *Double Self-Portrait*, in which he appears reflected in the window standing next to his camera and tripod and again reflected in a mirror-like wall in the interior, Estes painted less a double portrait of himself than a sign of his presence.

Ultimately, it is impossible to determine if Estes, in his hand-made paintings, is trying to humanize the modern urban experience by leaving a trace of his presence however minimal or if he acknowledges that since reality is constructed so arbitrarily then why not let the camera dictate reality's appearance. His paintings are not precisely examples of Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation or of the hyper-real which is based on electronic sources, nor is Estes the complete modern person envisioned by Baudrillard "now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence," but the paintings do bump up against Baudrillard insofar as Estes, by using photographs as his models has substituted "signs of the real for the real itself" and that for Estes reality itself lies in the signifier (the camera) rather than in the signified (the window).[24] What all of this means is that the reality of the painted surface for Estes is produced in accordance with the codes of photography—basically what the camera sees and what the photograph looks like.

By insisting on imitating the surface appearance of a photograph, Estes limits or eliminates any sense of affect from the window paintings, a condition Frederic Jameson feels is central to Postmodernism. (A city-scape by Munch is the obvious opposite.) Jameson suggests that the lack of affect does not necessarily result in neutral or passive responses. "The silence of affect in Postmodernism is doubled with a new qualification in surface and accompanied by a whole new ground tone in which the pathos of high Modernism has been inverted into a strange new exhilaration, the high, the intensity, some euphoric finale of Nietzsche's Dionysian impulse. ... The alienated city of the great Moderns, with its oppressive streets and

its constricting menace, has been unaccountably transformed into the gleaming luxury surfaces of Richard Estes' Manhattan."[25]

Jameson further suggests that paintings like those of Estes depend on the new "industrial dynamic of the computer, of nuclear energy, and of the media." All of this new machinery is involved with reproduction and process, not with manufacturing. These new systems, Jameson holds, have begun to colonize our unconscious.[26] With Estes, the camera, apparently, has colonized his unconscious. Beyond that, Jameson has suggested another way to think about Estes' paintings and to account for their "gleaming luxury surfaces." Jameson holds that the schizophrenic condition is also central to Postmodernism. What he means by this is a breakdown in the relationships of signifiers—in this instance for Jameson the experience of time and of the memory of language. As a result, the schizophrenic "is condemned to live in a perpetual present. ... Schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. ... The schizophrenic will clearly have a far more intense experience of any given present of the world than we do, since our present is always a part of some larger set of projects which force us selectively to focus our perceptions."[27] Two caveats here: Jameson is speaking metaphorically, not clinically, and Estes is, of course, not schizophrenic. But Jameson's comments do help locate the window paintings in this particular critical perspective, especially when it is remembered that Estes wants all the forms in a painting to be in focus at the same time. The ideal viewer for Estes would not selectively focus his or her perceptions or sensations.[28]

Another aspect of the schizophrenic experience is that of ignoring other people so that the individual is not swallowed by the experience of another. A person can maintain his or her own psychological integrity by simply not interacting with anybody else. The subjects Hopper painted in the privacy of their living rooms and bedrooms often exhibit this tendency.[29] Estes, it would seem, shows what these people might see and how they might feel when out on the street—concentrating on small units of space in front of them with terrifyingly large and indeterminate spaces behind—in their soundproof capsules. Other people appear rarely and never confront the viewers of the windows. Usually people materialize as ghostlike traces on reflected surfaces, their silhouettes hardly visible and barely brought to recognizable form. There is certainly no Baudelairian heroism of modern life here. It would even seem that both Estes and the viewer are absent flaneurs both apart from and hidden from the crowd. Unlike Baudelaire's flaneur, "an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non I'," Estes is concerned only with his own vision.[30] It is his only performative function in observing and partaking of city life. What he sees is the city as phantasm. The more carefully he looks, the more elusive everything becomes.

Notes

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1 Illustrated in Louis K. Meisel, *Richard Estes: The Complete Paintings, 1966-1985* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986).
2 Ibid., plate 88.
3 *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape*, interview with John Arthur (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978), 19, 26, 17.
4 Lloyd Goodrich Folder, The 1940s, item dated April 20, 1946, Whitney Museum of American Art.
5 John Perrault, "Richard Estes," in Meisel, *Richard Estes: The Complete Paintings*, op. cit., 12.
6 Edward Hopper, "Charles Burchfield: American," *The Arts* 14 (July 1928): 7.
7 Perreault, 17.
8 Perreault, 25-26.
9 *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape*, 23.
10 Perreault, 11. See also Linda Chase, Nancy Foot, Ted Burnett, "The Photo-Realists: 12 Interviews," *Art in America* 60 (November - December 1972): 79.
11 John Arthur, "Artist's Dialogue: A Conversation with Richard Estes," *Architectural Digest* 39 (October 1982): 208.
12 Newsletter, Allen Frunkin Gallery 7 (Winter 1979): 3.
13 *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape*, 27.
14 Perreault, 36.
15 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 9-10.
16 Ibid., 14.
17 Arthur, "Artist's Dialogue: A Conversation with Richard Estes," 208.
18 McHale, 47.
19 For Velázquez's painting, see especially Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970), 3-16. First published in 1966.
20 Letters to Gustave Geoffroy in 1908 and 1912, in Richard Kendall, *Monet By Himself* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 240, 245. See also Charles F. Stucky, *Waterlilies* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 18.
21 Michel Hoog, *The Nymphéas of Claude Monet at the Musée de l'Orangerie*, English edition (Paris: Editions de la Rénunion des Musées Nationaux, 1989), 75.
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23 Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 117.
24 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983): 133; and "Simulacra and Simulations," in Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 167.
25 Frederic Jameson, "On Diva," *Social Text* (Fall, 1982): 118.
26 Ibid., 118.
27 Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, op. cit., 119.
28 Perreault, 11.
29 Arthur Burton, "Schizophrenia and Existence," in Hendrik M. Rutenbeek, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1964), 91-106. See also Matthew Baigell, "The Silent Witness of Edward Hopper," *Arts Magazine* 49 (September 1974): 29-33.
30 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 9.

An Ambilogy of Painted Meanings

James Elkins

"Ambilogy" is the logic of ambiguity, and every ambilogy is untrustworthy at least to the extent that it is ambiloquous (it uses ambiguous terms). What I have in mind here is a (partly) untrustworthy survey of the kinds of ambiguous meanings that we—as historians and critics—assign to paintings. I find this kind of impossible survey—or perhaps I should say, the fiction that such a survey is possible—to be a helpful aid, for two reasons:

1. We do not assign unlimited, infinitely flexible meanings to paintings, though we often think that we do (and sometimes hope that we do). Instead, we talk and write along certain sometimes invisible but well-worn paths. Ambiguity, in art history and criticism, is two things: either a nebulous object of praise, or a member of a set of distinct possibilities. Some ambiguities are dilemmas; others are antitheses or choices between three or more possibilities. I take it that it is often helpful to have exact words for various types of ambiguity; and to do that, it is helpful to look again at the literary-critical and philosophic models that inform our writing.

2. And as for our own discourse, there is only a finite list of things that we think of as ambiguous. There are ambiguities of enframement, of ownership, of conscious intention, of control. (I will call these "arenas" of ambiguity to distinguish them from the "types" such as dilemma, trilemma, and so forth.) These, too, we think of as infinite—but it is not surprising, on reflection, that our thinking is not as free as that. If one sets out to collect kinds of things we find ambiguous, the list proves surprisingly short. And although it can be expanded at will (perhaps an artificially expanded list could run to a hundred subjects), there are less than a dozen arenas of ambiguity that we commonly use. Listing and studying these helps us understand the dimensions and possibilities of our own discourse—a thing too seldom studied.

In what follows I address these two points in order. Naturally I can make no claims to "completeness," whatever that might mean in these contexts; but I do claim the distinctions are useful and that they can, with

sufficient attention, give a reasonable portrait of the ways we think about ambiguity in painting.

Types of Ambiguity: Empson

Modern literary criticism that concerns itself with ambiguity largely avoids *complex* readings, either by remaining general[1] or by satisfying itself with small collections of ambiguous terms.[2] Philosophically inclined authors tend to stable small collections of polysemic terms, thereby avoiding the logical monstrosities—but also the densely packed interest—of the "close readings" that go on in poetry seminars. The insufficiency of recent texts on polysemy and polysemism—for instance, those by Stanley Fish and Paul de Man—is that, in terms of the individual work, they only provide overwhelming evidence of the "absolutely nonsaturable" status of meaning.[3] What we require here is not another theory of the ineluctable dissemination of meaning and the inexorable deliquescence of interpretive communities, but ways to speak about particular moments in those sequences.

Some categories can be gleaned from that tattered classic of literary criticism, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).[4] Empson's work has been partly revived in recent years, not as an encyclopedic reference—indeed, his seven types have been rejected in many more than seven ways—but as a pathbreaking attempt to show readers just how complicated meanings can be.[5] In that sense, Empson's close readings remain exemplary, and we can learn a great deal from them. Complex readings and "complex words" (another of Empson's interests) arise whenever we are willing to take grammar seriously: whenever we are willing to follow the possible constructions of a phrase or stanza regardless of the growing conviction that we are doing something unnatural. Empson reads English poetry almost exclusively, and his visual parallels are usually unhelpful, but I find that nearly every page is pregnant with possibilities for understanding paintings. We can look at a few, to see how the subject might be opened for exploration.

One connection is offered in Empson's discussion of a line from a Shakespeare sonnet:

> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

Empson's first type of ambiguity is logically the softest, the one in which there is least self-contradiction. He finds first-type ambiguities wherever there is more than one meaning, and no *logical* (i.e., grammatical) way to choose between them. An instance of this is a many-sided comparison of two things "which does not say which comparison is most important." In the Shakespeare, the comparison of forest and church holds for many reasons:

> because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row [as birds do], because they are made of wood ... because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallized out of the likeness of a forest. [2 - 3]

This is not in itself ambiguous, but it produces a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which alternative to hold most clearly in mind. In painting this occurs whenever we are not told which alternative is to be preferred. Gottlieb's paired "bursts" are signal examples, since they can have both general meanings (life/death, old/new, earth/heaven, perfection/corruption) and more specific meanings (eye/body, car lights/street). Nothing internal to the painting tells us which is most important. There is neither contradiction, nor possibility of resolution, nor visible hierarchy of interpretations.

Empson's "types" are suggestive for a wide range of painted phenomena, and they could easily be the basis for a book. I will content myself with two further examples. Empson's book is organized according to ascending logical opposition, and an ambiguity of the fourth type occurs "when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author."[6] The idea is that the reader is "conscious of the most important aspect of a thing" (unlike in the first type, in which there is no "most important aspect"), but cannot keep all the conflicting alternates in mind. They do not seem contradictory, since there are too many to recall all at once, and the reader "has no doubt that they can be reconciled." Empson's example, brilliantly analyzed over the space of three pages, is from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*:

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

If we take the grammar seriously, and ask about the dogma here proposed, then we find ourselves in severe difficulty. Consider the nouns: is "presence" a synonym of "sense"? Are they both a "something"? Empson spends an exasperated paragraph on the word "in." If it signifies a break, then everything before is "interfused" in nature, and "a motion and a spirit" are properties of the "mind of man." If not, then the passage

describes a living nature, of which the "mind of man" is a part. The difference is essential if we are to understand the proposed dogma. The former possibility implies "man has a spirit in nature in the same way as is the spirit of God" and "decently independent from him"; the latter melts our minds into nature's and "subjects us at once to determinism and predestination."[7] Empson finds that Wordsworth "talks as if he owned a creed by which his half-statements might be reconciled, whereas ... he found these half-statements necessary to keep it at bay." Though it is indisputably annoying of Empson to say so, grammar gives him the right to accuse Wordsworth of "muddled opinions" and—most important from our point of view—of making a work that not conscious of its "complicated" state of mind, only its overall intention.[8] This occurs often and widely in Modern art, often when a painter means to depict a "non-denominational" spiritual content or semi-public narrative of personal events.

A spiritual artwork must not declare itself too baldly, for fear of capitulating to the dogma it opposes, and an autobiographical narrative painting must not tell its story too baldly, for fear of losing half-remembered nuance.[9] The former occurs, for example, in Joseph Beuys' work, such as the *Eurasia, 34th Section of the Siberian Symphony* (Copenhagen, 14-15 October 1966), in which a plethora of symbols was variously interpreted by witnesses and added to a confused yet consistent overall impression. Beuys' religiosity and primitivism, which are still being explored, affected audiences on the spot more effectively than those who, with the distance of scholarship, can ask prying questions about coherence. An example of the latter is Balthus' *The Street* (1933 version). Even at the very beginning of an exegesis of this incomparably complex work, it becomes apparent that we are not dealing with a completed story. Figures that signify the painter multiply before our eyes, until the entire scene seems to be stand-ins for the painter. Sometimes it appears wholly incestuous and nightmarish, other times like a summer scene by Seurat. Many of the figures contrive to "touch" one another at the distance of several yards. A violent sexual encounter is "bracketed" by a swinging door. A central bisector speaks of religion (it strikes vertically through the painting, from a ball through a Renaissance cross-bearer to a tapestry icon). As we live with this painting, its "half-stories" diffuse through our memory and we lose the ability to keep them all in mind. There emerges the impression that the painting is an intricate memory, an autobiographical fantasy, and that "the subsidiary complexities ... are within reach" if we want them. They form a haze, a cloud of unknowing, implicating not only a miscellany of logical alternatives but deception, self-deception, and "muddled" thinking.

A crisper dialectic comes from Empson's sixth type, which "occurs when a statement says nothing," "so that the reader is forced to invent

statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another." A poem or painting can do this by creating a tautology that fulfills "rather exacting conditions": it must be "a pun which is used twice, once in each sense, [so that] the massive fog of complete ambiguity will then arise from a doubt as to which meaning goes with which word."[10] The example is a poem by Herbert, *Affliction*, which closes:

> Ah, my dear God, though I be clean forgot,
> Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

Empson's point here is that the tautology entails two possible orientations of the narrative voice: the speaker could be enduring bravely, or revolting. The last line could mean, for example, "'If I have stopped loving you, let me go; do not make me love you again in the future, so that I shall regret it if I return to the world'," or else "Do not let me spend my life trying to love you'," or again "'And yet, though you have already clean forgotten me, let me not love you in achievement if I do not love you in desire'." And Empson, iconoclast that he was, could not resist adding that a certain Archbishop Sharp died "with this couplet on his lips," perhaps indicating he had resolved the tautological dilemmas, but "be that as it may, the Archbishop was murdered and probably had little time."[11] In fact the poem does not declare one way or the other, and the meanings we supply are likely to be at once extravagant and conflicting.

Some abstract painting does something similar when it incorporates reminiscences of classes of objects, and then refuses to declare allegiance to one or the other. Kandinsky's *Red Oval* (1920) is an abstraction that has various familiar-looking shapes: theriomorphs and other organic forms, linguistic marks, a "rainbow," some "mountains." After a time these signifiers resolve into two possibilities: either the painting refers to the world of still-life or to that of landscape. There is a large yellow rectangle that might be a tabletop or a plain; a red oval that could be a sun or a cherry; zig-zag forms that could be mountains or drapery, and so forth. A "fish" could be on the table or a hieratically enlarged inhabitant of the landscape. "Rainbows" and "boats" are more difficult to reconcile, and there are freer gestures that do not correspond to either possibility. But the painting draws its energy from the tautological opposition of two genres, two sets of symbols. It provides the incentive to interpret without providing the mechanism of resolution.

Arenas of Ambiguity

Enough has been said here to locate a potential subject for further inquiry. Empson's types can be immensely helpful without snaring us in his (intentionally) overdetermined listing, and they can prompt us to be more exact about how paintings are ambiguous. I do not think it is

possible to argue cogently that there are primary kinds of ambiguity other than logical ones; but it is entirely possible to explore subjects other than logic that can be the scene of logical ambiguities. Empson himself thought that his logical list was only the first of three possibilities: ambiguities of logic, of "psychological complexity," and of the degree of conscious intention.[12] His other two categories also have their places in the field of painting.

1. In terms of *psychological complexity*, painting is especially versatile in its embodiments of what I called "figures that signify the painter." Balthus' painting contains at least two directly self-portrait types: a central, balloony figure and a boy of radically uncertain age—he could be a child or a forty-year-old—being carried by a woman. There are also figures that behold events in paintings. When they embody something of the viewer as well as the painter, they become what Michael Fried has called, in the important essay "The Structure of Beholding in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*," "the painter-beholder."[13] At the rhetorical apex of Fried's essay there is the possibility of even finer distinctions: Courbet's painting contains various figures that behold the scene, and they are each understandable as varieties of the act of beholding "in" the painter, the beholder, and the—strictly separable—"painter-beholder." When a "painter-beholder" does mostly beholding, Fried calls it a "beholder-'in'-the-painter-beholder," but a more accurate descriptive term would be "figure for the 'beholder-"in"-the-painter-beholder'," since the hyphenated persona is an interpretive trope, variously embodied by the painting. And certainly there can be such figures for each nameable narrative function: the only obstacle is the Heideggerian hyphenation. Each figure is, in narrative terms, a "voice" of the artist, and each is therefore an character in a novel of "psychological complexity."

2. *The degree of conscious intention* is subject to similar elaboration. In Empson, the emphasis is usually on process: what the author was aware of while he wrote, or vaguely aware of after he wrote. "Degree" is therefore a narrative term. Now we might want to augment that fiction of a narrative of consciousness by at least three critical avenues, pertaining to the origin, structure, and location of conscious intention. *First*, following Freud, there are ambiguities of origin of intention: a thought might be Conscious, Unconscious, or Preconscious, and it is possible that we may wish to imagine a meaning as the work of Conscious and Unconscious in tandem. Other thoughts are hypercathected from the Preconscious, and still others have escaped the Censor of the Unconscious by displacement or condensation. *Second*, we can wonder about the structure of intention using the terms inaugurated by Derrida and others (*pharmakon*, *Gift*, *hymen*, and *supplement*) rather than the fictional ethos of earlier critics. And *third*, it is possible to inquire into the

location of intention: whether it speaks "from" a *lapsus linguæ*, primary masochism, the Death Instinct, or psychosis.[14] I mention these not to advocate any one, but to underscore the possibilities of an expanded but measured critique of consciousness.

These two alternate approaches, "psychological complexity" and the "degree" of consciousness, are each dependent on the first, logical ambiguities, for their analysis, and so are various other possibilities that come up in discussions of painting. I will briefly mention five further possibilities. Though I will not be undertaking it here, each of the following ambiguities can exist in various logical states, and can therefore be interpreted using the kinds of distinctions proposed by Empson.

3. There is often a need to discuss ambiguities of the *mode of reference* of paintings. If a painter "lifts" a figure from another painting, as Balthus takes Piero della Francesca's figure of the *Carrying of the Wood of the Cross* from Arezzo, then the relation is described as "copying." But copying can be ambiguous: Piero's figure might be a "literal" or a "free" copy, though its openness precludes "plagiarism." Picasso's celebrated paintings of *Las Meninas* are often called "variations." Robert Lowell named his free copies "imitations." The histories of Western and Chinese painting are replete with types of "copying." All of them are, in the first instance, *citations*. But they can also be *uses* or *mentions* of previous work, and they can *implicate* or *entail* earlier work—and citation, use, mention, implication, and entailment are manners, not types, of reference. The type of citation and the manner of citation can be augmented with the means of citation. This last refers to method, and it can be—among other possibilities—a "tracing," a "projection," a "graft," a "collage," or a "condensation." This is not a disordered universe, since it is reined in by the interlocking concepts of the type of reference, the manner of reference, and the means of reference. And painters are often indeterminate in the ways their works proclaim their connections to the past, making this kind of terminology indispensable.

4. Then there are *ambiguities of ownership*. These divide into two large classes. First are ambiguities of the status of the owned object. It can be "held" as a financial investment (for example, a painting kept as a monetary equivalent in a private vault), as a financial voucher or chit (a painting valued as a trading piece, as in museum exchanges), and as a financial statement (a painting kept as a non-negotiable sign of money that is kept elsewhere, as in a painting in a bank lobby or corporate headquarters). The last category, paintings as financial statements, is variable; at times a painting is a sign of one's favored cultural camp, or of cultural identity (as in the "Chicago Picasso"), or in a matrix with other works of interior design, themselves entries in a financial statement.

Alternately, ambiguities of ownership devolve upon questions about relative ownership. A painting in a museum is ambiguously owned. There are claims made on it by, at the least: (a) art historians, who claim to be ultimate interpreters, (b) connoisseurs, who claim the right of authentication, (c) curators, who possess the right to move the paintings, (d) the public, which "owns" some paintings (at least, those that are "everyone's heritage"), (e) politicians, who sometimes claim ownership rights as part of their campaigns in the name of public morality, (f) individuals, who sometimes possess legal rights to retrieve paintings in museums, (g) guards and policemen, who occasionally reserve the right to sequester paintings from the public or *vice versa*, and (h) restorers, who possess a unique right to be alone in a room with paintings and physically alter them.

