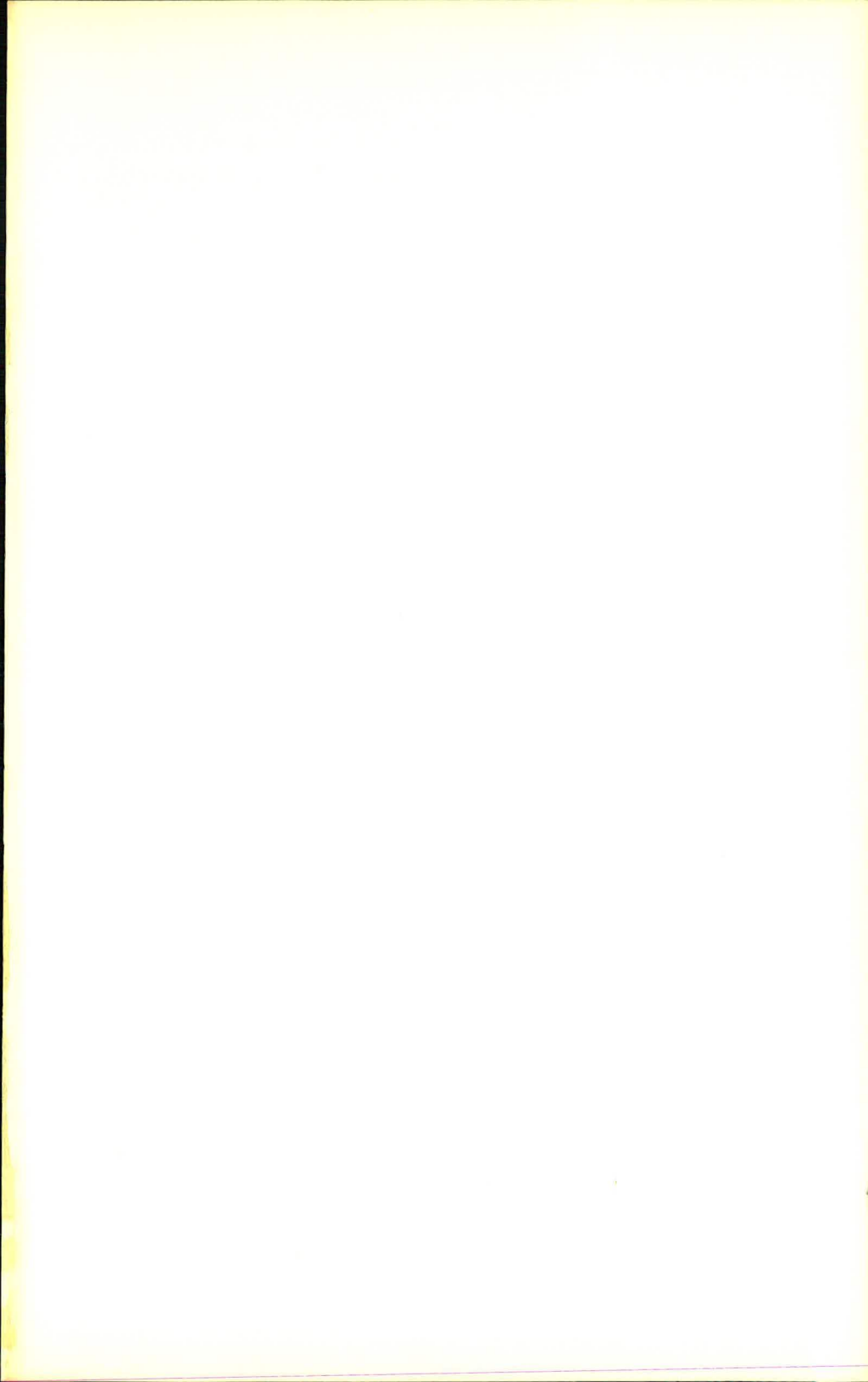


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INSIDE: EARLY MONDRIAN . . . BACON AND BATAILLE
THE END OF THE (ART) WORLD



Art Criticism

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On the cover:

Gray Tree (1911), Piet Mondrian, oil on canvas, 30 7/8 x 42 3/8 inches, collection Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague. On view through January 30, 1996, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, as part of the major retrospective exhibition PIET MONDRIAN: 1872-1944, featuring more than 160 works. Photograph courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art.

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Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence

Victor A. Grauer

The current ascendancy of the postmodernist viewpoint has led to interpretations of modernism which, to the present writer, are misguided and misleading. Nowhere has the critical process been more unfortunately oversimplified than in the case of Piet Mondrian, one of the key figures of what can be called "classic" modernism. The artist/theoretician who strove so intensely to overcome the limitations of late Romantic subjectivism has been painted as himself a Romantic idealist, a purist seeker after "essence" who turned his back on reality to pursue an esthetic of "significant form" as model for a super-Platonic, essentially totalitarian, Utopia. This assessment is of course fully in line with the currently fashionable notion of modernism as an elitist fantasy of mastery and control.

I will attempt, in these pages, to correct the currently accepted view, not by confronting, as I have elsewhere,¹ what I regard as the bad faith of the postmodernist critique of modernism, but, in a less argumentative, more methodical spirit, doggedly retracing and re-examining the development of this remarkably complex artist and thinker. Central to my position is the notion that Mondrian's work, all his work, is characterized by a powerful commitment to the spirit of realism (not abstraction) coupled with a prophetic awareness of the problems posed by what today would be called the "ideology" of the representational process. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate, in the face of the accepted wisdom of the time, that Mondrian's modernism is an achievement to this day still new and little understood.

I should add that my approach is informed by a theoretical position I have outlined in another publication,² a position which in turn owes a great deal to the work and thought, as I have understood it, of the subject of this essay. No prior knowledge of my theory is expected of the reader in what follows.

A. The Essence of Disruption

For me, a major problem with the postmodernist view generally stems from a difficulty over the notion of "essence." Clearly Mondrian, throughout his mature existence and with every fibre of his being, as both artist and thinker, pursued "essence." What makes him so utterly remarkable, however, is the very special and totally original nature of the "essence" he discovered during the course of this pursuit. To fully grasp the special nature of this extraordinary achievement and its meaning for our understanding and appreciation of modernism generally, we will need to loosen ourselves as much as possible from both postmodernist *and* modernist dogma to re-examine certain crucial aspects of his artistic development and rethink the meaning of some of his all too easily misconstrued theoretical writings.

The Tree Series

Mondrian's earliest paintings, dating from the 1890's, fuse a stark but conventional naturalism with the Dutch landscape tradition. From 1900 through 1907, his work reveals various influences, ranging from Van Gogh and Gauguin to Edward Munch and the Fauves. 1908 is generally regarded as a turning point in his career, the beginning of a systematic development that was to continue till his death in 1944.

The crucial early stages of this development can be traced through a remarkable series of paintings involving an obsessive image: a solitary tree. This series has already, of course, gained attention for its apparently systematic, almost seamless progression from realism to abstraction. More to our point, in the present context, is the way Mondrian has here also left an extended meditation on the iconographic sign.

The series begins in 1909 with two rather conventionally naturalistic studies of a particular, carefully observed, tree, its trunk leaning heavily to the right.³ These lead to the highly expressionistic *Red Tree*,⁴ very much in the spirit of Van Gogh, but with even more intensified color. The tree is red striated with blue, on a blue background. Barren of leaves, the intricate network of branches stands out against the background as a dense interplay of expressively curving lines. Three more "portraits" of the same tree, dating from 1909-10, are progressively more simplified and expressively symbolic.⁵

The culminating work, called the *Blue Tree*, is a highly schematized dark silhouette with branches radiating out from the center. This design, combined with the intensity of the color, gives the tree a flamelike aspect. The overall effect is highly symbolic, as though the tree were being fragmented and consumed by its own life force. In semiotic terms, this early sequence progressively fragments and schematizes the lower level articulations (signifying the highly individualized branches) in such a way that every element ultimately becomes totally subordinate, on the highest level, to a single, dominant, paradigm (the tree as a whole).

Exhibiting techniques already common in Symbolist pictorialism, a painting like the *Blue Tree* thus disrupts iconographic realism only for the purpose of dramatizing and intensifying a "higher" meaning.

If we define the icon as "the sign which resembles," we must note how this sequence moves progressively from a true iconism (embodied in the initial, "naturalistic" attempts to render the tree in its unique individuality) to a largely conventional symbolism in which the tree becomes a universalized emblem, not many steps removed from the arbitrariness of the linguistic signifier.

When Mondrian first saw Cubist paintings, probably in 1911,⁶ their reductivist, analytic fragmentations undoubtedly reminded him of his own efforts in a similar direction. Unlike the Futurists, however, who also must have discovered Cubism in 1911, the Dutch artist clearly sensed that the profoundly disruptive Cubist approach was as much a rejection of symbolist rhetoric as photographic naturalism. That this insight was decisive is essential to an understanding of his mature work. It is not until the next sequence of trees, unmistakably reflecting Cubist influence, that Mondrian sets out with real authority on the path that will be his consistently from then on.