5. Recently we have become sensitive to what may be called *ambiguities of enframement*, meaning undecided propositions about the borders of the work. In the narrowest case, a "painting" is the front of the canvas, disregarding the portions hidden by the overlapping frame. Moving outward, we can encompass the frame, and possibly also the back of the painting. (Joseph Albers left notations about his color choices on the backs of his paintings. Is their scientism not part of the paintings' expression?) Some frames are multiple: Seurat's *Grande Jatte* has a two-dimensional painted frame and a wooden frame around it, and the painted frame interacts with the painting to produce a third, ghostly frame within the other two. Some frames are detachable, others frames are non-detachable or partly detachable (these last are the *parerga*, things between ornament and structure; an example is the stucco frame around a fresco). And ultimately, following Foucault, we can consider the entire setting, reception, documentation, provenance, *Nachleben*, and summed experiences of viewers. The fact that painters often play with such themes makes them common subjects of ambiguation.

6. It is easier to summarize *ambiguities of scale*, if only because they are generally simpler. Some abstract painting and sculpture has particularly indeterminate scale, and works may appear to be representations or studies for much larger pieces: such works have self-referential ambiguities since they are at once maquettes or studies, in actual scale, and representations of "finished work" in larger scale. Often this is a matter of eliminating inherent ambiguity, since sculptors look for elements that can indicate a single scale (painters have in general been less attentive to this). Another subspecies of this ambiguity applies to figural works, since their scale is typically indeterminate in relation to the "actual size" of the figures that are represented. Portraits done near life size underscore this, since they purport to be a single, correct size—a geometric impossibility. When a gestural work declares its scale, it is

usually through painterly gestures, which is why Chuck Close's work (which avoids scaled gesture) is particularly interesting in this respect.

7. *Ambiguities of time* also involve painting, though they are present equally in performance, film, and video. A painter may represent an "instant" or a sequence of such "instants" (for example, in narrative paintings), or call the idea of "instant" into question.[15] A painting may purport to be ambiguously a physical "instant," a narrative "moment," or a psychological "unity." And there are various ways of adding instants, moments, and unities in narratives, and of implying their opposites (mathematical eternity or stasis, entire story, and psychological disunion).

These are the kinds of issues raised by the history and criticism of painting, and each of them can combine into multiple ambiguities. I would emphasize here that though this list of "arenas" is theoretically endless, in practice our conversations about art show it is finite; and though the logical types are endless, in practice they too are bounded by our narrative and critical conventions. The field is infected by polysemy, but not circumscribed by it. Indeed, the clearest way to comprehend the dimensions of our discourse is to think about these commonest arenas of polysemy.

Envoi

I have tried to suggest some types of ambiguity and some arenas of ambiguity. From here, the lists can only get longer, and in a way they will have served their purpose if they suggest additional entries. Typically, speaking about ambiguity is really *invoking* ambiguity, or praising it from afar. These schemata find application whenever the purpose is to be more precise, and to try to know more exactly what a painting is saying. Oftentimes a critical analysis can do worse than define what is happening in Empson's terms before turning aside into the peculiarities of the painting.

Notes

1 When Derrida, for example, sets out to speak about multivalent meaning, he considers what it is in writing that gives rise to what I have been calling (sloppily by Derrida's standards) ambiguity: the "force of breaking" with context, "the possibility of extraction and of citational grafting," and a concept of intention "never ... completely present in itself." See Derrida, "Signature Event Context [*sec*]," in A. Bass, trans., *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 317, 320, 326 respectively. The essay is also translated by S. Weber and J. Mehlman, *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 7 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). The entire debate is well worth following, though it cannot be done in the recent book (Derrida, J., *Limited Inc.* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988]), since the book omits the following essential antecedent tests: Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (Paris: Galilée, 1973), with an introduction by Derrida, and J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), as well as an element of the debate itself. J. R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 1 (1977): 198 ff. The book does, however, include an added "Afterword" that is—as of this writing—the last word.

2 In this way Derrida considers the sun, and Ricoeur considers sex, as "universal" metaphors. See Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in A. Bass, trans., *Margins of Philosophy*, op. cit., 207 ff.; P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 164 ff.

3 Derrida, "Signature Event Context," op. cit., 320.

4 Important early criticisms (which in general attack Empson for being overly strict about separating meanings that should be fluid) include J. C. Ransom, "Mr. Empson's Muddles," *The Southern Review* 4 (1938): 334 ff., and P. Wheelwright, "On the Semantics of Poetry," *Kenyon Review* 2 (1940): 264-87.
Appreciations include M. C. Bradbook, "Sir William Empson (1906-1984): A Memoir," *The Kenyon Review* (1985): 106-115 and J. Lucas, "William Empson: An Appreciation," *Poetry Review* 74 no. 2 (June 1984): 21-22.

5 See P. de Man, "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism [1956]," in *Blindness and Insight*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 229-45, and C. Norris, "Some Versions of Rhetoric: Empson and de Man," in R. C. Davis et al., eds., *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985, 191-214. A recent dissertation on Empson is J. D. McCoy, "The Middle Way: *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and the Critics," Dissertation Abstracts International 42 no. 7 (January 1982): 3156A.

6 Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 133.

7 Ibid., 153.

8 This example is the locus of debate for those who feel Empson has gone too far. He does battle in a footnote, declaring against M. C. Bradbrook that "if clauses are in apposition, the must be supposed to be somehow distinguishable, or why do they have to be said one after another?" But it is also here that Empson is at his least convincing when he claims "I must protest again that I enjoy the lines very much," despite the fact that they are logically "shuffling." (Ibid., 154.)

9 The religious topic here is discussed, among other places, in Robert Rosenblum's *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

10 Empson, 176, 182.

11 Empson, 184 n. 2.

12 Empson, 48.

13 Michael Fried, "The Structure of Beholding in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans*," *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 139.

14 These terms are discussed in Derrida's "Limited Inc. ABC ..." *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), n.p. See also the excellent review by Whitney Davis of Donald Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) in *Art Bulletin* vol. 72, no. 1 (1990): 156-66.

15 For debates on the idea of the moment in painting E. H. Gombrich "Moment and Movement in Art" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* vol. 27 (1964), 305 ff.

The Faith Dimension in Gestural Abstraction

Robert Jolly

Gestural abstractionist painting speaks analogously to faith in the Judeo-Christian mode. Since experience tells me such a statement virtually explodes with red flags, let me acknowledge at the outset that parallels to religious faith found in gestural abstraction are those which inhere accidentally. For, as opponents of the idea are quick to point out, it is fairly certain that most of the first wave gestural abstractionists, upon whose work this article focuses, did not intend religious meaning, perhaps just the opposite. No matter, because what they did is more pertinent than what they said, and will last longer. There was, of course, Mark Tobey, who was religiously motivated, but not in a specifically Judeo-Christian way. At any rate, he is not taken here as an exemplar of gestural abstraction since his works lack the forceful impulsion this writer associates with the style. Willem De Kooning and those of similar ilk are more paradigmatic. It is in such works as De Kooning produced in the mid to late 1970s, works I would call gesturally pure, that we find a faith dimension, unintended as it no doubt was. Moreover, we find it despite whatever antipathy pure gestural abstractionists may have held for doctrinaire religion, because what is demonstrably there, what can be seen on canvas and what is experienced from sight, is that which establishes the basis for a faith dialogue. Antagonisms born of consideration for artistic intent cannot undermine such a dialogue so long as we stay the empirical course.

However common knowledge it might be, I should like to specify how I mean to use the term "gestural abstraction." The term refers to one phase of the Abstract Expressionist movement, about which I shall have occasion to speak generically. Specifically, the article will focus on a style of painting which is conceived and executed simultaneously in a vigorous and spontaneous manner, and which reveals traces of the means by which paint was applied to canvas. That is to say, the particular bodily movements which produced the configurations of lines, shapes, colors, are evident in the finished product. The artist's wrist action, shoulder action, etc., are discernible to the viewer and are an emphatic part of the

overall content. These traces of action are what we call "gestures." When such traces of action are left so distinctly present, what naturally follows is the assertion of the material's intrinsic properties. Material and the means of its manipulation are the peculiar traits of gestural abstraction. Apparent in most of the completed pictures is the artist's practice of approaching canvas with little if any preconceived subject or composition. He simply applied paint according to momentary impulses, allowing the outcome to be determined by an instantaneous and chance-like interaction between artist and material. Such works are what I call gesturally pure; a purity, by the way, which is in no way compromised by the tacking on of a referent name to a painting started and completed primarily by impulse; not even if the artist should recall a certain visual stimulus which he or she loosely connects with the end result. So the paintings that concern this article are those materializations in paint which reveal the often frenzied process by which the end product was accomplished. And process is central to their meaning. The question is then raised as to whether or not process carries a faith dimension. I propose to show that it does, or can, depending on the viewer's frame of reference.

It seems that I have laid upon myself an obligation to defuse whatever resistance might be posed by arguments centered on artistic intent. Such arguments call us to judge art on the basis of the individual artist's motivation and/or his or her interpretation of their own work. The viewer is pressed to learn what the artist meant to accomplish, and is then implicitly asked to judge the success of the final product by how well it seems to achieve the creator's goal. If there is access to the artist's interpretation of the painting, that information is also brought to bear upon the viewer's response. We learn from the artists themselves, or from their biographers, what a given painting says and then we fuse that understanding with what can be seen on canvas. The actual painting becomes a kind of visual autobiography. And the viewer, rather than being an active participant in the total creative effort, becomes a passive receptacle for artistic theories which the painting is called upon to second-handedly under gird. The artist's interpretation of a work becomes the frame of reference from which viewers assimilate the visual elements into a meaningful whole. As a result of this commonly practiced approach, when my thesis is raised in conversation it is often greeted by condescending smiles, if not out-and-out hostile rebuke. Such responses seem rooted in the premise that if the gestural abstractionists intended no religious content, and see none in their work, there can be none there. These reactions are so strong and so prevalent, and pose such adamant resistance to my idea, that they must be confronted before faith parallels can be convincingly demonstrated. Consequently, the next few paragraphs argue for something approaching phenomenological analyses. They will lay down

nothing new. However, since I shall depend on them heavily and since I intend to draw them into a Judeo-Christian frame of reference—which is new—it seems necessary to re-establish already well-argued positions.

As regards phenomenological criticism, it should be asserted here that good ideas do not go in out of style like spiral perms or hot pants, or, at least, should not be perceived as doing so. The fact that many art historians are currently downplaying phenomenology as passé, in effect treating critical methodologies as fads which are or are not chic, should not deter students from those insights profound thought of whatever time frame might offer. Therefore, let us not be apologetic for the following arguments. We shall proceed in a kind of modified phenomenology. I say modified since we do commence with the a priori position of Judio-Christian belief. But otherwise we shall be experiential. We shall separate the creation from the creator in much the same way as we turn attention away from the soda jerk once he has passed a banana split over the counter. We savor what is there. We forget how it got there.

In an incident recorded by Samuel Laeuchli the battle lines between the two positions—artistic motivation versus visual experience—are drawn. He tells of a discussion which took place at the Sacré Cœur Church near Montbeliard, France. A group of ministers, professors and students, on a traveling seminar, were talking about the stained glass windows done be Fernand Léger:

A: "These windows do not belong in here!"
B: "What do you mean?"
A. "From what we have just heard, Léger was an apostate, an unbeliever, and as an unbeliever he had no right to create these windows."
B: "It does not matter if Léger was a Christian. This cycle is not only great art, it is a tribute to the Roman Catholic Church of Adincourt that it accepted it gratefully."
A: "It does not matter if Léger is a superb artist, it matters to me what a man believes. Are you telling me it no longer matters what a man believes?"
B: "Look, we went through that battle before, with Augustine and against the Donatists, and now you are telling me we have to start the bloody mess all over on the issue of art and belief?"
A: "I'm not willing to give up Christian faith for art!"
B: "I'm not willing to sell art for dogma!"[1]

This conversation draws out the gist of the matter: do we experience a work of art for what it is, intrinsically, or do we look at it primarily as a reflection of an individual artist's philosophy and/or intentions? To be sure, both categories of information are serviceable to the aesthetic

experience, and we need not debate whether one is preferable over the other. It is necessary, however, to affirm that they are not interdependent. It is not required that we know the artist's beliefs or intentions in order to properly interpret his or her work. Much is expressed through the raw visual evidence, much that is reliable, with or without the artist's concurrence.

Suppose the participants in the above dialogue knew nothing about Léger's beliefs. Suppose they responded only to what stood before them, the windows, and were in some way moved by the experience. Then suppose that later they learned of Léger's unbelief. In such a case is the original aesthetic experience invalidated? Or suppose that on a trip to New York a person steps into a gallery on 57th Street and finds himself or herself confronted by a painting done by a completely unknown artist from Los Angeles. Must the person first catch a plane to California, look up the artist (he is so unknown that nothing has been written about him), ask him about his interpretation of the work, then fly back to New York and respond to the painting as the artist told the viewer he or she should? Or does one's interaction with the painting, some three thousand miles removed from its unknown creator, become a private dialogue between the viewer and the object before him at the time?

Of the issues which arise from these questions, one, the "genetic fallacy," has been aptly propounded by Jerome Stolnitz. He maintained that the psychological promptings which motivated the artist's creative act are not necessarily a guide to content:

> ... the genesis of *x* is one thing, *x* itself is something else. Once *x* has been brought into being, it has, so to speak, a life of its own. Like a theory or like a human being, it will have a structure and value, and it will enter into relationships with other things, which cannot be understood wholly in terms of its origin.[2]

Gerardus Van Der Leeuw has said essentially the same thing:

> Works of art do possess their own life; they perhaps mean something very different to him who receives them than to him who created them. ... It does not matter to me what Goethe experienced at the conception of one of his works. Ultimately I must take it as it is given to me.[3]

And, of course, we could cite numerous other sources which stand on basically the same ground. In or out of vogue, these are still solid, rationally-based ideas, and they are not far removed from real and current events. In some of the spirited debates I have had I reminded the antagonists that they have often been called upon to jury competitive shows and in executing their responsibilities did precisely what is

advocated here. Perhaps two or three hundred painting submissions had to be reduced to the available space for fifty. I asked my antagonists if they contacted the two hundred or so artists before making their decisions. They did not. Rather, I found, they eliminated hundreds purely on the basis of what they saw and kept fifty or so strictly on the same basis.

The position taken here, therefore, is that the works before us can be legitimately examined and interpreted in whatever way we can reasonably support by the visual evidence, notwithstanding any contrary opinions that might be held by the artists. The article asks viewers to lay the a priori Judeo-Christian frame of reference along side the raw visual data supplied by an empirical engagement with the gestural abstractionist paintings themselves. We shall then examine the nature of the resulting experience to determine if it, not artists' pronouncements, is analogous to faith in the Judeo-Christian mode.

So far as I know, what we are about is unprecedented. However, there exists a previous thrust, which generates yet another inquiry into what remains one of the visual arts' most enigmatic statements. In the foreword to William Seitz's penetrating study of Abstract Expressionism, belatedly published in 1983, Robert Motherwell says, "For more than thirty years contemporary art criticism has been strewn with failures to interpret Abstract Expressionism adequately and accurately."[4] Motherwell sees Seitz's effort as a break through from earlier inadequacies, but the fact that one of the movement's major figures felt this way justifies continued analysis of this elusive style. And of the Abstract Expressionist movement, gestural abstraction is perhaps its most puzzling phase. For, now eight years after the publishing of Motherwell's comment, we still have no decidedly new insights brought to bear, unless one wants to include the current and questionable rush to anchor Abstract Expressionism (hence gestural abstraction) in specific visual stimuli—rather more reactionary than radical. So it seems that devotees of gestural abstraction are well served if the problem of criticism is approached from a heretofore untried frame of reference. Certainly, if we are to believe Motherwell, a Judeo-Christian one stands to do no worse than previous critical efforts. At best, such an approach proffers an additional dimension to one's appreciation of gestural abstractionist painting while at the same time providing an untried vehicle for a faith experience.

Judeo-Christian faith issues from a specific understanding of God in time and in humanity's involvement in that God created and God directed time. As distinct from religions of nature or religions of reason, the Judeo-Christian belief is a religion of history. It begins its statement of faith with a mythological account of time's beginning. It continues its faith expression with a sequence of revelatory events in which God, through human agencies, enters and works within the spatio-temporal order. God

generated time and thrust humankind into that time as an active participant in an ongoing creation. And, for Jews and Christians, time unfolds in a forward, linear manner. God is seen as interacting with a progressive time line which moves forward toward infinity. In the Western world this understanding of time is customarily schematized by a horizontal line. The left-most point on that line represents the beginning of time. As the time line progresses to the right it indicates the movement of time from its origin to the present. Whenever we want to indicate one moment in that span of time we cut a short vertical across the horizontal—say, for instance, at a point appropriate for December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Just so, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, vertical marks might represent those moments in history when God, through Moses, through the prophets, or through Jesus Christ, interacted directly with time, as a specific revelation. This is not to say that God is only in time at certain moments. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition he is always present. From early Hebrew confrontations with Baalism, the ideas emerged that "Yahweh was over all and in all."[5] While God is over the universe, as a transcendence, he is also within it. He is an immanent God, effecting history. "Genuine Yahwehism ... regarded history as the sphere of divine action."[6]

Returning to the diagram of time, it is most significant to the Judeo-Christian posture that the right most point on the horizontal line represents *now*, not the end of time. Beyond the now point, Judeo-Christian time is expected to continue its rightward movement, though not forever. A terminus is anticipated, but there is no absolute certainty as to when it will come. Time is expected to end with the Parousia, the Second Coming and establishment of the eternal kingdom. Some millenarians claim to know precisely when that point in time will arrive, but by-and-large, the Judeo-Christian community only claims certainty that the Parousia will come, not a certainty as to when it will come. Jesus himself, when asked by his disciples to pinpoint the end of time, only answered with a set of conditions which would signify the approach of time's end, not its exact point in history.[7] Judging from some reports he seems to have expected it within the lifetime of his living disciples, and that seems to have been the expectation of the early Christian community. Despite the failure of the Parousia to come in accordance with these predictions the faithful still look for it to happen. However, although an end of time is expected, present anticipations are that the time line will continue to the right indefinitely. This is what is meant in the above observation that time "unfolds in a forward, linear manner." Understood this way, time is open-ended. It is expected to proceed for an indeterminable length and to include indeterminable events. Its completion lies somewhere outside present possibilities of awareness. For

those in the Judeo-Christian tradition it is not so much the fact of time as it is the sense of *time generated* which demands a faith response. For Christian believers, this sense of generated time is expressed by the redemptive act of the incarnation, an event still looked for in orthodox Judaism. It is as if a new beginning had been, or will be, inaugurated. What then, for those within the Judeo-Christian tradition, is the nature of their interaction with the unfolding process of reinitiated time? The faithful are called on to enter into time's dynamic. They are prompted, in faith, to launch themselves into the forward movement of time, to interact with its events. In short, they are called on to "participate in history."[8]

Charles D. Barrett refers to Christian faith as a "project," in which he holds to that word's literal meaning—"to throw forward." Faith, in the Judeo-Christian mode, calls on one to enter into a "life project," explained by Barrett as the "dynamic and always *unfinished* [italics mine] character of human life and faith."[9] This is a way of confirming "the Christian faith's character as a project to be lived out in history."[10] A faith involvement in time is an acceptance of incompleteness, and an engagement in process, the sort which has no pre-defined conclusion and offers no other assurance than that such self-catapulting hurls one Godward. In other words, Judeo-Christian faith demands that followers "throw themselves forward" in time, despite the uncertainties such a plunge into history may present, and participate with love and hope in whatever future time may hold. Barrett makes a comparison of the self which has been projected into time by faith with improvisational theater:

> The *self-image and style* of the historist may be compared to those of actors in an improvisational theater, who must learn to work both creatively and responsively, providing stimulation for fellow actors and in turn responding to their creative initiatives. No written or memorized script is available to guide or channel their acts and words. Rather, they must trust themselves to the moment, to the intention of God, the prime actor.

Going on in this same vein and speaking of sin, Barrett says that man's

> principle mistake, as historists see it, lies in worshiping the creature instead of the Creator, the product instead of the *process* [italics mine] ... People would rather *have* and *be* and *do*; they prefer lives of security and stability to lives of activity on the stage of an improvisational theater in which the props and the plots keep rearranging themselves. As a result they become historically *irresponsible*, unable to respond to God the improvisor, that God who acts and speaks through the dramas, great and small, of history.[11]

Therefore, faith in the Judeo-Christian mode is an active, trusting involvement in history. It is a projection, or launching of one's self forward into time, willingly accepting the risks which inhere to such an open-ended experience. Consequently, Judeo-Christian faith militates against a disinterested observation of events. It demands of its adherents an existential thrust, an "intense struggle with the historical currents of their own situation."[12] We could say, then, that the faith experience immerses one in a titillating present which points to a promising future. In short, faith in the Judeo-Christian mode is the self's deep, committed, involvement in process.