For example the painting known as *The Gray Tree*,⁷ from 1911, seems poised midway between the schematized symbolism of the earlier expressionistic works and the analytic disjunctions of Cubism. Unlike the *Blue Tree*, which is systematically fragmented according to a controlling scheme, *The Gray Tree* is fragmented through a studied but decidedly unsystematic process of give and take, based on idiosyncracies of the subject itself. While it might sound like Mondrian is returning to the naturalistic iconism of the earliest tree paintings, a single glance at *The Gray Tree* reveals a totally different approach on the *syntagmatic* level, i.e., treatment of "space." The earlier works clearly set the tree off from its background in a striking figure-ground relation—*The Gray Tree* subjects both tree and background to a thorough fragmentation in which many figure-ground distinctions are lost in webs of Cubistic faceting and passage.

The controlling forces of the earlier paintings are strongly centric, a property emphasized with each progressive simplification to the point that the *Blue Tree* presents an unmistakably geometrical gestalt. *The Gray Tree*, with its strikingly arcing central trunk and umbrella of middle branches, seems torn between a similarly centric force field and the disruptive effects of Cubist faceting and passage, fusing figure and ground, liberating most of the lines from their sign-function as branches and their consequent attachment to the trunk. While this work can still be "read" as a tree, no really coherent gestalt unambiguously presents itself.

Thus from *The Gray Tree* onward Mondrian's methodical analysis of

the image reverses itself. He is no longer interested in the kind of quasi linguistic fragmentations that lead to hierarchies through synthesis toward ever higher levels of meaning. On the contrary, he now begins his years long search for the kind of structure that will exactly not sacrifice the idiosyncratic part to the meaningful whole. This is the only explanation for the enormously cluttered, even ungainly tree paintings of the final phase (1912-13),⁸ works whose agglomerations of untamed detail could only be derived from an effort to interrelate the multiple contingencies of raw observation in a manner free from any controlling scheme, iconographic language, even "esthetic" criterion. These highly disjunctive paintings, in which the tree image is literally pulled to pieces, reach an extreme of close observation and visual analysis rivalling the most hermetic examples of late analytic Cubism.

Reduction and Resolution

From 1913 onward, following the example of synthetic Cubism, Mondrian begins to resolve his surfaces. Complex, tentative, linear interlockings, tentatively adjusted and linked by webs of passage, become relatively simple, precisely and forcefully defined relationships. Horizontal and vertical lines which remained light and open begin to thicken and link, trapping rectangular planes within.

By 1918, with *Composition With Gray and Light Brown*,⁹ Mondrian has arrived at the format which will pervade his work until the early Forties, an open, clearly articulated surface, giving the impression of order while, at the same time, lacking any sort of predictable or definable pattern, determined exclusively by intersecting thick horizontal and vertical lines and the rectangles enclosed by them.

In this and subsequent works, Mondrian has most definitely *not*, as has been so readily assumed, abandoned a perceptual process in favor of a purely formal one, in the idealistic pursuit of "significant form," but has in fact only *intensified* his ongoing search for the universal principle behind the Cubist obsession with contingency. In his realization that such a principle, a universal basis for the disruption of the universal itself, might exist, he goes beyond Cubism, beyond abstraction, beyond semiotics, into completely fresh territory.¹⁰

According to Mondrian, "Cubism did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality."¹¹ Having thoroughly disassembled it, robbed it of its signifying power and turned it into a simple design element, the Cubists remained fascinated by the visual sign. Indeed, the witty interplay of abstraction and defused iconographic signification is an important aspect of synthetic Cubism. Mondrian, on the other hand, clearly saw no point in continuing to dwell on the sign, a now superfluous remnant of a decoded, demystified

naturalism. It was the reality *veiled* by *both* natural appearances and semiotic codes, an ultimate truth released for the first time by the same forces that *defeat* signification, which he wanted to confront.

Mondrian As Theoretician

Mondrian's notion of an apparently transcendent "pure reality" is one of the truly elusive artifacts in the history of verbalization about art, seeming, as with so many fundamental concepts, to partake equally of the naive and profound. While Mondrian was by no means as gifted a writer as he was a painter, he left an impressive body of theoretical writings which are both meaningful and consistent, if not always totally coherent. It is to these writings that we must turn if we wish to understand what he regarded as the "logical consequences" of Cubism.

Before we proceed, however, a word of explanation is necessary. Fortunately, Mondrian was a genuine thinker whose researches have produced theoretical works of enormous value. Unfortunately, Mondrian's ideas are new and complex and his dense, awkward literary style, sometimes verbose and repetitive, sometimes maddeningly laconic, can be extremely confusing. Moreover, there is apparently no one place where his overall position is presented as a continuous argument—vital aspects of his theoretical framework are spread out in numerous articles written over a period of more than forty years. Thus, while it would of course seem virtually impossible to "speak for" Mondrian with absolute authority, some sort of attempt to organize and clarify his thoughts is necessary if we are to come to grips with his radically new message.

The strategy adopted here will be to carefully pick and choose among various key quotations which in my view contain the gist of Mondrian's theoretical viewpoint. These statements will be presented in the form of a coherent step by step argument, punctuated by a certain amount of paraphrase and explanation.¹² What follows, a dogged (and admittedly somewhat presumptuous) effort to construct a coherent theory out of fragments, is the sort of thing that must at least be attempted if our understanding of Mondrian (and modernism generally) is to be rescued from decades of confusion and half truth.

A Dialectic of Form and Space

Nature reveals forms in space¹³ ...[yet] forms are part of space and ... the space between them appears as form, a fact which evidences the unity of form and space ...¹⁴ Actually all is space, form as well as what we see as empty space ... form is limited space concrete only through its determination. Art has to determine space as well as form and to create the equivalence of these two factors ...¹⁵

Mondrian is speaking generally of the way objects differentiate

themselves from the space surrounding them. Objects are perceived as forms (figures or *gestalts*) in space (the ground). Under certain conditions the space between objects (negative space) appears as a form also, indicating an underlying unity which permits the statement "all is space." Ultimately form may be regarded as "limited space."

While the limitation of forms could be regarded as a drawback (literally a "limitation"), forms gain concreteness by being limited in a particular way (determined). Space is unlimited but also undetermined, thus insubstantial. The task of art must be to determine space and at the same time reveal (create) the equivalence of space and form. The implied goal is a space which is both determined (concrete) and unlimited.

The more neutral the plastic means are, the more the unchangeable expression of reality can be established. We can consider all forms relatively neutral that do not show any relationship with the natural aspect of things or with any "idea." Abstract forms or dislocated parts of forms can be relatively neutral.¹⁶

The plastic relations which the artist must use in determining forms or space are veiled in the attempt to render natural appearance. In order to bring such relations forward, the "natural aspect" must be neutralized. This involves a process of simplification, reduction and abstraction leading to "flat, rectilinear" forms free from external reference. Note that in defining the "neutral," Mondrian rejects not only natural appearance but also "any 'idea.'" He has turned his back on both conventional realism *and* symbolism. "

[I]t is a great mistake to believe that one is practicing non-figurative art by merely achieving neutral forms or free lines and determinate relations. For in composing these forms one runs the risk of a figurative creation, that is to say, one or more particular forms ...¹⁷ [I]n relation to the environment, simple forms show a static balance. They appear as entities separated from the whole. In order to establish universal unity, their proper unity has to be destroyed: their particular expression has to be annihilated ..."¹⁸

After one has neutralized the natural aspect of objects and transformed them into abstract forms, one is still faced with the problem that even the most abstract forms are still perceived statically *as forms* (or *gestalts*) within an enclosing space. The equivalence of form and space will remain unexpressed unless we go beyond neutralization to break up the forms themselves. Clearly, for Mondrian, abstraction in itself is not

enough. Note also that he invokes two very different kinds of unity: the "proper unity" of the individual form (and, by extension, the usual type of "unifying" structure that promotes it) is opposed by a completely new kind of "universal" unity that requires the *annihilation* of the individual form.

In plastic art, the static balance has to be transformed into the dynamic equilibrium which the universe reveals.¹⁹ Non-figurative art is created by establishing a dynamic rhythm of determinate mutual relations which excludes the formation of any particular form ...²⁰ [Static balance] maintains the individual unity of particular forms, single or in plurality. [Dynamic equilibrium] is the unification of forms or elements of forms through continuous opposition. The first is limitation, the second is extension. Inevitably dynamic equilibrium destroys static balance ...²¹

The particular forms, static, limited, must be destroyed through a dynamic process of mutual opposition, which breaks them up and, in so doing, opens them to the enclosing space which is also established in the same process. This process Mondrian calls "dynamic equilibrium."

The equilibrium that neutralizes and annihilates the plastic means is achieved through the proportions within which the plastic means are placed and which create the living rhythm.²²

Having neutralized and opened form, reducing all elements to a rectilinear opposition of lines and planes, all creative activity centers on the one element as yet undetermined, the plastic relations themselves, which must be made concrete (determined) by specific proportions. For Mondrian, the proportions must create that living rhythm which is the essence of dynamic equilibrium.