Since the word "process" is fundamental to both gestural abstraction and Judeo-Christian faith, we need a workable explanation of it. An ordinary one will do. The *Random House College Dictionary* defines process as "a systematic series of actions directed to some end; a specific, continuous action, operation or series of changes." Process, then, is a *doing* of something. It is not the something itself, it is only the means of getting to the something. It is an action directed toward a goal. In such an understanding the key word is "action." There is nothing specific concerning an end. Process begins to do and it continues to do, but it is never a completion. When *doing* or *making* or *acting*, that is *process*, is the focus of attention there can be no sense of finish, because once a sense of completion sets in process is over. Moreover, process cannot be a reverse action. As an action it is directed toward some goal which is achievable only in the future. It is, therefore, a thrust into time. As such it is a thrust into indefiniteness, equating with the rightward moving horizontal; hence, carrying no sense of completion. As one enters into process certain risks are accepted, since there is no prior knowledge of the shape an ultimate resolution will take, or, for that matter, whether or not resolution will occur. The risks, the uncertainties inherent in process are attributes which lie at the core of Barrett's understanding of faith. And they are attributes integral to gestural abstraction. Because of its acting and its openendedness, process thrusts us forward into a risky time adventure.

No art style in the Western world so thoroughly focuses viewer attention on the very act of painting as does gestural abstraction. Despite all the artistic and critical disclaimers, in paintings of this style the very process of making stands palpably there. We can find examples galore but such De Kooning works as *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* (1975), *Untitled IV* (1976), *Untitled V* (1977), *Untitled XIX* (1977), and *Untitled I* (1978) are particularly illustrative. Indisputably manifest are the shoulder actions, the wrist actions, the sudden stops and starts, the energetic zigzags, the varying pressures on the brush, the well-loaded brush, the sparsely loaded brush, the use of a paint scraper, the pulling of the brush

away from the canvas with a sweeping action, the slapping of a dripping brush to the canvas, and on and on we could go. And there is the oil paint; one can almost feel its viscous flow, and, though dried for years, one can almost smell the paint as if it just were applied to canvas. The material properties and the way they were manipulated are there to see; in effect process has been gelled, enabling the viewer to experience the act of painting itself. So it is that, in such works, we identify and share in the artist's sometimes frantic wandering over the surface, his groping search for satisfying location of tone, color, and linear statement.

This article submits that *doing* is so emphatic in gestural abstraction that finish, as sensory/psychological experience, only comes into discriminating viewer consciousness upon the achievement of considerable psychic distance. One may come to a cognizance of plastic order, and I would not deny that it is there, in a flexible sense, but the preponderance of visual weight most assertively demands an immediate recognition of process. Indeed, the probability that process could be overlooked seems an incredible prospect for this writer. And herein lies the crux of my argument. Unless one strongly wills otherwise, viewer participation in the act of painting is so consuming that a sense of conclusion is kept out of awareness for some time; if, in fact it is ever experienced. The sustained sense of action is that which engages us in process to the point that we are projected into time; toward but not to some unforeseeable, unspecified end. Are the De Kooning paintings mentioned above to be thought of as completions? Is plastic order irrevocably set? One can almost hear the Renaissance devotees in their romanticized demands that not a single stroke of a Raphael painting could be changed without the ruination of his composition. And then we hear that notion implanted upon De Kooning. For myself the questions above are simply answered: No. Another stroke would not necessary ruin or even substantively change the paintings. These paintings were stopped, not finalized. But maybe we are making a moot point. Whether or not some completion is achieved, the *doing*, is vividly there, and so long as it is sustained in viewer consciousness, we are hurled into time as active participants, engaging time existentially. As long as that awareness is sustained, in and for itself, the receptive viewer experiences something very similar to faith as historistically defined.

The search for a faith dimension in gestural abstraction has an unwitting advocate in the person of the late Harold Rosenberg. Strange as it may sound, for nothing in his writings indicates such a concern, Rosenberg's actionist critiques establish a foundation for a faith inquiry, as existentially understood. However, before drawing out that line of reasoning I want to devote a few sentences to Rosenberg's defense. It has almost become fashionable to attack this insightful critic and the current

sorties are not the first. In 1960 Robert Goldwater attempted to refute Rosenberg's emphasis on the action element in gestural abstraction.[13] It was a poor effort. And there have been innumerable like-minded attacks. Lately, or so it seems, professional conferences almost demand at least one paper that sideswipes Mr. Rosenberg. All this notwithstanding, Rosenberg understood, early on and better than most, that process is key to the content of gestural abstraction, which he called "Action Painting."

It is Rosenberg's recognition of gestural abstraction as a dramatic event on canvas, as self search through action, rather than a picture *of* something, or a composition of visual elements brought together for satisfying sensory effect, which points viewer attention to process. Rosenberg identified gestural abstraction/action painting as "an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event."[14] In one of the more profound studies of Abstract Expressionism William Seitz calls it "a field for dramatic action in paint," which restates the gist of Rosenberg.[15] Following in the same vein John McCoubrey says of action painting, "For the Americans, reality was to be caught only on the canvas in the *process* [italics mine] of painting it."[16] The list goes on of writers who have focussed on action. They have all been sired by Rosenberg and they do, I believe, hit the mark precisely. Clement Greenberg and his critical progeny notwithstanding, what I would call "Bloomsburyism" just does not sit comfortably within gestural abstractionist parameters.

As concretized action gestural abstraction's "vocabulary tends to describe its creation in terms of their coming into being: expressions that conceive of painting as a beginning to 'happen' or as 'working itself out' are typical."[17] Hence, action painting is the nearest equivalent the visual arts have to improvisational theater. In it we see a similarly impulsive response to developing situations, situations which unfold in no prescribed direction. If, indeed, improvisational theater correctly correlates with a Judeo-Christian faith project, as Barrett persuasively argues, gestural abstraction does so at least as well, if not better. For in it not just the instantaneous response to a developing situation is apparent, but, in addition, viewers are made keenly aware of the means; we witness and are drawn into the dynamics of those actions which result from instantaneous response.

Distinctively, I believe, gestural abstraction offers the sympathetic viewer a participation in pure process. By "pure" I refer to a visual statement which exists in and of itself; it focuses attention on nothing other than itself and that to which it can ontologically point. And it is process in its unadulterated state which best expresses the faith dimension. Arturo Falico applies the term "pure presentation" to art itself.

He suggests that painting's uselessness heightens its capability to express a present dynamic being. I would press the case further. Even in art, speaking generically, there are degrees of purity. The least pure are those works that make distinctive reference to physical reality, to functional reality. The purest, speaking of painting now, are those that are painting *as* painting, and purer still are those that reveal painting as the act of painting—process as nothing but process. Hence, the De Koonings that are the most remote from optical reference are purer than, say, the "Women" pictures. To reiterate, they are gesturally pure.

Given gestural abstraction as a statement of process and given it as pure presentation, we are prompted into a consideration of Mircea Eliade's argument concerning the sacred sign. While he does not believe it to be a fully satisfying interpretation of the sacred Eliade begins his book, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* with a thought borrowed from Rudolph Otto's *Das Heilige*: "The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities."[18] Eliade continues:

> we are confronted by some mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world.[19]
>
> By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.[20]
>
> But the irruption of the sacred does not only project a fixed point into formless fluidity of profane space, a center into chaos; it also effects a break in plane, that is, it opens communication between the cosmic planes (between earth and heaven) and makes possible ontological passages from one mode of being to another.[21]
>
> Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiousus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, the *sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world.[22]

So the sacred sign occupies two states of being: it is of the world while at the same time pointing or directing awareness outside and beyond the world. To be of the world the sign must have a physical presence. To direct awareness outside and beyond the world the sign must be able to "break the plane" between the here-and-now and transcendence. To do so the sign must have some sense of otherness about it; which is to say, that while the sign is of the world there must be something about it which

separates it from the ordinary, from that which is experienceable through the senses. Pure gestural abstraction does just that. In its emphatic exploration of the intrinsic properties of material (paint) gestural abstraction has a vivid physical presence—it is of the world. Yet in its purest form, viewers are given imagery which is little attached to the world. By thrusting the unfamiliar into viewer consciousness, gestural abstraction directs him or her away from the security offered by identifiable optical references, signaling that something else is the focus of aesthetic experience. By their associations with the unknown, gestural abstractions open viewers to the possibility of a move away from awareness of this world. They offer otherness as no other painting does since they frame otherness in terms of pure process. As such they offer that which comes into experience as one enters a sense of world transcendence.

Before concluding one more troublesome antagonism needs to be laid to rest. It can be quickly done. The argument has to do with Immanuel Kant's interpretation of art's reference to the unknown. His position renders unknown signification to all art. Therefore, so the opponents have said, one painting serves no better than another in fulfilling the criteria of Eliade's sacred sign. My rebuttal is two pronged. First, bearing in mind the thesis of this article, we are not only searching for an equivalent to Eliade's sign but we are looking for something that equates with it while at the same time thrusting viewers into a keen awareness of process. To suggest that one painting serves the latter role as well as another is to say that a painting by William Harnett is as existential as one by De Kooning. The most cursory scan of the two artists' works defeats such a position out of hand.

Secondly, a little mundane practicality is instructive. Put before the lay public one of De Kooning's paintings mentioned above and one by, say, Jan Vermeer; and do not be quick to dismiss the contrasting albeit uninformed responses. From the Vermeer one will get an immediate identification of specific physical objects, objects with which the viewer is in one way or another familiar. To be sure, an awareness of the unknown may eventually come into discriminating viewer consciousness, but that is just what happens—the unknown *comes into* awareness. I would submit that even for the learned, the first response to a heretofore unseen Vermeer is a cognizance of optically referential materializations—things, if you please. But not so with the De Kooning. The De Kooning work put before the same layman elicits that now famous retort, "What is it?" The person is telling us that in the De Kooning work he/she sees nothing to draw into an equation with past sensate experiences. The De Kooning is otherness first, otherness sustained, and only upon sophisticated analysis does here-and-nowness, if I may coin a phrase, come into awareness. In other words, the experience with the Vermeer is reversed. Further, if it is

true that ultimate reality carries a different identity than present reality—as affirmed by believers in the Judeo-Christian mode—then that sign which is least of the world is that which best "breaks" beyond the worldly plane. I submit that the De Kooning is least referentially of the world and therefore serves better as a plane breaking sign.

Process which is "other" is process which, while being of the world, gets us out of the world. Process which is "other" (pure process) is that which projects us into time. It catapults the self into a risky time experience which is frought with uncertainties. For those who have come to gestural abstraction from a Judeo-Christian frame of reference, the hurling forward, the projecting that flows from an involvement in process, is a thrust toward the ontological. Herein, for the receptive viewer, does gestural abstraction provide an experience analogous to faith as historistically understood, faith as a "project."

Notes

1 Samuel Laeuchli, *Religion and Art in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 2.
2 Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 88.
3 Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 277.
4 Robert Motherwell, in Foreword to William Seitz's *Abstract Expressionist Painting in American* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), xiv.
5 John B. Noss, *Man's Religions*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956), 514.
6 Ibid., p. 515.
7 Mark 13.
8 Charles D. Barrett, *Understanding the Christian Faith* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 62.
9 Ibid., 124.
10 Ibid, 98.
11 Ibid, 52-55.
12 Ibid, 81.
13 Robert Goldwater, "Reflections on the New York School," *Quadrum* 8 (1960): 28.
14 Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 25.
15 William Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 6.
16 John W. McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), 115.
17 Harold Rosenberg, "Art at Mid-Century," *Readings in Art History*, vol. II, ed. Harold Spencer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 370.
18 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. William R. Trash (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 10.
19 Ibid., 11.
20 Ibid., 12.
21 Ibid., 63.
22 Ibid., 202.

Art:
Devilish, Diabolic, Satanic, Demonic

Rudolf Baranik

An impulse which does not divulge its provenance, a swift traveler who refuses to carry a passport, art is pulled by a troika of shadowy horses, hitched to the same wagon but moving in different directions: the rational, the irrational and the a-rational. Though in the center, the rational is the most passive, always willing to be co-opted by dailiness, willing to take out a passport from the Office of Logic—in fact willing to abandon art. The flanking members of the troika are the truer sources, though the irrational sometimes subverts art by pulling it into the ditch of theatricality. It is the a-rational which is art's true center, glancing neither to the prosaic nor the determinately irrational. The goal of this force remains unknown and at the same time reached for with obsession, leading to a triumph of darkness which closes or nearly closes entry to analysis—historical, sociological, and psychological. It is almost as if the power of the analysis does not matter: powerful projectors (keen minds) are as ineffective as dying flashlights.[1]

The psychological investigation, especially when carried by its militant vanguard, psychoanalysis, has a special relationship with art. The rational is rightly of little interest to this analysis, as it is to any investigation which comes close to art. The irrational, or rather the search for it, subverts the intention of psychoanalysis, since this analysis carries within itself a hope for some rationale; in other words, it would have to arrive at what would have to be called a "rationale of the irrational"—too much of a claim even for the most self-confident analysis. So it is the true impulse of art, the a-rational, which presents psychoanalysis with possibilities and tasks, possibilities hardly grasped by history or sociology. Art historians and/or Marxists are troubled by the speculative intentions of psychology, but the psychological approach is in deep trouble itself: psychoanalysis sees itself as an art which is also scientific, holding out a hope that through sensitive investigation it can arrive at responsible conclusions. It thus deeply resents its subject, art, which boasts of irresponsibility, which forwards the mail to the demons of inspiration—and gets away with it.[2]

The psychological approach to art clearly differs from the analyst-patient relationship. This analysis of art as a phenomenon emerges in

print and public work and though it often delves into the artist's motives and their pre-art Lebensvelt, it is directed at the public, the reader and listener.[3] Freud said once, in a moment of weakness, that in front of art psychoanalysis lays down its arms. In American art criticism today the psychoanalytical/psychological approach is pervasive in some of the most serious publications, especially *Art Criticism* and partly, *Artforum.* This approach, now deeply involved in the discourse on art, is hardly monolithic: it covers a span from simplistic Rorschach-like analysis to unproved but fascinatingly complex constructs which stimulate and provoke. These imaginative insights have a place in thinking about art—and why not—if art can be "irresponsible" why not the analysis? These insights, pinning down not only the state of the art, but also its motives, aims, reasons and roots are held up as veracities. Most artists find such writing interesting, even if they may think it arrogant: it is, after all, the critic's civil right, so to say.[4]

One can state that it is generally agreed that the a-rational is the primary impulse in art, and this is not a modern concept. Though benign, such terms as "inspired by muses," "angelic" and "divine" also signaled "outside" forces leading the artist, outside, that is, of the creator's conscious design, outside of the rational. The earlier terminology denotes the concept that the non-rational influence is ennobling, while the contemporary perception sees the outside forces as troubling. The inspiration is not "divine" but "infernal." I propose that four infernal terms cover the realm of beyond, in gradation of depth: Devilish, Diabolic, Satanic, Demonic. While in the daily language the "demonic" denotes the most sinister, art accepts the "demonic" as an ally and doppelganger. We shall see why artists choose the Demonic—provided their linguistics are in order.[5]

"Devilish" is playful, clever, too slight for the way artists perceive their inspiration. The term is rejected outright, even when (in the eyes of the viewer) it fits the work.

While "Diabolic" locates itself in greater depth than "Devilish," here we are in a realm of sinister threatening cunning, and the conscious planning implied robs it of the spontaneous. "Inspiration" is left out.

In "Satanic" we arrive at a much more remote place, beyond a screen of the unknown. Yet the screen is not opaque, since "Satanic" signals something locatable: Satan can be personified, made into an entity, seen as the power of Hades.

But who are the "Demons"? They are not even within our imagination—they are images without corporeality, an imagination we can not imagine; they enter us (in plural), beset us, in other words—inspire us. Art by its nature wants its inspiration to be unlocatable.

I have talked to a number of artists about the above mentioned terms. It was not a survey but simply a string of random conversations. Which of the terms was preferred? The keener quickly said "Demonic," if only possible. Some of the artists sensed with cause that their work can not claim demonic inspiration. Diabolic and Satanic were not considered. Devilish was accepted by an artist whose work could be described as clever, but hearing what others chose, added "with a touch of the Demonic."

It goes without saying that outside of the four Hadesian categories, artists would choose definitions they find more precise, more directly applicable, such as "moving," "compelling," "powerful," "searing the psyche," "troubled," "mysterious," etc. "Demonic" was simply seen as a generalized but high accolade, attesting that they are working from a totally inner sensibility, independent of mundane considerations and influences. Contemporary dictionary definitions give two versions of the Demonic: 1) Befitting a demon; fiendish. 2) Motivated by a spiritual force of genius, inspired. "Fiendish" and "a spiritual force of genius" are clearly contradictory, as is the case with many words. The different perceptions of the Demonic can be traced to the changing role the minor deity Daimon played in Ancient Greece. But this is another subject. Art embraces the second definition, "genius, inspired" since it considers it its own, arrogantly, of course, forgetting science and other human reachings. But art is right in choosing the demons within its own realm of possible inspirations. Each one of us would apply the term to somewhat different tendencies in art, but a general consensus exists. I think that one could not speak of the demonic inspiration in such artists as Grünewald and Bosch, since the horror they depict is too consciously staged. Goya's work attests that the demons visited him but they did not always stay to the end. The Demonic is not overt: it is the art of Munch, Ryder, Beuys and on, the epochal flanks, let us say, Carravaggio and the early black DeKoonings.[6] Some artists seemed to have invited the demons (for example, Bacon and Guston), some summoned them (Schnabel?), but the demons come neither by invitation nor subpoena. At their will, they beset art here and there and this is the art of greatest power and the hardest to analyze.

Notes

I am indebted to Kevin Whitfield, a Latin-Greek scholar, for some linguistic information.

1 Recognizing the inherent difficulties in the mentioned categories of analysis does not mean opposing their intentions. The psychological analysis, the least anchored to facts, has to be seen as a life-giving activity, even when it ranges far from the intentions of the art it diagnoses.

2 The term "irresponsible" is used as not beholden to exterior forces, true to inner urges only.

3 Artists seldom respond to the psychological analysis, especially when it touches on their

own art. A one-to-one approach would have to involve the artist in analyzing the critics's psychological reasons, becoming a duel, "interpreting interpretation"—an endless activity.

4 Notice the title of Donald B. Kuspit's collected essays: "Critic is Artist."

5 The differences and nuances between Devilish, Diabolic, Satanic, and Demonic are about their usage in English, English having absorbed more from other languages than any other living language. "Devilish" is Germanic, "Diabolic" has Latin-Romance roots, "Satanic" comes form the Semitic languages (Arabic and Hebrew), "Demonic" as mentioned from the Greek Daimon, through Late Latin Daimon. The different meanings in English do not necessarily coincide with the original meanings.

6 I have omitted the German expressionists of the nineteenth century, Ensor, surrealists and contemporary Neo-Expressionism because I consider the content projected there self-conscious.

Do Intentions Matter?

Sidney Tillim

As I understand the conference statement, at least the one printed on the poster for this symposium, it comprises two distinct issues. One is a general reevaluation of "Modernism" in the light of the present state of the art world. The other is an exploration of art that is not involved with the artistic values and visual vocabulary of currently fashionable art. The word "intention" does not appear in the brief statement and the reference to values is tacitly polemical, since it raises the possibility that currently unfashionable art offers "an alternative to the de-personalizing effect of media encroachment on individual expression."

What I take this all to imply is that, broadly speaking, there are two different kinds of artists out there and that the "intentions" of these artists differ radically. I think it is safe to assume that ideological differences abound (and sour grapes too) and that they testify to the abiding irony of an avant-garde turning—repeatedly—on itself, on its history and on its "traditions." Looked at simply as a system the avant-garde hasn't been much of an improvement on the one created by the bourgeoisie and the Academy since the end of the French Revolution.

We are talking then, at the very least, of what may be called cycles of taste which can suddenly plunge any art, despite the best intentions in the world, into sudden and, sometimes, permanent obscurity.

It was just this possibility that led me, in 1984, to publish an essay in *Artforum* entitled, "The View from Past 50." It was autobiographical in inspiration though it had a general critical dimension as well, designed to contextualize the main point. What, I more or less asked, does an artist do when, past fifty (I was fifty-nine at the time) he wakes up one morning (actually, the thought came to me on the subway about two years earlier) and finds he isn't going anywhere as an artist and that he might not "make it." I think the mores of Postmodernism hinge on this question. Put crudely, the question simply is: Does art—or do intentions—really matter if you can't make a living from them? Or, perhaps, the question can be put another way. If intentions do matter, how is it that they are not

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obvious to everyone? I know that there are problems with this approach, one, that is, that addresses the issue of intention in less than the most idealistic terms. After all, these were the terms we used to use when artists didn't make much money, or they are the terms we still use when we need to ignore the fact that some artists made a lot of money in the past and many are making even more today. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the art market phenomenon today is the amount of weighty philosophical and political commentary that has been generated to justify art that is selling for prices that are only unbelievable because we still can't get used to the idea that art is a "commodity" as well as a higher "good." Personally, I believe in exchange value and if I am not mistaken, I believe that I once heard Donald Kuspit discuss the importance of recognition, and the role that the market plays in recognizing the artist, as a form of validation.