It is only after a long culture that within the plastic expression of the limiting form, one perceives another plastic expression closely allied with it, but, at the same time, opposed to it. Art today ... has succeeded in establishing this plastic expression: *it is the clear realization of liberated and universal rhythm distorted and hidden in the individual rhythm of the limiting form.*²³

The proportions (rhythms) which annihilate the plastic means, open limited form and make space concrete by determining it precisely, have their ultimate source in the same contingencies ("individual rhythms") which give rise to the particular, limiting form in the first place. Thus *dynamic equilibrium*, while in one sense destroying the particular, in

another, far more significant, sense preserves it by liberating its vital principle, usually veiled by natural appearance and limited form. In a sense dynamic equilibrium *is* this principle, the equivalence of space and form, the universal which resides in the particular.

Far from ignoring our individual nature, far from losing "the human note" in the work of art, pure plastic art is the union of the individual with the universal. For liberated rhythm is composed of these two aspects of life in equivalence.²⁴

Two Spatial Realms

I have deliberately arranged the above in such a way as to bring out as clearly as possible the process I find essential to the "formalistic" part of Mondrian's theory (his treatment of broader issues will be considered below). Its crucial moments can be summarized as follows: 1. neutralization of the image through abstraction; 2. the opening out of (abstract) form; 3. proportional determination of the (opened) spatial field. While apparently a threefold structure, I would argue that it is actually twofold, the second term acting as a hinge between two diametrically opposed realms.

Step one, while promoting abstraction, remains nevertheless within the realm of traditional perception, the classically gestalt structure of "figure-ground," where forms ("gestalts"), concrete or abstract, are presented against a more or less passive background space. As I have argued elsewhere, "space" in this sense is the equivalent of syntax, that structure ("tax") which brings together ("syn")—the ultimate source of all "grammatical" rules.²⁵ Forms (or figures) perceived in such a space are a necessary precondition for any sign function, since clearly a sign must exist in a gestalt (figure-ground) context in order to be meaningfully perceived at all.

Step two, the "opening of form," is the breakup of this pictorial syntagma through the undermining of the gestalt which grounds it. In, for example, the most complex of the Mondrian tree paintings, the highly differentiated (faceted) canvas is *not* differentiated along lines that will produce the differences (articulations) necessary for semiosis. On the contrary, as in analytic Cubism, any meaningful articulation that might be produced by such facetting is immediately cancelled by erasures (passages) which open normally forbidden channels between contiguous forms to obliterate difference. Thus any possible sign/gestalt is destructively opened to the overall space in a process of perpetual deferral of meaning (not unrelated, it would seem, to Jacques Derrida's "différance"²⁶).

Thanks, therefore, to the transformation effected in step two, the "spatial field" of step three is profoundly different from that of step one—

we have progressed from the virtual, syntactic space of traditional pictorialism and conservative modernism to something radically new:

A New Proportion

Ultimately, for Mondrian, the "logical consequences" of Cubism, the "expression of pure reality," are intimately connected with the "dynamic," "liberated," "universal," "rhythm of determinate mutual relations," that "living rhythm" "achieved through the proportions within which the plastic means are placed." One might go so far as to say that the thoroughgoing process of reduction and simplification, so evident in Mondrian's work from the second set of tree paintings to the rectilinear abstractions of the Twenties and beyond, is guided by an increasingly conscious need to clarify these proportions and bring them into the foreground of the viewer's awareness. Ultimately proportional determination becomes equivalent to the creative act itself.

What, we must now ask, is the basis for this proportional determination? A great deal of confusion has arisen from the common tendency to associate the rectilinearity of Mondrian (and late Cubism) with geometry. In such a context, any reference to "proportions" implies some sort of systematic, even mechanical procedure. This kind of thinking has led to completely misguided speculations regarding Mondrian's employment of geometrically derived proportions.²⁷

Such speculations are totally incompatible with the developmental process revealed in our analysis of the "tree" series. It is the perspective system, thoroughly undermined by the Cubists, which is dependent on geometry. Cubism begins as a reaction against any such systemization, a return to direct observation of contingencies. Similarly, Mondrian's work, from the second set of tree pictures through the works of 1914, derives its proportions from careful observation of "individual rhythms" as manifested in a particular tree, building facade, etc. After 1914, having ceased to depend on an external model, he does not then suddenly take up geometry, but clearly proceeds on the basis of the same principle that he had sought in the earlier work. The extreme reductionism of his later paintings, their avoidance of any form of symmetry or regularity, their dependence on the rectilinear opposition of vertical and horizontal lines, can be regarded both as manifestations of this principle and, in a more subtle sense, clarifications of the sort that will permit the principle more readily to manifest itself.