Why do we wonder about intention? Because it has been notoriously difficult to make good art for almost two hundred years—art, that is, of any enduring value and quality. The modern notion of freedom destroyed the authoritarian unities of previous high cultures. Artists could once produce masterpieces in societies that, by even the most ambiguous modern standards, were essentially tyrannies, governed by fanatical despots and churchmen, by diseased aristocracies, by barbarous warlords. In a free society one has almost to improvise convictions and pray for the habits to sustain them and a liberal and generous patronage to support them. But as the art of Fascism and Communism has shown, neither a corrupt Neoclassicism nor a doctrinaire Social Realism can overcome the inevitabilities of consciousness and the fatality of choice.

It really doesn't matter how art gets made and even why it gets made. It gets made, so we must deal with it. If intentions were self-evident we would not have to discuss them and since they are not self-evident there is a real question if we *can* discuss them. And again, the reason I think we are discussing them is not so much to clarify "intention" as such but to explain why some "intentions" are preferred now more than others. It may be that taste is really a branch of metaphysics.

In a recent essay on Warhol, Thierry de Duve said that "[Joseph] Beuys wanted to incarnate the proletarian, Warhol ... wanted to be a machine."[1] De Duve took the artists at their word, which is a risky thing to do. We don't experience intentions when confronting a work of art. We experience psychic and motor impulses encoded as a visual unity. Which is not to say that we don't experience the social or that the experience is primarily esthetic. But Beuys' and Warhol's intentions are those that de Duve framed for himself. Whatever his intentions, I don't much care for Beuys—too much pomp, too little circumstance!—and whatever Warhol's agenda, his works between late 1961 and 1964 strike me as his most

ideologically, psychologically, and artistically coherent. Warhol, to my knowledge, has never been discussed in primarily artistic terms, though many have noted the falling off in quality after the mid 1960s. As in the case of Picasso, Warhol himself became the subject of discourse, as if his behavior, his lifestyle, his appearance explained his work. No one has ever noted the simplest thing—that in his early works he had an unerring, instinctive sense of placement. The sides or bottoms of his canvasses were left blank in varying degrees. This doesn't explain either their success or his intention or any "meaning," but it does indicate a degree of focus and concentration that he lost about the time he became seriously interested in film. Eventually he became interested in gossip which he reported to his friend, Pat Hackett, with the same "detachment" of his best works, except he was dealing with real people and their private lives which escape his monotone and become repulsive. In his best paintings Warhol enshrined the banality of his "heroes" with absolute sincerity. He probably did not understand his own success, and he did not develop. Eric Fischl has noted that success affected his inspiration and that he would have to change. Richard Lindner once told me that he was glad recognition came to him late in life. The successful artist is not as free to change as one less encumbered. Few modern artists have had the artistic longevity of, say, a Titian or a Matisse. This implies limitations that are new to art, a special element the modern artist must contend with, affecting both his intentions and judgments, which are, after all, the same thing.

Style is not the only thing in art, only the most important thing. In their manifest form, all intentions are formal. Real style validates content; it has to be valid or else art would not matter. A style that is valid is always valid, otherwise history would not matter. So style is about time. An artist in touch with his time is always in style, regardless of prevailing fashions. The problem may be that there are just not enough outlets for all the art being made. That's a little general, but in a way competition is part of the agenda here.

A style is not arrived at consciously but judgment is involved. A lot of art today is strategic, which means that judgment is subordinated to or swayed by the need to position the art in what is perceived as the reigning discourse of style. Judgment is guided by certain ideas that are a function of taste. The principle idea is to attain a unity that validates references to meaning in the work. Everything in the work means something when it has style.

Intentions more specific than this are subsumed by style. These can be discussed but I'm not much interested. A lot of art today is supposed to be "political" or "socially conscious," and thus morally superior to other kinds of art. There is, of course, a difference between figurative and

abstract art, and one kind of art can have more pertinence than another. There can also just be a craving for something different. Despite my emphasis on style, I'm not saying that all art means the same thing. But art as a value is always the same.

Different styles have more in common than is generally recognized but ideology claims otherwise. The history of art since Manet has been distorted because of ideological differences. The Academy tried to preserve a system of education and patronage that tied art to aristocratic power and privilege. The avant-garde ignored the irony of creating a sense of art and quality that was no less narrow. As the private gallery replaced the Salon, there were fewer places to exhibit for more and more artists. Today museums are largely hostages to fashion and art magazines are rarely critical of anything that is fashionable.

At this point I have to confess that I'm not sure I have contributed anything substantive to the putative topic of this symposium. As my opening remarks imply, the statement of this symposium is somewhat confused or split. It seems to have both a historical and and ideological agenda. But it is mainly the fact that artists' intentions—and here I use the word in its strictest sense—are extremely vague. An intention to me seems something in addition to artistic volition, in addition to the will to art. I hardly want to sacralize artistic practice, especially since its literal and material aspects defy mystification. Furthermore, sociological and psychological causalities are for me not the same thing that I understand as intention. Of course, volition without consciousness, without choice, is barely more than chaos. Perhaps "intention" is what occurs where volition and consciousness intersect. It is at the same intersection that social and psychological "forces" come into play. There is a place for these "forces" or "factors" in critical discourse, but too often these days they are taken to be explanations of meaning. If language is slippery, as current critical fashions would have us believe, that would seem to me to be proof that the idea of intention is something of a critical fallacy. If meaning is accessible to linguistic analysis, however, it is because meaning is taking the place of intention. This is plainly unvisual and patently ridiculous. That is all I have to say.

—November 1989

Notes

1 Thierry de Duve, "Andy Warhol, or the machine perfected," *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 3.

Art and the Logic of Computers

Andrew Menard

> "The movement of form in time inevitably ushered us into geometry and mathematics. It's the same as when you build a machine."
>
> —Marcel Duchamp

Mathematics has dominated science ever since Galileo, and comparisons between science and art are apt to elicit parallels with mathematics and physics. Chaos theory is merely the latest in a long line of theories that have fascinated artists and critics: relativity, quantum mechanics, the fourth dimension. Of course, chaos theory would have been impossible without the computer, and it is through the computer that science and art may for the first time speak the same language—the language of mathematics. It is also through the computer that aspects of form may converge. If Charles Babbage's "calculating machines" were almost Babylonian in their obsession with counting, the modern computer emphasizes logic, architecture—a geometry of information.

It is tempting to think of the computer as little more than information, and in 1990 the Museum of Modern Art presented "Information Art: Diagraming Micro-chips." But to talk of a *geometry* of information is really to admit that, in the world of computers, information is secondary, indeed arbitrary. Perhaps this is why the MOMA show seemed so pointless and confused, despite its limited focus. Evoking the visual tactics of Hanne Darboven or Joseph Kosuth is a mistake when the diagrams themselves suggest the work of Mondrian and Agnes Martin—artists with a geometric imagination. Information art, at least as it emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s, was largely a refutation of geometry and form. If there was a sense of order, it was an order of "one thing following another," as Judd once put it. Patterns were important—patterns, sequence, permutation—but not geometry or design. The computer, on the other hand—and the micro-chip, in particular—is almost pure design.

Generally speaking, the geometric imagination is static or formal. Believing in design usually implies belief in some absolute design—a notion that can be traced to the Greeks. When the Greeks first developed

geometry, it meant "measuring the world"; later, in the dialogues of Plato, it came to mean "knowledge of the eternally existent."

Perhaps the purest expression of geometry in art has been the grid. The grid is the modern form of paradise, the mathematical garden—and surely it is no surprise that once Mondrian and Martin enter the garden they endlessly repeat it as an image. The *logic* of the grid is repetition. Before Descartes, the grid was little more than a principle of order, as in Roman city-planning; it was also employed by artists for purely mechanical purposes: transferring a drawing from one size to another. After Descartes, however, the grid emerged as the principal method of quantifying space. Quantification meant that space could be assigned a specific coordinate instead of being perceived as even or undifferentiated—thus encouraging repetition, predictability, standardization. Essentially, the grid was a means of mapping or modeling space, and, in conjunction with the clock, was the foundation of modern navigation and world conquest. Space can be considered full (Descartes) or empty (Newton), but in the context of the grid it is infinite in extension, symmetrical, utopian. The grid is also, of course, the basis of computer design.

The artist most closely associated with computer design is Peter Halley. Of the many artists consigned to Neo-Geo, he is the only one to exhibit a geometric imagination. For Halley, any absolute form implies an absolute form of control. His notion of the "circuit" or "cell" is meant to suggest an architecture that, like the self-similarity of any fractal object, represents domination at every level of magnification. Yet geometry also offers relief from the pressures of psychology and style. By insisting on the center of the canvas, by avoiding the prison-house of composition, Halley reiterates the freedom of design. As in the work of so many artists after World War I, we encounter a symmetry between loss of control and control itself.

> "The relationship between what is 'abstract' and what is concrete or 'real' is changing."
>
> —Tishan Hsu

In its effort to simulate perfect design, the computer is both simple and abstract. Computers are built for speed, and great speed is possible only with great efficiency—meaning that perfect design = simplicity of design. Cara McCarty, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art show, found computer chips to be "the most complex patterns ever made." But complexity, in this case, is nothing more than simplicity raised to a higher level of abstraction.

Certainly abstraction is the operational sphere of computers. Reality itself has become more abstract. If photography (or mechanical reproduction) has been the prevailing metaphor for much of nineteenth and twentieth century art, the computer is rapidly rendering it obsolete.

(At best, photography will persist as a form of digitization.) Digitization represents the new world order, the transition from simulacra to simulation, from copying to modeling. In a sense, we are abandoning the world of Plato and entering that of Aristotle.

Simulacra survive within the philosophical boundaries of Plato's opposition between appearance and reality. In his metaphor of the cave and his discussion of types (where any chair is a copy of some Ideal chair and where something "can be beautiful only in so far as it partakes of absolute beauty"), there is no question of appearance merging with reality. Even the best copy is still a fake—as in the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, where it takes the intervention of Aphrodite to bring the sculpture to life. Obviously photography has been a perfect representation of Plato's dilemma, and it is through the camera that so many artists have examined questions of originality and authenticity.

In the philosophy of Aristotle, on the other hand, art is *supposed* to imitate reality. It isn't a question of authenticity but of precision—the exactness of the imitation, its verisimilitude. What for Plato is a crisis of knowledge, is for Aristotle a technical problem. Authenticity depends on the quality of imitation, on the virtuosity of artifice. Art = artifice. Plato was contemptuous of art precisely because it could never transcend artifice.

If a "better" simulacrum does not eliminate the philosophical distinction between real and fake, technical advances in simulation may very well erase the difference between real and virtual. Simulation sidesteps the opposition between real and fake by operating as a separate or parallel reality, a reality that exists alongside or within reality. We might say that it becomes a tear in the fabric of space-time, such that reality must include virtual reality—or such that virtual reality *is* reality. (This possibility was first given precise form by Alan Turing, and has become a popular category of science fiction—as in Ridley Scott's *Blade-runner* or William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Charles Platt's *Silicon Man.*) The essential feature of simulation is that it can create things that look perfectly natural or real, but in fact exist only as digital information. In other words, simulation can imitate or approximate reality without copying it. George Legrady: "A digital image does not represent an optical trace such as a photograph but provides a logical model of a visual experience."

As a logical model of visual experience computers are unique in their capacity to visualize an invisible world. When Benoit Mandelbrot correlated decades of cotton prices what he revealed was a hidden relationship, a repressed geometry: the fractal object. Another of IBM's scientists, Clifford Pickover, generated a series of what he calls "voltage sculptures"—imaginary animals that resemble ammonids but exist as nothing more than step-by-step instructions.

A number of years ago, Nancy Burson created a series of computer "composites." Working in collaboration with Richard Carling and David Kramlich, she took some photographs of two different faces, reprocessed the images digitally, and then combined them to form a third or "composite" face—a face from the invisible world of numbers. About the same time, the Yugoslavian artist Goran Dordević digitally reproduced a number of Malevich paintings, hung them on the digitally manufactured walls of an imaginary museum, and "photographed" the retrospective (thus anticipating the "real" retrospective by five years). For both of these artists, photography had become a new model, a kind of hardened grid, that abolished any connection to documentation, sentimentality, nostalgia.

> "All technology is matter built into ideal structures."
>
> —Robert Smithson

Since simulations cannot be considered copies, there is no question of treating them as fakes. If there is a distinction to be made, it is not between real and fake but between real and abstract—and in the domain of simulation, there may be no distinction. Computer images are among the most real we have ever produced, but they are also the most abstract, existing solely as a sequence of numbers or instructions. This is the paradox of artificial or virtual reality: that something so ideal as simulation is never-theless so precise in its approximation of the Real. We might say that reality is *perceived* as real only to the degree it has been idealized. Which is why, in a secular age, technology has become our exemplary model of reality.

> "When human functions are converted into abstract, uniform units, ultimately units of energy or money, there are no limits to the amount of power that can be seized, converted and stored."
>
> —Lewis Mumford

Modern forms of abstraction began with the Renaissance. The Renaissance itself was largely a humanist project, elaborated on a human scale, with notable achievements in art, architecture, medicine, anatomy. Perhaps the most characteristic image of the Renaissance was Vitruvian Man: the body as an ideal configuration of organic and geometric systems. Of course, the scale of humanism is precisely why it so quickly diminished in influence. Compared with mathematics, humanism showed little capacity for abstraction, little "craving for generality" (Wittgenstein). Only mathematics had the capacity to unite human and non-human scale in the realm of theory. As Galileo put it: "No one will be able to read the great book of the Universe if he does not understand its language, which is that of mathematics."

The computer represents the end of Renaissance space in art—the demise of Euclidian geometry. Cézanne may have shattered Renaissance space, but he retained the line, the edge, the plane and solid geometric shapes characteristic of Euclidian geometry; and the body was still the measure of his fragmentary perspective. Constructivism also eliminated linear space without eliminating its dependence on classic geometric shapes: the circle, the rectangle, the square.

In the Cartesian world of computers, nature as we know it does not exist. No longer is there any reference to the body. Computers are abstract, continuous, and discrete; in otherwords, they are both infinite and singular, an extended grid of individual coordinates, each of which is assigned a 0 or a 1. They are also without dimension, since points are always defined as having zero dimension. Number, then, not shape or volume defines the geometric space of computers.

Computers greatly accelerate the process of abstraction begun with the Renaissance, but they do so, paradoxically, by enhancing our powers of visualization. Galileo declared sight to be "the most excellent of senses"—only to be contradicted in the 1920s by Werner Heisenberg, who proclaimed visualization to be obsolete. Confronted with the scale of theoretical physics at the time, this was understandable. Once again, mathematics seemed to offer our only escape from the logic and dimension of human senses. Computers, however, have shown that there is no contradiction between mathematics and visualization—that, in fact, some of the most intractable problems can be solved *only* in the context of computer simulation. Operating independently of the body, and of the senses, computers have simply reduced visualization to an aspect of mathematics.

Something similar can be seen in Duchamp's rejection of "retinal" art. This was not an attack on vision or visualization, but on taste. It did, however, alter the scale of visualization. By disassociating art from the eye, and therefore from human scale, Duchamp allowed visualization much greater latitude or abstraction than before. Without this kind of abstraction, it is hard to image how something like the *Large Glass* would have been possible.

The notion of visualizing the invisible can also be found in the *Large Glass*, though without the lucidity, the precision of approximation, to be found in recent computer simulation: "The *shadow* cast by a 4-dim'l figure on our space is a *3-dim'l* shadow." Duchamp's mistake, his miscalculation, really, was to imagine that the invisible world had to be represented abstractly rather than realistically—that, in other words, there was a contradiction between visible and invisible, real and abstract. But virtual reality *is* virtual precisely because it is both abstract and real. The remarkable nature of simulation is that there are virtually no limits to what can be realistically represented. Timothy Binkley: "Unlike their physical

relatives, virtual tools obey strictly mathematic regimes that circumscribe their capabilities at the limits of logical, and not physical, impossibility."

> "The sciences do not try to explain, they hardly even try to interpret, they mainly make models."
>
> —John Von Neumann

> "If a piece is built it constitutes not how the piece looks but only how it could look."
>
> —Lawrence Weiner

> "Whenever I develop a system I feel it is important to destroy the system almost at once. It makes plain the fact that in the bottom half of the twentieth century it is only possible to be half-serious."
>
> —Frederick Barthelme

Since science has long been an inspiration for art, it is hardly surprising that a number of nineteenth and twentieth century artists have been intrigued by the metaphor of modeling or simulation. But it is not until Tzara's automated poems, Duchamp's *Large Glass*, Giacometti's hand-operated hand, that we encounter the first self-conscious simulation, the first use of simulation as an operational logic. Above all, these works are models and are meant to be understood as models. If so many of them resort to technology, it is largely because technology itself is a model: of the human body, of rationality, of perfection, of power. By ridiculing technology, or at least conventional notions of technology, Dada is not only an "anti-machine" (Octavio Paz) but an anti-model.

Models are often conceived as "visual approximations" (Kosuth). Approximation is crucial to the idea of simulation, for simulation implies a narrowing, a distillation of reality. Simulation = reduction. (Duchamp: "Reduce, reduce, reduce was my thought.") Any reduction is an idealization of reality, a scale-model that approximates a full range of relationships, but in miniature. This reductionism has been attractive to artists—after all, most works of art are a microscopic world of sorts, with their own rules of logic. Certainly the idea of "systems" was popular in the 1960s and early 1970s, and a recent example is Mel Chin's proposal for using plants to clean up a waste-dump site (a proposal that echoes earlier proposals by Nancy Holt). But artists have also discredited reduction for the rationalism it implies, resulting, once again, in the anti-model—the model that reduces *itself* as a model.

Models have always been a part of science—the *basis* of science, in fact—which is why modeling and simulation are not confined to the age of computers. But computers, uniquely visual in their capacity to model,

are beginning to *normalize* the virtualization of reality. Consciously or not, more and more artists are thinking in ways that embody or imply simulation. Modeling is becoming a significant aspect of art, especially in the work of artists who find science itself to be a model for art.

> "Reluctant moralists, we make art that suggests our simultaneous longing for anarchy and order—to have nothing and everything. An uneasy peace is made between the reassuring mythologies society and culture provide and our own wish to see ourselves as free agents."
>
> —Sherrie Levine

The work of Sherrie Levine perfectly illustrates the transition from simulacra to simulation. In her earlier work—the copies of Mondrian and Edward Weston—the emphasis is on repetition and authenticity. The nature of this work, its artful aversion to any separation between originals and copies, made such questions inevitable. On the other hand, these pieces never existed simply as copies. Instead they were *models* of copies—copies that embodied the logic of photography. The photographic model is essentially documentary, a matter of duplication (which is why the Weston copies were always more compelling—purer—than the Mondrian pieces). It is precisely this model that Levine abandons in her more recent work—the sand-blasted glass based on Duchamp's "malic molds," the pool tables lifted from a painting by Man Ray. It is as if Levine animated these objects, rather than copying them; as if she submitted them to a kind of CAD program that started with a single view and then rotated it, projecting what the objects would look like in three dimensions. This is not a matter of duplication but of imitation—and what we see are virtual objects, not copies. In effect, Levine is offering a new model of the object, a model deriving from simulation rather than simulacra. Although the glass pieces seem more satisfying, it is mainly because the "malic molds" themselves are so clearly simulations to begin with—suggesting the kind of symmetry that, photographically, was exploited in the Weston copies.

For Ronald Jones, models are both a source of work and something to be included within the work. For the most part, these models have been architectural (plans of Erich Mendelsohn's Columbushaus, a bookcase blocking the stairway to Anne Frank's attic) or medical (enlargements of the AIDS virus, a Jarvik artificial heart)—and they should be understood in the framework of simulation. Jones does not offer these models as copies or simulacra, especially since the color, or scale, or material often conflicts with the original. Even the table he extracts from Warhol's electric chair painting, or the chair he removes from the photograph of prisoner Edward Johnson eating his last meal, are not duplications so

much as re-creations. This is what these works are: mock-ups, prototypes of social and political events that, in their extremity or their bizarreness, evoke our worst fears. It is what gives the works their sense of irony: the feeling that whatever is being modeled—death, judgment, retribution, hope—essentially exceeds the dominion of mensuration and modeling. These are models about the domination of models: the collision of science and ethics, the collusion of science and power.

Ashley Bickerton, in his early work, often asserted that his art did not exist "at one specific juncture of its life, but at all junctures: in storage, in transportation, in the gallery, at the auction, as well as on the wall." For the most part, these early works were models of their own circulation as cultural artifacts. In his more recent work we find this solipsism replaced by images of technology and imperialism, development and ruin: high-tech bunks, suggesting the hammocks of Cook's or Magellan's ships; port-hole shaped vitrines, containing Cheese Doodles and used Polaroid film as well as copper sulfate and sand; green liquor bottles, painted with the names of various colonized peoples. In many ways, these works are reminiscent of the harmony between mechanical and organic systems to be found in Smithson's sites/non-sites. Constructed in the language of technology, but evoking the language of nature, the works can be seen as models of the world itself becoming a cultural artifact—and of art's contribution to this process.

Technology offers the clearest model of art as simulation, if only because it suggests the operational nature of simulation, it logic or program. The preoccupation with obsolete or eccentric technology, so common to Dada, is now being adopted by a new generation of artists: Rosemarie Trockel's painting machine, Michael Joaquín Grey's clay-covered microscope, John Kessler's earthquake non-simulator, Rebecca Horn's temperamental suitcase, Kristen Jones' and Andrew Ginzel's stasis machine, TODT's technological environments. Unlike the earlier machines, however, these new machines refer not to the steam or gasoline engine, but to the computer (some of them actually employ computer chips). The most obvious feature of the computer is its speed, and, in a sense, these lumbering and whimsical machines act as a kind of visual "delay" in the domain of computer logic. They decelerate the process of simulation while still representing it as a model. Duchamp once referred to the "static representation of movement." These machines would appear to reverse this process, operating as a kind of moving representation of stasis. They simulate, not the speed of computers, but their logic or design, which is essentially static and formal. In doing so, of course, they also subvert or distort this logic.

> "The work of art is valuable only in so far as it is vibrated by the reflexes of the future."
>
> —André Breton

> "What the artist seeks is coherence and order—not 'truth,' correct statements or proofs. He seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate."
>
> —Robert Smithson

The convergence of art and technology, by no means unique to the modern era, is largely a matter of teleology. Consider the myth of Galatea again, this time as simulation rather than simulacrum. There is no mention in the myth of a model for Galatea—and it would appear that Pygmalion falls in love, not with a perfect copy, but a perfect imitation. Galatea is neither an idealized version of one particular woman, nor the impoverished version of some Ideal woman; instead she is generic, a unique "composite" of features that we recognize as human, female, beautiful. Galatea's beauty is more than a question of physiognomy, however. Any myth of simulation is a myth of craft or technological virtuosity—and virtuosity itself invites an aesthetic response. Galatea is beautiful because she is perfect, *technically* perfect. That she comes to life only with the help of Aphrodite is largely a matter of abstraction. At its logical limits, the limits of pure abstraction, simulation may erase the philosophical difference between artificial life and real life, thus eliminating the need for divine intervention. Certainly this is the aim of cybernetics—and, in its prolonged struggle towards abstraction, it has been an aim of Western art. Only in the modern era have we begun to question this teleology of perfection.

But what is the nature of our doubt? We find ourselves in an Aristotelian world: will we continue to evaluate this world with a consciousness, and a mistrust, that is essentially Platonic? If photography and advertising have occupied our imagination for the past several decades, it is time we acknowledged the importance of plans, briefs, blue-prints, layouts, renderings, treatments, projections, soft-ware. It is not falseness that confronts us, but artificiality; it is not a diminished or deformed reality we face, but a reality dominated by design. The "reflexes of the future" have been digital for some time.

—February 1991

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A Langerian Comparison of a Starnina Painting and a Richard Howard Poem

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"There are no happy marriages in art—only successful rape"—so says Susanne Langer in her essay "Deceptive Analogies: Specious and Real Relationships Among the Arts."[1] Langer is condemning the fashionable practice of regarding the arts as all one Art. She argues that an understanding of the way each art is unique is a necessary first step to gaining insight into how the arts can interrelate. The categories of artistic illusion that Langer defines provide a terminology for describing what "symbols of human feeling" each art presents to its audience. Although she makes war against the makers of "specious analogies" among the arts, she provides a system of categories that seems to offer a way to the analysis of "real" relationships and influences among works of art in different forms.

The method of analysis to be used in this study is based on the theory of art and system of categories presented in Langer's *Feeling and Form*. In that work Langer expands the philosophy of music that she developed in *Philosophy in a New Key* into a philosophy of all the arts. According to Langer, works of art in every media express "forms of feeling" that are composed of elements that parallel lived experience: tensions and resolutions, rhythmic progressions, and so forth. The value of works of art is that they capture, give form to, feelings so that we can enjoy and study them. Art objects, as "nondiscursive" symbols, can express feelings that the discursive symbols of everyday language cannot.

Langer's Categories and Terminology

The categories enter her theory when she describes the "virtualities" of the various art forms. Literature is "virtual life," the visual arts are "virtual space," music is "virtual time," and dance is "virtual powers." She further distinguishes modes within the visual and literary illusions. In the visual arts, painting is "virtual scene," sculpture is "virtual kinetic volume," and architecture is "virtual ethnic domain"; while in the literary

arts, lyric poetry is "virtual timeless present," narrative poetry and novel are "virtual past," and drama is "virtual future." She allows for the complexity of art works by establishing that, although the various virtualities are the primary illusions of their respective arts, there can also be other virtualities involved as secondary illusions. Thus, a novel whose primary illusion is virtual life could have a secondary illusion of virtual space. The primary illusion is said by Langer to "assimilate" the secondary illusion or illusions. Since these illusions can be present to varying degrees, we can speak of illusions having second, third, or fourth priority prominence in a work.

It will, I think, be necessary to include here an outline of Langer's categories of primary illusion and a glossary of her terminology. Although both the outline and the definitions will risk the twin dangers of oversimplification and belaboring the obvious, these explications are necessary to make intelligible the Langerian analyses that follow. Even when Langer uses familiar terms she gives them a particular slant to suit her needs. Since most of the terms are best and most appropriately defined in Langer's *Feeling and Form* and *Problems in Art*, I will be referring frequently to those texts. (For a detailed, and disapproving, critique of Langer's terms and the assumptions that underlie them see Samuel Bufford's 1972 discussion of Langer's "two philosophies.")[2]

Langer's Categories of Primary Illusion

1. virtual space (plastic arts)
   a. mode of virtual scene (painting)
   b. mode of virtual kinetic volume (sculpture)
   c. mode of virtual ethnic domain (architecture)
2. virtual time (music)
3. virtual powers (dance)
4. virtual life (literature)
   a. mode of virtual timeless present (lyric poetry)
   b. mode of virtual past (narrative poetry and novel)
   c. mode of virtual future (drama)

Langer's Terminology

Virtual: Langer uses this term to make clear that works of art do not have material existence. Paint on a stretched canvas may have been used to create a picture, but the painting as a work of art exists only as a "virtual" space. The physical substances the artist used are not in that space.[3] Langer derives this term from physics where it is used to account for the space we see in a mirror. Besides reflections, other non-artistic virtualities would be things that are mere appearances, such as rainbows and mirages.[4] Although she has derived the term from an optical usage, she applies it to the non-material appearances presented in all types of art.

Illusion: this term is connected with Langer's use of *virtual*. A virtual object is something that is merely an appearance or semblance and nothing else. Another way of referring to a virtual object is to say that it presents an "illusion."[5] This term has caused Langer some problems. In her later lectures she switches to *apparition*, apparently believing it less confusing than *illusion*.[6]

Primary illusion: Langer considers that each art form presents one characteristic kind of illusion or semblance. What makes the illusion primary is that it is always present whenever its form of art exists. Thus, whenever we have a visual work of art, there must be a primary illusion of virtual space.

Mode: for two of the primary illusions—space, the visual arts, and life, the literary arts—Langer has provided modes as subtypes of the illusions. These modes are provided for descriptive purposes. They give us the means to distinguish between the various kinds of virtual space and virtual life that have typically been created. Thus, a painting has the primary illusion of virtual space in the mode of virtual scene.

Secondary illusion: works of art often have more going on in them than can be adequately explained by reference to the primary illusion alone. A secondary illusion is an incomplete appearance of an illusion that is primary in another type of art. Thus, there can be a secondary illusion of virtual time in a painting whose primary illusion is virtual space.[7]

Tertiary illusion: this term is not used by Langer, but it follows on the same principle as her term secondary illusion. It is, in fact, a *secondary illusion* that has less force and priority in a work than another secondary illusion. That secondary illusions can have varying degrees of prominence is stated by Langer in several places.[8] I will be speaking, in my analyses, of illusions having second, third, or fourth priority prominence in the work.

Assimilation: this key term is used to explain what happens when secondary illusions are present in works of art. Langer says that features of a work that belong to another realm of art are "swallowed" by the primary illusion. In a song, for instance, the illusion of virtual life presented in a poem is swallowed or assimilated by the illusion of virtual time presented in the music.[9]

Virtual space: this is the space perceivable in visual works of art. It is entirely visual space that is not a part of the spaces within which we live. This detached space is "a self-contained, total system."[10]

Virtual scene: this is one of the modes of virtual space; it is the mode created in paintings; it has the effect of making space discernible. All elements in a virtual scene are related to one another because they are all organized into one design.[11]

Virtual kinetic volume: this is the spatial mode created in sculpture. We perceive sculpture as being at the center of its own space, a space that resembles the space in which we perceive ourselves to exist. The volume is kinetic because we conceive of it as in action. Even though we know on

an intellectual level that sculpted volume cannot move, we automatically feel the movement asserted by the statue's stance in its own space.[12]

Virtual ethnic domain: architecture presents this mode of virtual space by providing an image that "expresses the characteristic rhythmic functional patterns which constitute a culture."[13] Architecture makes a culture perceivable. This is true not just in the obviously religious spaces of temples, but applies also to secular buildings. Architecture can include more than interior spaces. Gardens, terraces, patches of sky seen between columns, and many other elements can help establish the cultural significance of the space.[14]

Virtual powers: dance makes visible a play of forces or powers. We sense in the movements of the performers significant gestures that make us discern conflicts of vital energies. Dance arose for primitive man as a means to a presentation of his awareness of powers of darkness and light, death and fertility, and so forth. Modern forms of dance make visible similar apparitions of powers; the detachment from religious tradition that characterizes most modern balletic performance does not diminish the illusion of virtual powers.[15]

Virtual time: this is the primary illusion of music. Time in the musical illusion is subjective time or "felt time." Music displays this time so that our hearing can perceive it as a pattern. It is constituted by our discernment of tensions and resolutions and other complications made audible by the motion of forms of sound. Virtual time is complex and variable, unlike the clock time of everyday experience, which is just a simple succession of moments.[16]

Virtual life: literature makes apparent to us an image of life by use of devices of language. Our actual thoughts often lack structure and complete-ness, but in a literary work thought patterns can be fully developed. The writer can create a text that shows the reader a semblance of lived experience.[17]

Virtual timeless present: lyric poetry gives us a semblance of "the occurrence of a living thought, the sweep of an emotion, the intense experience of a mood." It is "a genuine piece of subjective history."[18] Since subjective history always seems to us to be timeless, the mode of lyric poetry's virtual life appears to us as a virtual timeless present.[19]

Virtual past: narrative literary works, whether in verse or prose, give us a semblance of life as a completed memory.[20]

Virtual future: drama gives an image of human destiny that develops before us as we watch the action of the play unfold. Every event that we observe during this unfolding is charged with potential because it is perceived as moving toward an as yet unspecified future.[21]

Although, as Bufford has shown, Langer's categories and terminology are open to several kinds of criticism, I am leaving such questions aside. For the purposes of this article I am simply accepting Langer's categories and attempting to apply them in a systematic way. What I am engaged in

here is, thus, an "experimental" application of a particular aesthetic theory to specific works of art.

The method of "Langerian" analysis I employ in this essay could be used with any kind of work of art, but it seems to have a special relevance to the analysis of works in one art form written under the influence of, or at least in the presence of, works in a different art form. To gain an understanding of how poems inspired by paintings can be seen to incorporate the various Langerian categories of artistic illusion I will conduct a three-stage analysis. First, I will endeavor to determine the disposition of illusions in Starnina's *Thebaid* (c. 1400). Next, I will do the same for the poem Richard Howard wrote under the inspiration of Starnina's work. Lastly, I will consider what observations can be made concerning the priorities of the illusions in the poem in comparison to the priorities of the illusions in the painting.

The choice of Richard Howard's "Thebais" and the Starnina painting to which it refers as my materials for analysis is a somewhat arbitrary one. I could have focused on the "iconic" poems of any of the numerous writers who have written poems that refer to visual works—William Carlos Williams, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Howard Nemerov, and Stephen Dobyns to name just a few. Howard was chosen largely because there is richness and subtlety to his poetic use of the visual work that seemed to promise special challenges and rewards to analysis.

Starnina's *Thebaid*

For the purposes of the first stage of my analysis I can accept Susanne Langer's judgment that the primary illusion of a painting must be virtual space in the mode of virtual scene; certainly there is no disputing that Starnina's *Thebaid* is a scene. There is, also, I think, no disputing that the other two spatial modes come into play along with the scenic mode. There is a complex of spatial effects at work here. The space of Starnina's picture is an arrangement—of people, buildings, creatures, rocky outcroppings, and vegetation—that appears at first glance to be almost random, almost as if a child's toys had been dumped from a box and then stood up where they fell. The river that flows down the right side of the picture and then cuts across the foreground breaks this initial impression of randomness and helps me to discover the scenic organization of the space. The scene is actually framed on three sides—the green river is on the bottom and on the right, and the blue sky and the mountains run along the top. On the left the scene is merely "cropped" so that we can presume that the monastic scene continues to unfold in that direction. The scene is organized into two parallelograms divided by a dark green channel of water that cuts from the main body of the river into the center of the picture. The buildings, the vegetation, the groupings of

monks and animals—all reinforce this diagonal line, or rather this series of parallel diagonal lines that are displayed across the face of the composition like a series of unmoving waves. The effect of parallel waves is, however, most emphatically enforced by Starnina's slanting of the facets of his mountains and the shifting colors he has given to these strangely massed peaks. Starting on the left the mountains are green and grassy, the next are brown, and finally ending on the extreme right with gray. The rhythm of these parallel lines broken only in the center and at the sides of the picture supplies the scene with what unity it has. It is a unity established by repetition. Although I have described the organization of the scene from left to right, it could as easily have been described from right to left. It is the horizontalness of the scene that I am trying to establish; its direction is reversible. It is important to note, too, that the composition lacks hierarchical signals. No part of the scene has clear priority over any other. There is no orientation of scenic priorities through the use of triangular structure. This seems fitting for a depiction of a monastic scene that is, for the most part, a brotherhood of equals.

That last statement points toward an important aspect of the picture's virtual life. It is an aspect I will need to return to later. In looking at the picture I do not see the Langerian illusions as separate from one another; therefore, there will be some necessary overlap as I describe the illusions I am finding in the work.

As I indicated at the outset, I am immediately aware, as I look at this picture, of spatial illusions beyond what is scenic. There is a sculptural quality to the details of this work; the mode of kinetic volume is, thus, important to the picture's illusion of virtual space. The rocky cliffs are what most dramatically give the sense that this Theban monastery's volumes are kinetic. A more realistic rendering of mountains would not have so strong a kinetic effect. Langer testifies that kinetic volumes need not be human figures: they can be "non-representational shapes, like simple hewn monoliths, monumental pillars, pure inventions."[22] What makes a volume "kinetic" is that we perceive it, not as an object but as "the center of a space all its own." We see it as a "semblance of the self and its world."[23] In Starnina's picture we see the "sculpted" cliffs as active agents in the space that surrounds them. These abstract, jagged thrustings of rock seem almost to protrude from the picture plane, seem almost to be moving toward us. That the peaks are separately structured and colored, rhythmically repeating groups contributes to their kinetic effect. They are like abstract statuary—strongly-faceted, dramatically-shadowed, three-dimensional presences that dominate the scene. The three-dimensionality of the buildings and vegetation is not as well established, making these constructed and cultivated features of the scene seem slightly less substantial than the vigorous volumes of the

mountains. The people, with their heavily draped ecclesiastical robes, however, have a statue-like, kinetic presence that almost equals that of the mountains. In fact, the colors of the monks' robes often coordinate them with, and make them seem subtle echoes of the mountains behind and above them. This echo effect seems to enhance the kinetic effects of both mountains and monks, as if this scene were really just a gallery for the display of statues.

Curiously, one of the few really flat looking features of the composition are the boats on the river. It's as if departure and land-leaving were not substantial possibilities for these monks. The only monks who have clearly three-dimensional boats are the monk on the right who is pulling in a fish and the two monks in the center who are just boarding their boat; both of these boating activities are tied to activities on the land. The fisherman will momentarily bring his catch to land; the boarding monks are still physically attached to the shore. As with my analysis of the scenic mode of the picture's virtual space, my analysis of the sculptural mode has led me to comment on the life of the illusion.

Although, perhaps, less dramatic and obvious than the sculptural mode, the architectural mode is also important to the virtual space of Starnina's picture. According to Langer, virtual ethnic domain, the architectural mode, is a way of talking about the essential features of "built" space. It will be helpful to quote Langer at length here so I can more readily explain how this mode can be seen in Starnina's work. Langer's conception of the architectural does not confine the ethnic domain exclusively to interior space:

> A building may be entirely enclosed by a solid, masking wall, like a Renaissance palace or a Turkish harem, where life lies open to the court within; or it may have practically no shell at all, being divided from its surroundings only by glass and moveable shades, curtains, and screens. Its virtual domain may include terraces and gardens, or rows of sphinxes, or a great rectangular pool. Sea and sky may fill the intervals between its columns and be gathered to its space.[24]

Thus, a virtual ethnic domain may include gardens, terraces, patches of sky, and so forth within its illusion. In Starnina's picture, it seems to me, the entire depicted monastery registers on our attention as an ethnic domain. The buildings scattered throughout this wilderness-as-a-space-for-worship have the effect of taming the savage place into a domain for devotion. The buildings are scattered about the scene like raisins in a cake so they do not give the scene a geometrical arrangement beyond reinforcing the pattern of repeated diagonals mentioned earlier, but it is that scattering that defines the domain. The monastery at Thebes is here

shown, as it is in other medieval Thebaids, as an outdoor place for "interior" devotions.

Since I find myself regarding, once again, the virtual life of this scene, and, since I have now discussed all three modes of the painting's virtual space, I will turn to consideration of the virtual life of Starnina's *Thebaid.* According to Langer, the literary illusion of virtual life can only be a secondary illusion of a visual work of art whose primary illusion, is, by definition, virtual space. Another way of saying this is that, if virtual space is not the first priority illusion, we are not dealing with a visual work of art.

It seems to me that painted scenes that contain human figures inevitably have a secondary illusion of virtual life. When I see a human figure, I automatically assume life of some kind. Even where there are no human figures, there often is the implication of life. It could be this aspect of painted scenes that makes them of such great appeal to the many poets who write iconic poems. The painted scene is a witnessed living "frozen" into a spatial arrangement. Though the virtual life of a picture is secondary to its virtual space, that virtual life is often important to the picture's power, as it is in Starnina's painting. The mode of this virtual life can, however, be a matter of dispute. In the case of *Thebaid,* an argument could be made for describing the mode of the secondary illusion as virtual past; there is an implied narrative to this collection of monastic scenes; but ultimately I must accept that the mode of this painted virtual living is predominantly the timeless present. Although the events belong to the past, the painted scene is irresistibly present. Even viewers who are aware that the depicted monks belong to a historical sequence that could be presented as a narrative must perceive the painting as a unified landscape existing in an endless now. The design of the work makes us see it as a tableau rather than a history. There are other medieval and Renaissance works in which a narrative is presented pictorially by showing a sequence of scenes, but that is not the case in Starnina's picture. As was mentioned earlier, there is an equality of significance to the many little scenes contained within this large scene. The monk who is fishing is no less important than the monk who is riding a leopard—at least, no hierarchy is insisted upon by the design of the scene. The clothing of the monks would, of course, reveal some differences in rank and station, but the arrangement and treatment of the figures in the space does not reinforce those differences in status.

Although the mode of the timeless present dominates the life of Starnina's scene and there is no narrative sequence of images, we cannot entirely ignore the modes of virtual past and virtual future. Within the timeless moment rests a present scene that has come from a past and must move toward a future. The moment may be frozen, but my imagination is not. Thus, the modes of fiction and drama are important to

the picture's effect, even though those modes are only part of the illusion by implication. A monk herds his donkey across a path. I must assume that man and beast began this movement at a previous moment and will continue it into a future. This picture is rife with narrative suggestion. Every little cluster of men and animals suggests a novel or a play in miniature. The suggestiveness of these scenes-within-the-scene makes me want to know or invent stories. The tension between the temporal modes of virtual life are important to my investigation since the tension between a picture's timeless present and the past and future we want to imagine for it will be a matter of some importance when I turn to the examination of Richard Howard's poems.