Mondrian had explained to a young colleague, Charmion von Wiegand, "that he did not work with instruments nor through analysis, but by means of intuition and the eye. He tests each picture over a long period by eye: it is a physical adjustment of proportion through training, intuition and testing."²⁸ To this can be added the testimony of Harry Holtzman, an intimate friend: "Mondrian's painting method, which he

called 'pure intuition,' was the direct approach, by trial and error, to the given space of the canvas. There were no a priori measures of any kind, there was no 'golden section.' He also called it 'pure sensuality.'"²⁹

In the light of Mondrian's writings, which continually stress the importance of objectivity and precision, such statements can seem disappointing. The artist who works intuitively, making crucial decisions by eye, seems the very type of subjectivist whose outlook Mondrian rejected. The contradiction is resolved only when we grasp the full extent of the dialectic involved. Within the context of traditional pictorial syntax, the intuitive perception of the artist functions as a vaguely defined subjectivity operating in relation to a highly defined and objective overall controlling system, that pictorial "language" which finds its culmination in scientific perspective. With Mondrian, not only is any such system opposed, but all the factors contributing to this opposition are ultimately reduced and clarified to the point that their guiding principle can be evaluated directly and *completely* by eye. In such a context, intuitive perception functions objectively and with precision.

This totally new situation would seem to throw theory into a crisis. In the complete absence of system (functioning either as a structural determinant *or* an object of resistance), in a context where the eye of the artist is the sole criterion of value, there is apparently nothing at all of a concrete nature to be said about that "dynamic rhythm of determinate mutual relations," that "dynamic equilibrium" which is the ultimate product of Mondrian's search for the universal principle residing in the particular.

Open Structure

Given the finality of the above conclusion, respecting always the fact that the precisions of any given Mondrian painting can ultimately be neither explained nor even stated (in words), it is still possible, nevertheless, for theory to speculate regarding the conditions satisfied by such precisions.

Basic to Mondrian's "classic" works (dating from the period 1925 through, roughly, 1939) is the manner in which their rectilinear lines and planes "annihilate" (to use Mondrian's term) each other. In other words, the proportional relations of both (we must remember that Mondrian's lines are thick enough to carry planar weight and often vary in thickness) are such that no element is present as a *figure* against a *ground*, no *gestalt* emerges. While technically the lines contain rectangles, these do not come forward perceptually as isolated forms. Neither does any particular configuration of lines come forward. Most important, the total design, thoroughly non-centric, does not form a *gestalt*, but remains open to the space around it.

The whole is therefore *not* greater than the sum of its parts. Each part,

clearly differentiated (by shape, position and, more rarely, color) from every other part, is nevertheless equivalent to every other part and to the whole. While each element is clearly articulated, non is rigidly circumscribed—all is in flux.

The Seeing of Seeing

The evolution of Mondrian's work and thought may be compared with the preliminary simplifications of Euclid or Descartes, leading backwards toward that which can have no other basis than intuition itself: the axiom. But there is a profound difference between conceptual and perceptual intuition, between the geometrical or logical axiom, which Mondrian unquestionably rejected, and the completely new kind of "axiom" embodied in his mature paintings. The axioms of Euclid and Descartes can be stated as propositions. Those of Mondrian, as we have seen, cannot. His ultimate decisions regarding the precise proportions (and, of course, colors) of any given canvas must be regarded as "axiomatic" (thus, in some sense self-evident) to the eye alone. By this I do not mean either the "empirical" eye of science or the "logical" eye of geometry or even gestalt psychology, but, to use Mondrian's own term, the "sensual" eye of purely sensory experience. This unveiling of the "perceptual axiom" at the heart of "the universal which resides in the particular" confirms what we may call *sensory determination* as the ultimate goal, not only of Mondrian's "completion" of Cubism, but the long evolution of realism as well. *Sensory determination*—this phrase must be understood in two ways, both of which are equally valid in the present context: determination by means of the senses; determination of the senses.

Mondrian's progressive reductionism is a journey to the heart, not simply of "realism," painting or artistic experience, but vision itself, for the first time liberated from the totalizations of thought. His "classic" canvases, not simply through abstraction, but by destroying the figure-ground relation itself, liberate vision from meaning, freeing visual perception to be experienced more or less completely in its own terms. Proportional determination, originating as the disruption of the sign, achieved by means of sensory judgement, is thus equivalent to determination of the senses. In this light, the "spatial field" of step three must be regarded both as the surface *and* the perceptual field (what I have called elsewhere the "negative field"³⁰). In determining such a "space" Mondrian is determining this field, articulated (brought into existence) on the painted surface, where it may be said that seeing itself is made visible.

B. The Disruption of Essence

If the above might encourage us to characterize Mondrian as the

coldest of the cold objectivists, it must also be acknowledged that the work of few artists has been permeated with a warmer subjectivity. The Romantic, indeed Expressionist, element which so obviously pervades his earlier paintings is still, in fact, strongly present (albeit greatly transformed) in the later. We must seek out the meaning of this apparent contradiction and deal with the very serious misunderstandings to which it has given rise.