I should summarize where my consideration of Starnina's *Thebaid* has taken me so far. I have found that the painting's primary illusion is virtual space predominantly in the mode of virtual scene, but with the modes of virtual kinetic volume and virtual ethnic domain having some importance as well. I have found that the secondary illusion is virtual life predominantly in the timeless present mode, but with some significant tensions between that mode and the modes of past and future. Now that I have the work's primary and secondary illusions is my Langerian analysis finished? In *Feeling and Form*, Langer is concerned only with primary illusions and the secondary illusions they assimilate. Nothing she says, however, precludes the possibility that there might be a tertiary illusion or that all four kinds of illusions might be assimilated within one work.

In the case of Starnina's work I can see a clear basis for finding a tertiary illusion. It is interesting, however, that in describing what I consider to be a tertiary illusion of virtual time, I will be referring to elements of the picture that were important in my description of the primary illusions of virtual space. The rhythmic, horizontal repetition of diagonal lines and masses that unifies this picture as a scene also has a notable musical effect. The long horizontal spread of this painted panel is reminiscent of the landscape scrolls of Chinese and Japanese art. Such scrolls inevitably have a stronger sense of aesthetically modulated time than is the case in typical Western landscapes where one glance can take in the overall structure of a scene. The "wave" metaphor I used earlier has relevance to Starnina's musical illusion. The rocky modulations of the mountains—which are echoed in the clusters of people, creatures, build-ings, and foliage—have temporal, musical effects that are unmistakable even though they are overridden by the stronger illusions of space and life. As lovely as this musical illusion is, it would be difficult to argue for giving it higher than third priority. There is no doubt that Starnina's painting is a virtual scene, and it is a scene that teems with life. The music merely plays softly under the more major excitements of scene and life.

The fourth priority illusion of virtual powers in Starnina's picture is overshadowed by the previously discussed illusions, but it is, nonetheless, important. This picture is a choreographed ensemble of gestures. The monks are coming and going, worshipping and meditating. Everything they do is in some way indicative of their dedication of their lives to God and to the Theban monastic life. The myriad gestures that make up their lives are a kind of dance of homage. The community is entirely organized around worship and all of its gestures evocative of a spiritual force. The illusion of virtual powers is pervasive but understated. It seems to me the least powerful of the work's illusions.

Richard Howard's "Thebais"

Because I will be making detailed references to Richard Howard's poem, it will be useful to reproduce it in its entirety at the outset. One of America's best critics and translators as well as one of its best poets, Richard Howard has over the years published a number of poems inspired by works of art. (Works by Fra Angelico, Caspar David Friedrich, Donatello, Simone Martini, Giovanni Bellini, and Rodin have also made appearances in Howard's poems.) "Thebais" appeared in a 1979 collection entitled *Misgivings* and published by Atheneum.

Thebais

> In the next small room we find Starnina's panel depicting the lives of saintly hermits in a landscape which shows the artist to have had a highly developed understanding of nature. Starnina (1354?-1403?) remains, however, an enigmatic figure; Berenson does not mention him, and the attempt to attribute this picture to the young Uccello was never convincing.
>
> —Guide to the Uffizi
> for Cynthia Macdonald

There are, by my tally, just a hundred
of us here, monks living and dead, maybe
more—without a jeweler's loupe, who could tell?
nor am I sure the dead ones count, except
to suggest a symbolic enterprise
to the living (more about that later) ...
We are all over the place, even up
in a tree, even down in the dragon's
mouth—look over there on the extreme right,
just beyond the white-walled village, see him?

your common or yellow-bellied dragon
waiting for one of us to wade across,
above the double bridge, where the water
thins to a more negotiable gold,
though why that dragon fails to negotiate
the stream in our direction I can't guess—
all the other animals are here, beasts
of burden, birds of prey, one dancing bear,
and there comes Brother Anselm from behind
the ragged hills, riding on a leopard!

I always said there was something showy
about Brother Anselm, he could never
be content like the rest of us to ward
off jackals, herd our long-horned antelope,
or discipline a fox which has just gnawed
through the neck of Father Eustace's hen—
do you see anyone else riding? No,
we walk, even on water, or else we are
transported, as by devils, through the air
to bleak caves with little more than a bell

and a basket to make our wants known. Wants!
We farm, we fish, and Brother Fred can bake
(if you call that baking). Once in a while
someone remembers us and sends real bread
from town—you might suppose those two in red
gowns were angels, up where George the novice
is reading to the new abbot (we read lots),
but they are merely rich ladies who hope
to have it both ways; every now and then
they stay the night, listening. Then we feast,

and that brings me—feasting does—to my point,
or at least to my line. Any depiction
of human life—and Lord knows, ours is that,
if "human" means warfare with what is not—
goes to show nothing exists by itself,
not even the eminent thunder rattling
St. Antony who has just wrapped St. Paul
(of Thebes, dead at 113)
in a yellow mantle he had himself
received from Athanasius, attended

by one of our reverent lions (rather
a desert specialty, that); not even,
between the pines, some intricate red roofs
which correspond to a red-silk binding
of the sermon read over a red silk bier
of our patriarch of earthly arcades
in the opposite corner; not even …
But it is hard for me to put you in
the picture over here: there have been no
enlargements made of the entire left half,

we must abide by a general sense of pink
and delicate architecture reproached
by certain precipices only, for
as the Preacher saith, better is the sight
of the eye than the wandering of desire.
And it is better, this unrequited
attachment of ours to things in general,
this long perspective we might call tragic
if we did not, like Starnina, call it
love: taken out of scale, taken close up,

it is holocaust. I say Starnina
"calls" it love, by which I mean he labors
to label what he shows, and thereby
calls it love, these coenobite practices
he discovers to us in little boats,
on large boulders, among lilac buildings,
for love is shown in violence, supreme
love in levity. Which joy, once a meager
publicity of pagans, is for this painter
the giant secret of his anchorites

whose world is an adventure, not a scheme,
and our differences from each other
an absolute sanctity. Nothing
exists by itself … Who is the man, anyway,
this Starnina of ours? One Gherardo
of Florence, who being nobler in blood
than in nature, by Vasari's account,
brought more harm on himself than on his friends
thereby; and more harm still would have brought
if he had not dwelt a long time in … Spain!

where he learned gentleness and courtesy,
so that on returning, those who bore him
hatred received him lovingly. Spain then,
or the desert behind Thebes—any place
of trial is inconceivable without
a semblance of self-exposure. And then
disappearance. Maybe we are not his
at all, because there was no Starnina ...
Look! a man may vanish as God vanished,
by filling all things with created life.

Howard's "Thebais" is basically a lyric poem; thus, it has the primary illusion of virtual life predominantly in the mode of the timeless present. The speaking is in the present tense for most of the poem, and the speaker treats what he describes as current events. The mode of this virtual life is not; however, securely fixed in the present. The tendency toward narrative that underlies all literary illusion is important to this poem. There is a tension in Howard's "Thebais" between the mode of the timeless present and the modes of the past and the future. To find the virtual life in a poem we must discover the nature of the speaker and the speaking in the poem. The speaker is the stance from which the virtual life issues; the speaking is the making manifest of that life. The speaker in Howard's "Thebais" is, obviously, a character in the picture. Howard gives us his speech without identifying the location of the character in the picture. He is simply one of the monks: "There are by my tally, just a hundred / of us here." (stanza one) The pronouns place him in Starnina's scene. Yet several of his comments imply a vantage point outside of the picture. Since there are several such breaks in the verisimilitude of the narrative—and each one is a witty, playful aside—we can surmise that the poet is deliberately playing games with the illusory life of his poem. In the third line, for instance, the speaker declares that an exact tally of the number of monks would not be possible "without a jeweler's loupe." This obviously makes the speaker an observer of the picture, but in the lines that follow he maintains his posture as an inhabitant of the scene. A few stanzas further there is another, even more emphatic deployment of the observer-of-the-picture stance: "But it is hard for me to put you in / the picture over here: there have been / no enlargements made of the entire left half." (stanza six) This droll comment makes the speaker into a browser of art books who does not even have the original painting at his disposal. (Since the epigraph to the poem is a quote from *Guide to the Uffizi*, we could suspect that Howard had that illustrated guide and perhaps a few other art books spread out in front of him during the composition of the poem.) There are several other smaller touches of this sort. He tells us that the dragon is on the "extreme right." (stanza one)

The final four stanzas discuss the painter Starnina from an art historical perspective, but Howard never releases the speaker from his citizenship in the picture. The last statement of the poem reaffirms the speaker's position as a part of the scene while wittily suggesting that Starnina is that scene's lost God:

> Maybe we are not his
> at all, because there was no Starnina ...
> Look! a man may vanish as God vanished,
> by filling all things with created life. (stanza ten)

The games Howard plays with his speaker allows him to have it both ways: he gets to be a character in the picture while retaining the ability to comment as an observer of a painting. The contradiction between the viewpoints does not interfere with the poem's effects because the switching of perspectives is a mechanism of the poet's wit. In other words, the switching around *is* one of the poem's effects. Obviously, this switching around of the speaker's stance has implications for the mode of the illusion's virtual life. When the speaker comments on the artist, Starnina, he switches from the present tense that he uses for all his remarks about the picture and its scene to a past tense that enables him to recount the historical tale of a mysterious man who "brought more harm on himself than on his friends." (stanza nine) This putting of the artist in his historical place, also, by implication, places the picture in its historical time of composition. This historical narrative impulse is in conflict with the speaker's insistent placement of himself in a presently transpiring scene.

The manner of the speaker's speaking is conversational in tone and style. Howard's effortless, seemingly, casual, patter gives this speaking a plausibility that establishes a kind of realness, if not realism; the manner of speaking persuades me of its naturalness despite the deliberate inconsistency of viewpoint and the strangeness of the world described. The eloquence of the speaker does not become tedious or pretentious because his delivery is so wonderfully casual, specific, and matter-of-fact. The plausibility of this eloquence makes me attentive to the narrative potential of the scene he is describing. I see stories in the works as he describes the depicted characters and creatures, architecture, and terrain. When I receive the comment that "Brother Fred can bake / (if you call that baking)," I am given a thread of story that arouses my curiosity as to what has happened at past bakings and what would happen if Fred were to bake again. Howard forces me to strain against the timelessness of the moment as well as the paintedness of the scene. Thus, this monologue poem pushes hard against the lyric moment. It has a sense of a virtual present that assumes a virtual past and hints at a virtual future. Lyric, narrative, and dramatic modes are all operating at once in the virtual life that Richard

Howard has created to animate the virtual scene that inspired him. The virtual life of his poem is, thereby, charged with nuance and potential.

The poetic form of Howard's verse reinforces the paradoxical stance of the speaker. This is storytelling suspended in elegant blank verse stanzas. Howard manages to give the appearance that the speaker is speaking prosaically while all the while a poetic pattern is being carefully adhered to. A survey of the beginnings and endings of his lines confirms that he generally keeps a firm hold on his iambic rhythm despite the appearance of effortless speaking. Almost every line begins with an unaccented syllable and ends with an accented one. One could be tempted to try to make much of the ten by ten by ten pattern of this poem (one could even talk about the tally of a hundred monks!), but such a digression would merely lead us back to the basic and obvious point that the poem has a firmly ordered formal structure underlying its witty rhetorical gesturings. The mechanisms of these gesturings are various. There is, for instance, considerable game playing with regard to the breaks between stanzas and units of discourse. There are forms of linking that work to partially override the breaks to keep the poem rolling toward its conclusion. The discourse breaks (where we would end a paragraph of prose) are overridden by the use of strong transition statements that link one topic with the next without pause. For instance, the discussion of the number of monks that takes place in the first stanza leads to a mention that there may be a monk "even down in the dragon's / mouth." By this means the dragon is introduced as the first reference in a "paragraph" describing the eccentric activities of the pictured monks. The verse "paragraphs" in turn help to link the stanzas since these units of discourse invariably straddle the stanza breaks. Heavy use of enjambment further links the blockish ten-line stanzas. Howard's sentences are often lengthy, and they often start in the middle of one stanza and end somewhere in the middle of the next one. Thus, the poetic form of this lyric moment, which strains toward becoming a narrative, contributes to the tension between stasis and movement that is central to the poem's effect. The verses tumble forward without escaping their neatly contrived stanzaic form, just as the speaker's monologue tumbles forward without escaping the timeless world he his trying to re-imagine.

The secondary illusion of Howard's poem is, not unexpectedly, virtual space in the mode of virtual scene. Howard's speaker provides considerable detail that can be identified in Starnina's painted scene. My previous discussion of the tension between the mode of the timeless present and the modes of past and future can be related to the nature of Howard's scenic effects. The illusion is more clearly scenic when Howard's speaker is describing his world rather than showing it in action. In saying this I am restricting *scenic* to its Langerian meaning of a static pictorial design; therefore, words and phrases that point to details as

fixtures of the scene reinforce the spatial illusion. Two statements in the first stanza do this most clearly: "There are by my tally, just a hundred / of us here ... / We are all over the place." The use of the verb *are* indicates the simple statement of the existence of the scenic details. The prepositions the speaker uses in specifying the locations of details are also important spatial markers. They enable him to tell us that there are monks "even up / in a tree, even down in the dragon's / mouth" and so forth. Such spatial use of prepositions to locate scenic details can be found in every stanza except the last two, where the focus is on Starnina's life rather than on his picture. Howard's use of the directional words *right* and *left* supplements the prepositions in his exposition of the ways in which "We are all over the place."

The many instances, discussed at length earlier, when the speaker becomes an observer of the painted scene are, however, the most important and explicit establishers of the secondary illusion of virtual scene. Because of the way Howard plays games with his literary and scenic illusions it was necessary to describe how his scenic references were intertwined with and confronted by his speaker's living. The switching of stances from being a character in the picture to being an observer of the picture is an outrageous violation of plausibility, but it is so outrageous that it works as a comically artificial procedure that does allow Howard to have it both ways. This interfacing of artistic illusions may not work for all readers, but I must admit that I can enjoy the wit of his strategy and accept the double vision it allows him.

Howard's fictionalization of his scenic effects serves, of course, to fight against their scenic nature. His giving of names and implied personalities to the monks and his twisting of what he has observed in the picture into little anecdotes are basic to his manner of story suggesting. The speaker's critical commentary on the behavior of Brother Anselm is a good example of how far from the painted image Howard's approach can lead him. Howard gets so involved with making Anselm's riding on a leopard into a little story that he actually misrepresents the contents of Starnina's picture. The speaker asks, "do you see anyone else riding?" and then answers, "No, / we walk, even on water." Even a glance at Starnina's picture reveals that several (three?) of the monks are riding reindeer and several more are riding carts or boats. This "error" of his is a trivial matter, but it is further evidence that Howard's loyalties are to the life he is inventing more than to the scene he is re-rendering.

Nevertheless, so strongly established is the poem's scenic orientation that there is little room for the other spatial modes. I can discover only slight evidence of virtual kinetic volume in Howard's poem. The small assertions of action enforced by the speaker's description of the various monastic activities create slight kinetic effects. We are told to witness the riding of Brother Anselm, the reading of George the novice, and a host

of other behaviors. These instructions force us to share our space with these actions. The kinetic effect is slight, however, because the actions are generally presented in a passive way: Brother Anselm does not *ride*, he comes "riding"; and George the novice does not *read*, he "is reading." This slight effect is important because it intrudes the monastic world into the world of the reader. Virtual ethnic domain is also given surprisingly little play in Howard's poem. Where there are monks there must be a monastery and a monastic life, but Howard does little to point up the implicit architectural space. He does, however, probably assume that the reader will conjure up such a space without much prompting. Nevertheless, the spatial effects in this poem must, in my estimation, be construed as largely scenic.

Virtual time, the musical illusion, is an obvious candidate for secondary or tertiary illusion of any work of poetry. Insofar as the poem is lyrical in the traditional sense of "song-like," it must be considered as having a musical dimension. In most kinds of poetry the musical connection is readily apparent. Howard's verse is an interesting case since he seems to aim for a music that will accommodate a manner of speaking that will sound like prose even as it functions as a kind of song. Howard's ten-line, blank-verse stanzas are well suited to this task. He is able to manage the flexibility and the colloquial tone of prose. He gives the impression that he just wants to talk, yet there are singing rhythms and little clusters of song-like echoings that keep his talk lyrical.

His rhythmic effects involve subtle modulations of song and talk. For instance, he will from time to time present a regular iambic line that is easily recognizable as song-like. That regular line will often be followed by a rather irregular and very conversational line, as if to break down the impulse toward simple singing and to insist upon the priority of the living voice. Here is an example: "We farm, we fish, and Brother Fred can bake / (if you call that baking). Once in a while ..." (stanza four) Howard's habit of breaking into the middle of his lines is another device that emphasizes talk and interrupts song. Whether or not other readers agree entirely with my scansion of the above lines, I think the shift from smooth, formal musicality to rough, casual chatter is obvious.

Howard's extensive use of alliterations and other sound echoes follows a similar pattern. The line quoted above shows how Howard will indulge in clusters of alliteration to give his line a little extra tunefulness and to enhance the line's unity.

> *a*ll the other *a*nimals *a*re here, *b*easts
> of *b*urden, *b*irds of prey, one dancing *b*ear (stanza two)
> *s*omeone *r*emembers us and *s*ends *r*eal bread (stanza four)

These little alliterative jingles, like the much rarer rhymes, are introduced and dropped abruptly and do not become sustained patterns. In

these cases Howard is toying with expressive use of sounds echoing over a moment of virtual time. This is a very Elizabethan thing to do, and Howard's use of alliteration as well as his use of puns (note the "negotiable gold" of the river in stanza two) could be described as Shakespearean. As with the blank verse of Shakespeare's plays, the story and the scene are more important than the music, even though the music is wonderful and indispensable. Part of the art of this kind of poetic music lies in making that music unobtrusive yet everywhere in evidence.

The fourth priority illusion of virtual powers is handled in a somewhat surprising way. The activities of the monks are gestures of homage to God, a dance of devotion, much as in Starnina's picture. Howard indicates the gestures through verbs of action. Sometimes he presents these verbs in little clusters: "We farm, we fish." (stanza four) Other times he cites an isolated action that is indicative of what everyone is doing—"George the novice / is reading to the new abbot (we read lots)." (stanza eight) What is surprising about the dance of "coenobite practices" (stanza eight) is that the monks really do not seem to be particularly godly in their orientation. The speaker indicates that the lives of the monks revolve around a kind of pagan "joy." The joy of their lives is in the "love" that manifests itself, according to the speaker, in the "levity" of Starnina's picture. This "giant secret of his anchorites" (stanza eight) makes the virtual powers around which the monastic tribe dances somewhat more pagan than Christian.

In summary, I have found Richard Howard's "Thebais" to have a first priority illusion of virtual life predominantly in the mode of the virtual timeless present, but with some significant tension between that timeless present mode and the modes of past and future. I have found the poem's second priority illusion to be virtual space primarily in the mode of virtual scene, but with some slight effects of virtual kinetic volume and virtual ethnic domain. The third priority illusion I have judged to be virtual time, and the fourth to be virtual powers.

As we have seen, the style of an artist's use of illusion is established by the relative priorities the illusions have within the work. By examining the results of my analyses of both poem and painting I can seek to discover the ways in which the illusions of the poem can be seen to be similar to or complementary to the illusions of the visual work of art. My use of the word *complementary* here requires explanation. According to Langer's theory, a painting will always have a primary illusion of virtual space in the mode of virtual scene and a lyric poem will always have a primary illusion of virtual life in the mode of the timeless present. It is the primary illusion, afterall, that defines the form. Change the primary illusion and you have changed the form. A painting and a poem can never, therefore, have the same priority of illusions. In saying that the

illusions of the poem can be complementary to the illusions of the painting and vice versa I am referring to cases in which the primary illusion of one is the secondary illusion of the other.

It would seem likely that there would often be complementarity between an iconic poem and the visual work of art to which it bears witness and certainly that is the case with regard to Starnina's *Thebaid* and Howard's "Thebais." For easy reference it will be useful to display the illusions in a chart:

Starnina's Thebaid

First priority illusion:	virtual space in mode of scene (with some emphasis on modes of kinetic volume and ethnic domain)
Second priority illusion:	virtual life in mode of timeless present (with some emphasis on modes of past and future)
Third priority illusion:	virtual time
Fourth priority illusion:	virtual powers

Howard's "Thebais"

First priority illusion:	virtual life in mode of timeless present (with some emphasis on modes of past and future)
Second priority illusion:	virtual space in mode of scene (with some emphasis on modes of kinetic volume and ethnic domain)
Third priority illusion:	virtual time
Fourth priority illusion:	virtual powers

The two works do seem to have complementary illusions. It is interesting, also, that my analysis indicates that the primary illusions for both works involve three modes. This parallel probably means nothing more than that both the artist and the writer present illusions rich in the variety of their effects. It may be of more importance to notice that Howard's secondary illusion involves only two modes. One might have expected Howard's poem to emphasize the mode of virtual ethnic domain, but I could detect no evidence of such an emphasis. It appears that Howard has no great interest in the architectural effects of Starnina's picture.