Mondrian and the Romantic Tradition

In his influential book, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, Robert Rosenblum isolates a predominantly North European tradition of nature-mysticism. Taking as his point of departure early Nineteenth century works by Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge, Rosenblum traces a line of development through such figures as Blake, Turner, Van Gogh, and Munch, to modernists such as Nolde, Marc, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and the Abstract Expressionists, notably Still, Pollock, Newman and Rothko. Motivating this development are "dreams of mystical and spiritual realms" which, "in their transcendental ambitions, ... perpetuated the Romantic search for an art that could penetrate beneath the material surfaces of things and extract a religious essence." Occupying a key place in this scheme is

the Dutchman, Piet Mondrian, who provided the clearest and most artistically compelling link between a nineteenth century tradition based on the themes, the spaces, the emotions of Northern Romantic art and the transformation of these historical roots into a twentieth century art where all explicit references to the material world are banned.³¹

An obvious link between Mondrian and the earliest manifestations of the tradition invoked above is to be found in the same "Tree" series we have already examined. The special significance of trees for the Northern Romantic artist is discussed in some detail by Rosenblum, who cites compelling examples by Friedrich, Constable, Dahl and Van Gogh. He speaks of "an empathy of the artist with the life of an individual tree" so intense that the tree can "become a sentient, almost human presence." Specifically comparing Mondrian's *Red Tree* with those of Friedrich and Van Gogh, he finds in this work and the *Blue Tree* reflections "of radiant, organic vitality so potent that it can transform roots, trunk, and branches into a vibrant web, hovering in some transitional domain between matter and spirit, solid and void." Such works are really symbols evoking "elemental forces and mysteries."

These themes are crystallized in his discussion of the "neo-Romantic botany" of Rudolph Steiner, founder of the spiritual "science," Theosophy. To Steiner, heavily in debt to Goethe's notion of the

“primordial plant,” all plant species share a fundamental structural principle, reflecting the workings of the universe itself.³²

Theosophy and the Archetype

In light of the fact that Steiner's Theosophy distills and elaborates on the tradition of nature mysticism invoked by Rosenblum, Mondrian's well known association with the Theosophical movement becomes especially significant. This association, documented in Robert P. Welsh's "Mondrian and Theosophy,"³³ undoubtedly had a profound effect. Mondrian, who joined the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909, was an avid reader of Steiner and his associate Madame Blavatsky, whose ideas, as Welsh demonstrates, are reflected in many aspects of his work and thought.

Probably the most ambitious and, in many ways, convincing attempt, in modern times, to erect a theoretical framework for the nexus of ideas and associations invoked by belief systems such as nature-mysticism and Theosophy can be found in the writings of Freud's famous disciple, C. G. Jung. Basic to Jung's theories is the notion of the *collective unconscious*, a deep layer of the psyche, which is, in some sense, shared by all humans. The collective unconscious manifests itself by means of certain forms, found world-wide in myths, dreams, art and religious iconography, which according to Jung, carry a universally meaningful symbolism: the archetypes.

Mondrian's tree motif, especially as interpreted by Rosenblum, is an excellent example of an archetype. Jung has, in fact, devoted to this subject a lengthy essay, "The Philosophical Tree," which begins as follows:

An image which frequently appears among the archetypal configurations of the unconscious is that of the tree or the wonder-working plant. When these fantasy products are drawn or painted, they very often fall into symmetrical patterns that take the form of a mandala. If a mandala may be described as a symbol of the self seen in cross section, then the tree would represent a profile view of it: the self depicted as a process of growth.³⁴

Mandala and Cross

Mondrian's *Blue Tree* is one of a group of contemporary works which clearly exhibit, in the words of Jung, "symmetrical patterns that take the form of a mandala." The *mandala*, which means, literally, "circle" or "magic circle" is, of course, associated with that aspect of Oriental religious iconography which has had crucial significance for Theosophy. According to Jung, the mandala is among the most important of archetypes and is to be found almost universally as a symbol of the self.

He has written that "most mandalas take the form of a flower, cross or

wheel and show a distinct tendency toward quaternary structure ..."³⁵ The fourfold "quaternary" structure of the mandala is related to the alchemical notion of the "unification of opposites," a fundamental principle to which Jung devoted his last and most extensive work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*.³⁶ Here we are very close indeed to Theosophy, for the conjunction of opposites is symbolized by the cross, to Madame Blavatsky "the master-key which opens the door of every science, physical as well as spiritual."³⁷ For Jung the cross is the fundamental underlying structure of the mandala itself.