The tertiary illusions of both works involve strong effects of virtual time. The strong sense of time in Starnina's painting does not, however, seem to be directly translated into the music of Howard's verse. The landscape rhythms of Starnina's picture are reflected in Howard's poem only scenically. The rhythmic repetition of monks and mountains is referred to by Howard only in

scene-evoking comments such as "We are all over the place." (stanza one)

The fourth priority illusion appears to be virtual powers in both works. This could be considered a parallel element, even though the poem's choreography of gestures has a "secretly" pagan aspect.

To conclude my Langerian analysis of these two works, the most important thing I can say is that I have found Howard's poem to be largely complementary to the Starnina picture that inspired it. This is hardly a surprising conclusion, but my Langerian analysis has provided a framework within which that complementarity can be seen to operate. The insights provided by any kind of analysis of works of art must necessarily fall short of illuminating the essential mysteries of any particular work. An analysis is a breaking down of a whole into component parts, and, with regard to art, it seems wise to assume that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. More broadly conceived hermeneutical strategies—such as phenomenological description—stand more of a chance of satisfying our desire for interpretation, than does the analytic categorizing I have engaged in here. Such categorization can, however, provide opportunities for the display and careful examination of selected aspects of works of art. At any rate, the categories I have made use of here—the categories of artistic illusion contained within the philosophy of art of Suzanne Langer—do seem a useful net for catching some of the ways the various forms of art assimilate one another.

Notes

1 Susanne Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1957), 75.
2 Samuel Bufford, "Susanne Langer's Two Philosophies of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Fall 1972): 9-20.
3 Langer, *Problems of Art*, 28.
4 Ibid., 49.
5 Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 45-48.
6 Langer, *Problems of Art*, 81.
7 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 117.
8 Langer, *Problems of Art*, 85-6 and *Langer, Feeling and Form*, 158-60.
9 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 77.
10 Ibid., 72-5.
11 Ibid., 77.
12 Ibid., 90-2.
13 Ibid., 96.
14 Ibid., 96-100.
15 Ibid., 190-93.
16 Ibid., 109-12.
17 Ibid., 245-53.
18 Ibid., 259.
19 Ibid., 267-8.
20 Ibid., 269.
21 Ibid., 308-24.
22 Ibid., 89.
23 Ibid., 92.
24 Ibid., 100.

Resisting the "Obscure Art of Light": Reticence in the Art of Christian Boltanski

Therese Grisham

The political dimension of Christian Boltanski's art has rarely been addressed in depth. When it has, it has been thought of as one version of the Postmodern representational critique. In Boltanski's case, this is situated in part as a reaction against Modernism's quest for purity in all media. As Ann Hoy writes, the Paris generation of 1968, of which Boltanski is a member, "derided painting and other 'high art' as establishment tools, dedicating themselves instead to social comment and an art of kitsch associations." For example, Boltanski uses photography because he wants to subvert our commonly-held belief that the medium is a transparent proof of reality through staging stereotypical scenes, particularly of childhood, in order to jolt our collective memory.[1] This account seems accurate as far as it goes, fitting in to the Postmodern critical paradigm in term of 1) a reaction against "high art," particularly its notions of purity; 2) a critique of photography as a transparent representation of reality, specifically in terms of sociopolitical concerns, and 3) placing the viewer in the position of "authority," that is, through the work's openendedness, the viewer is allowed and encouraged to "complete" the work through his or her own associations. But this assessment of Boltanski's projects does not go far enough in describing their political complexities and subtleties. Exploring the politics of some of his installations in *Lessons of Darkness* in more than this cursory way may help to articulate some aspects of his work today, since he is still elaborating some of the same themes and forms.

Most critics and reviewers I read took "darkness" in its most traditional figurative senses—as evil (manifested in the Holocaust, for example), as ignorance, as forgetting (implying both repression and the importance of remembering), and as death (as in "out, out, brief candle" or other traditional figurations of death). But Boltanski seems uninterested in such conventions; he teaches us in his installations about the

affirmative aspects of (even literal) darkness, and about the relationship of light to techniques of power. In this show, Boltanski offers a profound and complex means of resistance to such techniques. For example, he often withholds information, in those settings he evokes in which "making visible" is an operation of power, a practice of subjection—police stations, Nazi archives, collectors' or museum archives and displays, even adults' nostalgic relations to their childhood selves through memory, another kind of "archive." And while withholding is often thought of as both passive and deceptive, reticence in Boltanski's art is an active means of resistance.

To make something invisible visible is the business, in part, of critical projects that concern themselves with ideology, one aspect of Postmodern art and critical discourse. In these projects, invisibility is synonymous with deception, covering over, withholding the truth as part of particular ideological processes—bourgeois, patriarchal, individualistic. To make visible what is invisible, then, is both desirable and good; it makes an ethical contribution. The procedure of uncovering is edifying and ethically responsible. Christian Boltanski could not be more at odds with such projects. He first announces what he hides and then refuses to reveal it. He deliberately plays a no-win game of hide and seek, showing that to win is only to play into dominant power relations by demonstrating that "making visible" is a practice of power that produces ways of knowing (involved in the will to truth) instead of being a viable means of resistance. In addition, Boltanski employs various means of obstructing vision, demanding viewers' corporeal involvement with his art. This is both a tactic that offers viewers a means to resist dominant regimes of vision, and a way to show performatively how viewers are implicated in those regimes. I have taken the first part of my title from a paragraph in Foucault's "The Means of Correct Training" in *Discipline and Punish*, because it offers a way to articulate some of the formal and thematic moves that Boltanski makes. Foucault includes the idea of "making visible" in many of his analyses of the subjection of human beings—for him, visibility is one of the conditions for practicing techniques of power.

Giving a history of the rise of observatories in the classical age (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), Foucault writes:

> Side by side with the major technology of the telescope, the lens and the light beam, which were an integral part of the new physics and cosmology, there were minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man.[2]

This obscure art, a regime or order of vision, is the art of surveillance, which has come to play an integral role in the military, policing operations, schools, and in the work place. Today, it exists side by side with another regime—vision as a corporeal process—which arose in the nineteenth century. As Jonathan Crary demonstrates in his Foucaultian analysis of the historical placement of vision and the rise of the camera, vision, through a variety of experimental procedures, came to be defined in the nineteenth century as an "irreducible amalgam of physical processes and external stimulation."[3] The body began to play a productive role in vision.

This represents a radical break with the earlier idea of the camera obscura in that "the privileging of the body as a visual producer began to collapse the distinction between inner and outer upon which the camera obscura depended," among other things. By the 1820s, Crary writes, we have a model of autonomous vision resulting from the "observer having been made into a subject of new knowledge."[4] The observer is now the subject of physiological experiment and measurement. The importance of the idea that the body, especially the eyes, is "*a priori* a productive body," is that the body "existed to be set to work."[5] Physiological knowledge was put to use to discover the nature of the adaptive power of the human subject to productive tasks in which "optimum attention span was indispensable for the rationalization of human labor." The problem of visual inattention in models of factory production, for example, relied upon this way of knowing for a solution.[6] So, in the nineteenth century, "[t]he observer is simultaneously the object of knowledge and the object of procedures of stimulation and normalization, which have the essential capacity *to produce experience for the subject*."[7]

The ongoing articulation of vision as "lodged in the body ... was a *condition of possibility* both for the artistic experimentation of Modernism and for new forms of domination, for what Foucault calls the 'technology of individuals.'." Crary infers from this history that film and photography must be seen as inseparable from technologies of domination. The fact that critics still link photography and the camera obscura is the result of film and photography's "increasing hegemony which helps recreate the myths that vision is incorporeal, veridical, and 'realistic'."[8] In short, it makes it easy to ignore the fact of film and photography's corporeal involvement and the fact that they are also, like surveillance, techniques of domination.

Today, we still look at film as if it were transparent, "realistic," incorporeal, which allows it to work its effects. In film and photography, two dominant ways of seeing and so two ways of knowing are identification and objectification. Dominant Hollywood cinema, for instance, works by soliciting viewer identification using various film

techniques, the better to produce certain realities, which involve processes of objectification. This is not to say that identification always works as an accomplice to realism, however; it can also be used to disrupt it. David Cronenberg's films are a case in point. Films like Cronenberg's deliberately play off the body's involvement in film, or in the case of *Videodrome*, television and video, to evoke bodily sites of domination and resistance.[9] In a different way, Boltanski's photographic installations and their attending objects and settings also do this, as do his staged artifacts, depending in part on playing with light and darkness to turn transparency into a thickness, a body, an obstruction.

It is fairly obvious that some of the settings evoked in the *Lessons of Darkness* installations—police stations, interrogation rooms, Nazi archives—are places where the technique of illumination is applied to people in order to arrive at, or more accurately, to produce, by coercion, the "truth"—of the person, the group. This convergence is perhaps expressed best in the "Les Chases" exhibit, where Jewish schoolchildren's faces are illuminated (and blotted out) by desk lamps, a connection that equates study, interrogation, and objectification or death. In all cases, the technique involves sight, which also signifies knowledge or understanding (what we have come to call "insight"), or the revelation of truth ("seeing the light"). The very mechanism by which knowledge is gained has to do with the light required for seeing. In this convergence, we can see Foucault's definition of disciplinary power, of which surveillance is a major technique, in action:

> The exercise of disciplinary power presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible.[10]

But the effect that the lamps themselves, as physical objects, produce is to block this process, to interrupt our steady gaze. We are disallowed the feeling of looking through the photograph at a reality behind it. In this way, the viewer's vision is implicated in the expectation that this reality will be easily visible as well as resistance to this expectation, a distinctly non-hegemonic, subversive use of vision's corporeality. The light from the lamps produces a glare on the photos making it even more difficult to have this transparent relationship with the photographic object. We literally see the light. In addition, Boltanski's procedure of rephotography is a way to turn the photo itself into an "opaque" body.

Surveillance/hierarchical observation/making visible are crucial procedures for particular productions of knowledge. Boltanski's *Detective* indicates how this operates along one line of force. At the Vancouver

showing of *Lessons of Darkness*, *Detective* consisted of cardboard boxes piled on shelves, evoking the archival—and forgotten, though peripherally present—property rooms at police stations. The boxes are labelled with killers' or victims' photos, rephotographed from the pages of different issues of the French *Detective* magazine. They are not mug shots or crime photos, but pictures of the victims/killers in more relaxed, "natural" settings—at home, with their families, posing for a friendly photographer. That these photos are not, then, marked by the policeman's eye (the gaze of surveillance), constitutes a means of resistance: it bars us from "detecting" who is victim or who is killer. The comfortable settings mediate any objectifying or categorizing practice we might employ to assign guilt or innocence: these people do not look like killers; neither do they necessarily look like victims. After all, it is only after the fact of our knowing that Ted Bundy was a mass murderer that he began to look like one in our eyes, and while Boltanski notes that it would "be better if terrible people looked terrible," he implies that life is at once more complex and impenetrable than the easy detection of guilt and therefore criminality in the "terrible look" allows. More precisely put, each photo in *Detective* could be of a victim or a killer—or both.

The boxes contain and conceal the histories of people Boltanski lifted from the pages of *Detective* magazine. But, as the artist points out, reading these histories wouldn't help us to assign moral meaning to the people in the photos, since each history describes the life of someone other than the person depicted on the outside of the box. Even so, somebody at the Vancouver show who had the urge to "find out," the impulse to assign guilt or innocence, tried to get to the history inside one of the boxes—one of its taped flaps was ripped open, revealing another sheet of cardboard underneath. The sealed boxes, because they withhold information the artist advertises, expose our impulses to play detective, to reach the area of truth "behind" the suspect surface—something literalized in Boltanski's photos of people who are all under suspicion by us. And although these urges are socially constructed (to serve the requirements of a socius constituted by a system of standards and substandards which demands morality as its functional rationale), they are deeply ingrained in all of us. Further, the sheet of cardboard underneath, inserted by design, works as a barrier, another means of withholding information from us. This is particularly effective in such a clinical, forensic setting, where, we are made to believe, the "truth" is laid bare—through interrogation, for example. This barrier also functions in much the same way as the "No Trespassing" sign in *Citizen Kane* does, on the level of its metaphor: to detect gives rise not to truth, but to myth, the myth that a life can be so easily unravelled and assigned a meaning, all tidied up for complacent public consumption. Complicity

has nothing to do with the constructed oppositions between criminal and noncriminal or guilt and innocence, which are "added on" to make moral meaning. Rather, it is the expression of the impossibility of creating such oppositions, since we are all inextricably involved in the "thickness of things," to borrow Michel Foucault's phrase—by which he means their impenetrability in terms of meaning, insight, and truth rather than their depth—that cannot be so easily sorted out. The socio-moral construction of the simple opposition between guilt and innocence tries to reduce complicity spuriously to one or another option that serves, rather than disturbs, our received ideas. One has only to think of the commonly-held belief that parents are the innocent sufferers of children's murderous fantasies, an idea elaborated by Freud and his followers, to begin to see how this opposition serves the status quo. The newer idea—that children are the innocent victims of their guilty parents—is a simple, not particularly revolutionary, reversal of the terms. That complicity is synonymous with living is much harder to accept and situate, since it relies conceptually on absolute contingency. This is where Boltanski's art situates itself.

Detective is unconcerned with the pat idea that violence lurks under the skin of our civilization (as some critics have claimed—George Chacona in Seattle's *Reflex*, for example), which still clings to a notion of truth as lying "behind" or "underneath" the surface, implying that we have the power both to know the truth and to control it, partly by designating what deviates from it (the criminal, the guilty).[11] *Detective* provokes us to experience our unavoidable implication in undecidable events. This isn't a relation to events we choose; nor can we decide to be related to them; it is the absence of relation that determines our complicity. As Steven Shaviro writes, "We are marked by events, bound to them and compelled to acknowledge them, precisely to the extent that we cannot recover them, cannot preserve them, cannot remedy them."[12] We cannot know them, then, but this doesn't mean we can escape them. In fact, it means we can't. *Detective* presents complicity in terms of murder. Time, itself a kind of murder, is also what marks us as implicated. In terms of the Holocaust, for example, the truism runs that forgetting is as criminal as murder. If this is so, we are all criminals, for forgetting—usually associated with the psychic death resulting from repressing one's childhood, or with collectively, immorally repressing history—is one of the conditions of life, and is impossible to escape. Boltanski's focus, in installations like *Reconstructions*, *Archives*, *Vitrines*, and *Monument*, is on our implication in forgetting—even and especially in the act of remembering. These works devote themselves to elaborating the complex relationship between memory/memorial and forgetting/death. Time, or perpetual loss without recompense, constitutes the raw material of this

relationship. In *Reconstructions*, childhood is the temporal point Boltanski uses to elaborate it.

Childhood persists in us, yet it cannot be recaptured. Memory actually signals that childhood (or any past time) has been destroyed rather than recovered, leaving us with a sense of loss. Memory then is a type of forgetting rather than a means of regaining the past, since it only brings to consciousness the past's stubborn non-presence, its unreachability. Made from a motley-colored mixture of modeling clays, Boltanski's "attempts"—at reconstructing his house slippers, a toy airplane, and other things he ostensibly used and played with—are just that; they fail, of course, to perform a reconstruction which might present itself as a transparent substitute for what is irrevocably and irremediably past. You can't even touch them—he has removed them to an ill-lit region behind wire mesh in a tin box. Again, he uses physical obstructions to keep these objects inaccessible, which the light recapitulates by making viewers feel as if they can't quite see.

It may be difficult to see the relation between this particular technique of power/way of knowing-seeing and museum vitrines or, even more difficult, childhood. But it is precisely in the evocation of childhood that Boltanski offers the strongest means of resistance to the technique, if only because our investments are greatest in this "personal" realm. Boltanski has always concentrated obsessively on childhood, mainly I think, because it is the locus of our nostalgia. We "identify" with childhood. That Boltanski chooses this "universal" to make identification possible (and highly likely) should not lead us to ignore the fact that the childhood he simultaneously personalizes as his "own" and genericizes as a stereotype (as no one's), is heavily marked as bourgeois, white, male, European. I don't think this is something Boltanski does unwittingly; it lends even a certain banality to the *Reconstructions*, a banality that should catch pathos up short. Boltanski's *Reconstructions* and *Vitrines*, as well as *Club Mickey* offer different dimensions of the relation between identification, objectification, genericism, nostalgia, and loss (as well as memory/forgetting) in terms of techniques of making visible. What is notable in the *Reconstructions* is how difficult it is actually to see the installation—because of the dim light, the relative "formlessness" of the objects (clay gym shoes, for example, as compared to the "real thing"), the mottled material used, and the fact that they mesh. Childhood is the point of identification (one "transparent" way of seeing/knowing), but Boltanski uses this identification to highlight our objectification of childhood, and our inability to "possess" it because it is generic. Hoy writes that Boltanski wants us to "recognize and 'complete' his works, attaching [our] own specifics to his general types,"[13] in other words, to make his art personal to each of us. However, the point is that we should

not, since we can't do it unproblematically: we play into our retrospective nostalgic constructions of childhood this way.

Boltanski's art finally has little to do with the predominant ways that the political aspects of Postmodern art and many of its critical discourses have operated, at least as summarized by Brian Wallis in his introduction to *Art After Modernism*:

> In the widest sense, representations are those artificial (though seemingly immutable) constructions through which we apprehend the world: conceptual representations such as images, languages, definitions; which include and construct more social representations such as race and gender. Although such constructions often depend on a material form in the real world, representations constantly are posed as natural "facts" and their misleading plenitude obscures our apprehension of reality. ... [C]riticism addresses the fact that while the rational *surface* of representation—the name or image—is always calm and whole, it covers the act of representing which necessarily involves a violent decontextualization.[14]

Much Postmodern art, such as that of Barbara Kruger, is involved in the project of "making visible" what is invisible. It engages in revealing the constructedness of representation, for example. The Postmodern critique of representation depends upon two crucial concepts: the loss or inaccessibility of origins or the original (failure to acknowledge this leads to false "plenitude"); and to make visible that which is invisible, as an ethical position (indicated by Wallis by the use of such terms as "seemingly," "misleading," "obscures," the opposition between the suspect "surface" and the true depths, or "violent decontextualization"). False and misleading or deforming representations can be made *because* origins are inaccessible; but they can also be corrected because of this—the world and art are cast into contingency. One means of criticizing oppressive deformations is through exposure: Kruger's art exposes the (previously thought of as universal) masculine coding of the photos she chooses to represent, for example. But, it is here, in the idea of "making visible" that critiques of representation become severely problematic; they are only recapitulating a procedure which is in itself part of the exercise of power, and therefore can't be used to subvert it. (Perhaps this is the limitation of critique in general..) But, much Postmodern art does not engage in this project. Boltanski's art falls outside the focus on representation and critique, dealing both thematically and formally with the role of surveillance and the body in complex forms in the production of knowledge (division and judgment). It resists these productions through various kinds of "darkness." Finally, the lesson of darkness is that the world does not present us, nor ever will, with a legible face.

Notes

1 Ann H. Hoy, *Fabrications: Staged, Altered, and Appropriated Photographs* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 88.
2 Michel Foucault,"The Means of Correct Training," *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 171.
3 Jonathan Crary, "Modernizing Vision," *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 34.
4 Ibid., 35.
5 Ibid., 36.
6 Ibid., 37.
7 Ibid., 41.
8 Ibid., 43.
9 See Steven Shaviro's article on the films of David Cronenberg, "Bodies of Fear," forthcoming in *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
10 Foucault, 170-1.
11 George Chacona, "Lessons of Darkness," *Reflex* (March - April 1989): n.p.
12 Steven Shaviro, "Complicity and Forgetting," *MLN* 105 (1990): 829.
13 Hoy, 88.
14 Brian Wallis, ed., "What's Wrong With This Picture?," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), xv.

Beyond 'Like' and 'As' in Images:
Metonymy and Metaphor in Some Recent Art

Mark Staff Brandl and Daniel Ammann

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. In aphasia one or the other of these two processes is restricted or totally blocked. ... In normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative, but careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other.
>
> —Roman Jakobson[1]

The linguist and literary theoretician Roman Jakobson most thoroughly described the central distinction between two modes of language information processing—metonymy and metaphor—in his essay "The Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances."[2]

His establishment of this fundamental polarity in techniques of expression or utterance is based largely on his studies with people suffering from severe speech disabilities, that is "aphasia," which often results from physical damage to certain brain centers. His primary discovery is that there are two basic types of this deficiency: either the major problem lies in the realm of substitution, with stable combination, or oppositely the problem presents itself in the area of combination with relatively stable substitution.

By way of illustration, an aphasic of the first order—in Jakobson's terms with a "similarity disorder"—makes expressions that are extremely dependent on context, contiguity. Such a person, when unable to recall a certain word, will select another term from the same context of reference.

For example, such a potential mistake would be substituting 'bulbs' for 'chandelier' or 'flame' for 'candle.' An aphasic of the second order—with "contiguity disorder"—can express things through similarity, making approximate identifications (e.g. 'lamp' for 'sun' or 'bulb' for 'head').

Although substitutions of this kind are arbitrary and cannot be predicted, they fall into two clearly separable categories. Their selection is always dominated by a relationship of either similarity *or* contiguity. Metonymic substitutions for 'candle' could also include 'wax' or 'wick' (component), 'candelabra' (contact), 'Christmas' or 'Christmas tree' (context, contact), 'light' (causal effect) and others. Metaphoric substitutions, on the other hand, would be 'torch' (similar functions) or 'stick' (similar shape).

In each case we could draw up a long list of possible substitutes. Of course, even though the categories are clear-cut, they may overlap in that the relationship is sometimes characterized by similarity as well as contiguity. Thus the wick of the candle is in fact similar in shape and at the same time part of the whole, sun and moon are similar opposites, but also part of the same context. Art may sometimes wish to exploit both aspects. Pre-permissive cinema, for instance, may show two lovers in embrace and then fade out on the empty bed in order to metomymically delete and yet represent the sexual act; or it may pan to the fireplace and metaphorically suggest the flames of passion. In this latter case we could speak of a metonymic metaphor, because the fire, which functions as a metaphoric symbol, is also part of the context and hence metonymic.

In fact, we are dealing with a polarity along a continuum in which either aspect can have more weight. Powerful metaphors combine elements both similar in one respect and yet radically different in another. In other terms, they can also be said to stress the similarity of things not normally contiguous. Thus the relationship would ideally result from a similarity with something *in absentia*. Metonymy, correspondingly, is more forceful when it tries to exclude similarity completely and by doing so emphasizes the close relationship with something (normally *in praesentia* but) deleted from the context.

Rather than as has here-to-fore been believed, namely that metonymic devices are a species of metaphor, Jakobson's studies show that metonymy and metaphor are polar. They are in fact produced by opposing principles. On the basis he constructed two much more rigorous categories of contradistinction.

Metonymy, then, is substitution through perceived connectedness: component, contact, closeness, context, cause and effect. In visual art the most common forms of metonymy have been the detail standing for the whole (i.e. synecdoche) and the particular for the general or the concrete

for the abstract. Thus the skeleton or the skull can represent death, because the former is a natural consequence of the latter.

Metaphor, on the other hand, is substitution of one item for another through perceived similarity. Art, however, stresses resemblance while it actually relishes the remoteness of the things implicitly compared. Hence an extinguished candle can signify death, the expiration of life.

Unquestionably, these two modes can exist concurrently in a single piece. A preeminent example here would be those wonderfully overdetermined symbolic still-lifes of the Netherlands produced by moralistic contemporaries of Rembrandt. In a single so-designated *vanitas* painting an artist such as Jan Davidsz de Heem would crowd in a bevy of metaphors and metonymies: a skull, rotting fruit, an hourglass with an almost empty upper chamber, flowers well past their prime, a recently extinguished candle, and so on.

David Lodge in his book *The Modes of Modern Writing*[3] and subsequent essays draws on this crucial distinction between metaphor and metonymy as advanced by Jakobson in order to describe and define the fundamental modes of linguistic expression. He applies it rewardingly to literature by various authors. When he discusses Hemingway's metonymic realism in these terms, he enlighteningly shows that this author's terse prose exploits metonymy to circumvent any symbolist-religious metaphor and thereby creates a style that is equally modern and realistic. Indeed, blatant metaphor in Hemingway, Lodge points out, is often an indication of insincerity. One of the most acclaimed passages from *A Farewell to Arms* displays this:

> There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. Certain numbers were the same and certain dates and these with the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments, and the dates.[4]

This, together with the resonance of his successions of repetitions permitted Hemingway to amplify a metonymic, in this case realistic, style toward the haunting power of much metaphorical writing of the Modernists.

On the seemingly opposite end of the spectrum, Lodge discusses the quintessential mythopoetic writer, James Joyce. Lodge shows how Joyce 'painted Homer from nature' in *Ulysses*. The mythology re-enacted in it is drawn in a natural progression from the simple activities of daily life in

Dublin. *Ulysses* is a metonymic novel with a metaphoric substructure (i.e. Homer's *Odyssey*).[5] Lodge even succeeds in applying Jakobson's distinction to contemporary Postmodern writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut, J. D. Salinger, Thomas Pynchon and others.

Metonymy and metaphor, then, are not just another overused unproductive dichotomy in the nature of Apollonian-Dionysian: the distinction has a strong concrete basis in fact, it is more particular and illuminating in application, it is a theory of dominant qualities—not mutual exclusion—and deals directly with the processing of information.

The dichotomy here discussed, we feel is not merely fascinating but of direct relevance to contemporary visual art, yielding a new source of critical assessment. For one thing it begins to delimit that nebulous category "metaphor." But even more importantly, rather than *pre*scribing anything, it penetratingly *de*scribes what is intuitively recognized as unique in certain art. A theory which is descriptive grants understanding of original creative processes and opens avenues into the work itself, rather than supplying a list of "oughts" such as too much art theory.

Metonymy appears clearly, but in sundry and richly varied fashions in recent art. Jakobson's scheme applied to certain artists enables us to examine the quasi-symbolic, but not often consciously understood, force of key devices in their work. The artists we will discuss have powerfully stepped beyond the now clichéd, and hence powerless, purely metaphoric gestures of Modernism: by enhancing tangible particulars of the context into conveyers of meaning, or by extracting correspondences from the theoretical field of extension within the context.

One metonymic device to be derived from Jakobson's description is the substitution of a part for the whole. This can surface as the use of "fish" for "sea" or the like. To return to Lodge again temporarily, he points out that this might be called "deletion," for in using this mechanism we in fact merely (non-logically) delete a group of descriptive elements from the mass of details that would be present anyway. This is essential for the visual artist, who must always be specific to some greater or lesser extent. Furthermore, we would like to add that in visual art metonymy of this kind resolves itself in the vitality of *particularity*, That is, a visual artist can express so naturally *this* green, in *this* corner, or *this* man with such a nose having *this* blemish on *this* particular twist of flesh. This, while necessary operation of the decision-making process of painting or other visual art, is a fertile synecdochical ground material to be utilized by the artist, to an extent virtually impossible in language.

We can observe this principle in attending to the work of Anselm Kiefer. His painting *Wege der Weltweisheit* or *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* from 1977, as well as many others, clearly makes use of the substitution of

a part to represent the whole—the whole in this case being an abstract concept to which these individuals have contributed. In this large oil, acrylic and shellac painting on burlap Kiefer represents the ideas of "worldly wisdom" by delineating men's heads, mostly those of philosophers.

This work is of course quite complex, dealing with many Postmodern issues, intertextuality, the burden of being a German, and more. Without minimizing the importance of the sophistication of the work on many levels, including Kiefer's play with a Baudrillard-like idea of representation, we posit that the sheer power here comes from his choice of images from an axis of contiguity from his ideas: metonymy. The concerns of eighteen philosophers, as reflected in their writings, are a part of what makes up "worldly wisdom." The straw affixed to the surface of the canvas by being embedded in the tortured scumbled paint in *Nürnberg*, 1982, is a further instance of Kiefer's masterful use of metonymy. Straw, dry glass, is one of the physical elements that are present in a 'scorched-earth' landscape. This single substance is once again a case of a part representing the whole. The whole here is the dried-out, stricken, destroyed European plains that were the result of the war-centered policies of National Socialism. This feature of Kiefer's work effectively separates him from the world view of Modernism, and thereby 'actual' Expressionism. It also enables him to challenge the Romantic metaphoric strategies of Modernism, and by extension (Nazi-) Germany.

Conversely, we can look at the paintings of a sometimes superficially similar artist, Julian Schnabel. Schnabel's work seldom, if ever, makes use of any form of metonymy, while often calling out for the viewer to use conventional metaphoric interpretation to explain its plethora of plates, antlers, appropriated Renaissance figures and the like. The works, however, never actually yield to a metaphoric reading, for they only mimic the density and texture of earlier art.

Schnabel's paintings are simply expressions of the desire to paint great paintings. This 'simply' is not necessarily a 'merely,' however, and should not always be as denigrated as it has been recently. Some outstanding artists of the past have had works, or entire corpora with this ambition; Willem de Kooning, Michelangelo, Jackson Pollock, and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel* come quickly to mind.

However, Schnabel's images, no matter how much they try to be *about*, are not. They imitate metaphoric *aboutness*. If the tendency for such ostentatious analogy becomes the rule, similarity degrades to dead metaphor. The plate chips are similar to large gestural brushstrokes, and simultaneously similar to mosaic—both readings cry for appraisal as "epic." The broken crockery in *The Sea* from 1981 substituted for thick impasto, which in itself is a traditional metaphoric substitution in kitsch painting for the froth on the crests of waves. The figures in his works are

so similar to those in great art as to be borrowed from the same. The young boy centered in *Stella and the Wooden Bird* of 1986 seems to be derived from an Italian or Italianate painting of the past, although (Post-)modernized through purposefully clumsy paint handling. Which work exactly? Do we know? Does it matter? In fact it does not, for the figure is no bearer of meaning. Any other figure from practically any other historic painting could be similarly stolen and would work as well, or as poorly, in its place. The nod toward the historically proven 'great' is where Schnabel's interest lies.

The point is that the weakness of much of Schnabel's art, especially when compared to that of Kiefer, is its naïve and tiresome mirroring of the structure of metaphor. The works never delve into metonymy, and ultimately do not supply much of anything even in the metaphoric mode.

The substitution of one stage of a process or procedure for another is a further fundamental mode of metonymy. To call for the again a simple illustration in language, this mechanism could entail the replacement of "publishing" for "writing" or "filming" for "directing."

The idea of process can be constructed in many ways, even that of history itself as artist Marcel Broodthaers has done. While metonymy can clearly be seem in all of Broodthaers best works, one of the purist instances is his imitation of flowery, old-fashioned calligraphy in most of his pieces containing language. *Lampe bleue et chaise* from 1969, a simple assisted-readymade arrangement of folding chair and spotlight, is an example of this. On the inside surface of the lamp's reflector Broodthaers scattered lowercase alphabet letters in beautifully painted flowing blue script and installed a blue light bulb. Each crystal-clear bottle of the 1974 multiple *Le manuscript dans une bouteille* has elegant, curvilinear, etched font stating solely *The Manuscript 1833*. But perhaps most extravagant is the artist's *Pour un haut devenir du comportement artistique*. This plaster, eggshell, paper, and wood relief of 1964 features two centered book-page-like paper rectangles. The eggshells on the sheet to the left mimic the fragility of the lettering on the one to right. The words are those of the title, so unbelievable over-flourished in an intertwining, ornamented penmanship that they are neigh-impossible to read, cloyingly antiquarian on purpose.

Radical experimenting with type led through Dada and the Bauhaus to modern design. The drastic asymmetry and frenzied admixture of type faces and even languages which occurred in the pages of the Dada publication *291* or Francis Picabia's own *392* are the consummate examples, and forefathers, of these new forms. This development for Broodthaers is significant and consequential. Fortunately history in Broodthaers' view is neither opaque as in Modernism nor a shopping mall of ideas to appropriate as in Postmodernism. Rather, Broodthaers perceives it as a temporal path of relationships, from which he inge-

niously chooses a form contiguous with yet opposite to experimental type. He thereby reinforces the originality of the experimenters, while framing their achievement in time.

An opposing situation is present in the art of Ashley Bickerton. By far the weakest aspect of Bickerton's work is the element of script he often introduces. Bickerton uses corporate logos, or the like, scattered across the surface of his paintings. Hence, he is following the typical line of substitution through similarity, by deriving a style from found Pop sources. In many of his works, but emphatically in his 1988 *Wall Wall No. 9 (The Gigantic Silence) for Kiani*, the artist's signature is applied vertically on the left and the right is angular, stylized script, befitting a perfume or cosmetic designer with Modernist aspirations. The more or less "international' symbols of *Good Painting No. 2*, again from 1988, include the UN symbol, the peace sign, a dolphin, palm trees, and the U. S. presidential seal. The actual trademarked logos of *Tormented Self-Portrait (Susie at Arles)*, a painting with black, padded leather additions, include Fruit of the Loom, Marlboro, *Village Voice*, CalArts and many others, as well as his own personal logo formed from stylizing the name 'Susie.'

His script is, rather heavy-handedly, saying that fine art is *like* a corporate product, and so on. While perhaps true, presented in such a typical manner it becomes no more than a truism, devoid of vigor. He accepts in a rather academic way too much of the form of Modernism to really question it. His structural device is that of metaphor, but so obviously derivative of Pop Art and Dada that it expresses little.

As an aside, the Jakobson dichotomy of metonymy and metaphor here used, might also offer in principle a fuller explication of staleness in much recent work. If one wanted to pursue this we feel it could be shown that the clinging to older forms of metaphor is the reason why so much of Postmodernism has resulted so far in bad surrealism in writing and limp Dada in visual art such as Neo-Geo.

In the preceding examples we have surveyed forms of metonymic and metaphoric processes that were easily illustrated ar first from language in simple isolated single sentences or phrases. Language is not always capable in such a rudimentary form of showing the dynamics of complex, subtle, or pervasive artistic strategies. While of course both language and visual art are systems of conventional signs that are culturally dependent and must be learned, they are not identical. It is necessary to invoke Wittgenstein here as a corrective for the too overt Neo-Formalism of the Post-Structuralism of our time. We do this indirectly through anthropologist Alexander Alland, Jr., because of the economy and elegance with which he has expressed an important Wittgensteinian notion. Writing in the Winter 1989 volume of *The Journal of Aesthetics* Alland says:

> ... there is no better way of putting things but to say that language and art are both communication games and that they share family resemblances. I am sure that this has occurred to most of you, but it is important to reiterate because, I believe, it is these family resemblances that have led to analytical confusion with regard to the differences between art and language. ... Language and art are siblings, but not twin parts of our species essence. We are thinking creatures whose thoughts can be made up of sensations, images, words and musical sounds.[6]

Keeping this in mind a final example of creative exploration and application of metonymy in recent art, and its superiority over metaphor, lies in comparing artists Thomas Lawson and Sigmar Polke with David Salle.

All three are practitioners of a style which brings together disparate images in a seemingly willful or haphazard way. For this critics use, and over-use, the term "juxtaposition." In these three artists this technique is derived to a greater or lesser extent from the late works of Picabia. Specifically the so-called "transparencies," primarily of the period around 1930. Works such as the oil on canvas *Chloris* or the gouache on cardboard *Iris* display all the formal devices utilized presently by Salle: linear, see-through overlays, borrowed images from various historical periods, and intentionally crude technique. These pieces by Picabia were ripe for the picking as an influence, since they have been and remain among the critically least well accepted paintings by the artist. (Perhaps we will soon see a Postmodern rebirth of Magritte's generally despised 'Impressionist' or 'Vache' periods.) These transparencies, as well as occasional works employing analogous procedures by other artists such as Franz Kupka, make it necessary to point out that this method has been around longer than recent criticism would lead us to believe, and is usually referred to by the less leaded term "montage."

Jakobson himself mentions film montage, and categorizes it as completely metaphoric, while situating the close-up as metonymic.[7] Sergei Eisenstein, however, describes montages of both metonymic and metaphoric types. Also Lodge points out that with the techniques of cutting, splicing, and combination being the techniques of editing and hence of all film, both metonymy and metaphor are possible. With such techniques of combination indeed being so central to all the visual arts, it is impossible to locate the work of Lawson, Polke, or Salle as metaphor *per se*. Cubism itself, while obviously metonymic, is 'montaging' or 'juxtaposing' viewpoints of the viewed subject. Therefore, in the bringing together of images, context is most important.

It is interesting to compare the art of the three mentioned artists. Superficially similar, or at least working in linked styles, they produced diverse effects. To our eyes the achievement and quality of Lawson's and Polke's work is shadowed interestingly by the unconvincing and minor art of Salle. Examining the dynamics of this art through the conception of metonymy-metaphor reveals that the work of the first two consistently displays metonymic dimensions.

In Polke's work *Can you always believe your eyes?* from 1976, there is a crucial structural balance between his use of the randomness with which he brings elements together, and the elements' own actual metonymic derivation. The indeterminacy of the montaging, because it reeks of surrealism, begs a metaphoric reading of the elements—which Polke is confidently alluding to and travestying. It must be kept in mind that he, and to a lesser extent Lawson, *travesty* but do not truly *parody.* This is an important distinction that is lost on Salle.

Many of Polke's works are painted on common fabric—sheets, towels, or the like—stitched together. This is a light-hearted play with the self-importance of the support in "fine art canvasses." But Polke's supports are metonymically derived from canvas—both are after all only different types of good cloth. There is a feeding upon the mutual reflexivity here that is far beyond the sophomoric attempt at nihilism that Salle's own alterations of the painting surface yield: a plastic 1960s chair screwed to the canvas; read: all style, hence art is dated and stupid.

Parallel appreciations can be made of Polke's, and even more so Lawson's choices of images. Lawson's paintings bringing architecture together with abstraction "feed metaphorically upon his own metonymies," as Lodge said of D. H. Lawrence.[8] A characteristically inventive work by Lawson is his painting that was realized as a billboard project in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1989. A black and white painted version of the famous photograph of Bernard Berenson admiring a Neoclassical sculpture is overlaid with a regularly spaced grid of green disks. These disrupt our vision, perhaps similar to the way the recent revelations concerning Berenson's questionable dealings behind the scenes disturb our perception of the supposed disinterestedness of his theory of connoisseurship. But besides this metaphor, most importantly these abstract circles, and the two images of a Romantic equestrian statue which frame the central image, are metonymically derived from the context and thereby used to a critical end. The red on blue statue depictions are of pieces Berenson himself would have analyzed, criticized and decried in his capacity of advisor and connoisseur. The green shapes float over the surface marking compositionally significant spots in a dot-to-dot burlesque. They manifest Berenson's deluded formal, analytical approach that would moor points of interest or lay out how the

eye travels through the work, to the exclusion of any larger understanding of the whole.

Salle's works conform completely to and satisfy the accepted structural criteria of Modernism, which he attempts to challenge. Like Schnabel, and unlike Lawson, Salle apes metaphoric patterns, while emptying them. Typically he does not take responsibility for either, as is demonstrated in his videotaped interview 'discussion' of his painting *Tennyson*. The 1983 acrylic *The Cruelty of the Father*, which includes the attached chair mentioned above, also feature his typical hodgepodge of images from *How to Draw* manuals, soft porn, disruptive abstract shapes, and more. The "Zeitgeist" paintings of 1982 all sport the Picabiaesque transparencies in their upper half, while mingling diagrammatic forms, truncated human images, and assorted citations or allusions to antecedent abstract art. This patchwork may be discussing contemporary issues such as emptiness, disunity, and absurdity, but more probably it is simply an unconscious result of the same. His art supplies a metaphoric mode that in turn yields nothing more than the clichéd message "Ain't art idiotic."

We have briefly examined a small variety of artists in an effort to apply the fruitful possibilities of Jakobson's metonymy-metaphor distinction. The potency of this notion lies in its applicability to the particular successes or failures of individual artists. By extension also this discovery could furnish much insight when employed in examination of whole periods, movements or an artist's entire œuvre.

Additionally, metonymy could be a productive artistic method in the drive to create a Postmodernism that is non-"Neo."

We will end with this point of emphasis. Metonymy as a predominant factor in visual art is a fundamental departure from Modernism, and for that matter from most Postmodernism thus far. While appearing before, notably in versions of realism or naturalism, metonymy was utilized in a severely limited fashion. Metaphor has been far more favored.

As an analytic device the dichotomy presented here gives a window into new possibilities of understanding art. As an artistic device metonymy offers a doorway through which to push beyond the current stasis of reiteration into new art, while constructing an understanding of our framing conception.

Notes

1 Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *Selected Writings II: Word and Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 254.

2 Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, 2nd rev. ed. (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 67-96. Rpt. in *Selected Writings II: Word and Language*, op. cit., 239-59.

See also his related articles "Toward a Linguistic Classification of Aphasic Impairments" and "Linguistic Types of Aphasia" in the same volume.

3 David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

4 Ibid., 156.

5 As a creative writer Lodge has similarly used a metaphoric subtext in his own novel *Small World*. The forefront realism of this global campus novel is governed by the underlying structure of the Grail quest, which it re-enacts. But unlike Joyce he intentionally exploits it to excess by frequent references to Arthurian legend without breaking the metonymic frame.

6 Alexander Alland Jr., "Affects and Aesthetics in Human Evolution," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47.1 (Winter 1989): 5-6.

7 Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," 256.

8 Lodge, 164.

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