Rosenblum follows the development of the tree motif into that of the cross, concluding that Mondrian "could hardly have avoided the association of religious meaning with elementary geometric pattern, a pattern that was in fact to become the structural basis of the remaining thirty years of his objectless, abstract art."³⁸

Bringing the above set of associations into line with Mondrian's theories, we might say that "neutralization" of the tree-image has more clearly revealed the abstract, circular, symmetrical mandala form that is veiled by the "natural appearance" of the tree. Since the mandala nevertheless remains a "limited form," it too must be broken up (in subsequent paintings) to reveal its underlying structural principle: the "unification of opposites" that is the cross, for Mondrian the "primordial relation."³⁹ Interiorization of this powerful symbol would, finally, put one in touch with Jung's mystic "archetype as such," existing prior to the formation of any image, equivalent to Mondrian's notion of space itself.⁴⁰

Asymmetry

The above discussion, from Rosenblum's invocation of nature mysticism and Theosophy to the distillation of such notions in Jung's archetype, presents a totally convincing picture of Mondrian's development up to and including the period of the *Blue Tree* (1910), adding a great deal, moreover, to our understanding of certain aspects of his work and thought throughout his career. Nevertheless, as should be clear from our analysis of the Tree series, it would be a serious error to assume that the impact of Cubism in 1911 did not profoundly alter Mondrian's relation to the whole set of ideas invoked by Rosenblum and Welsh. Their failure to fully take this into account has had an unfortunate effect on the currently prevailing critical view of Mondrian's work as a whole.

For example, Dore Ashton has written of "the occult symmetries through which Mondrian meant to depict his intimations of the essential world—essential as the ever-unchanged schema Plato admired in geometry. All radiates from the centre here as, eventually, all of Mondrian's circles would be squared."⁴¹

If we are to profit from the genuine insights of Rosenblum and Welsh,

we must be careful to avoid this sort of misguided but completely typical generalization. Principle number 6 of Mondrian's "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" is among his clearest and most unequivocal theoretical statements: "all symmetry shall be excluded."⁴²

The circle, the square, the mandala, the cross, the "fourfold conjunction of opposites," are, in their very essence, symmetrical. While the Mondrian of 1910 *is* turning his trees into mandalas where "all radiates from the centre," from 1911 onward, beginning with works such as *The Gray Tree*, he is progressively *decentering* the image. The process of reduction and fragmentation begun in 1908 as a means of suppressing contingencies in favor of a dematerialized, symbolic essence is, in 1911, transformed into a means of subverting the symbolic process itself.

This involves not only the rejection of symmetry but also the rejection of any form of hierarchical, geometrically systematized proportioning. References to Plato, geometry, circles, squares are relevant only to those works completed before 1911. As has already been demonstrated, the proportions "which create the living rhythm" of dynamic equilibrium have their origin in the contingencies of observation, the active interaction of the eye and the object of its regard. Aside from the role of elements such as straight lines and right angles in clarifying and stabilizing such interaction, geometry has no role whatever to play in Mondrian's most characteristic work.

If he had never been confronted with the discoveries of Cubism, Mondrian might have moved on from the *Blue Tree* to an ever clearer distillation of its underlying geometry, arriving finally at the ultimate Theosophic, archetypal and, of course, Christian, symbol: the cross. What in fact happened was much more complex. Fusing Cubism with the goals of Theosophy, he retained from the cross its basic principle—the conjunction of opposites through the intersection of horizontal and vertical forces, the "primordial relation." *But*, "in each given case Neo-Plasticism must, so to speak, break up the representation of the primordial relation ... To represent the horizontal position and the upright position as a unity, without anything else, would evidently not be art, but at most a symbol."⁴³ Thus, the cross itself, as a meaningful configuration, a "limiting form," a symbolizing unity, is thoroughly disrupted in virtually all the later works.

Intensification as Reversal

Mondrian's relation to the Romantic project invoked by Rosenblum, the neo-Platonic search for a dematerialized, transcendent essence, is complex indeed. Beyond question, Mondrian's involvement with Theosophy had a lifelong influence on his thought, to the extent that there is little in his theories which could not be interpreted in purely Theosophical terms. However, too many critics and scholars have

overlooked the complete incompatibility of such an interpretation with the actual structure of the mature paintings. If Mondrian's theories regarding the neutralization of natural appearance, the destruction of limited form, and the unification of opposites are to be read simply as invocations of some Theosophically inspired archetype, then his paintings would have to be mandalas!

On the other hand, Mondrian's relentless search for the fundamental principle behind the Cubist attack on pictorial syntax clearly has its source in his original, Theosophically orthodox, project, the impetus of which was strong enough to carry him beyond the largely iconographic-iconoclastic preoccupations of Cubism.

More generally speaking, exploration of this necessary link with the Romantic tradition can tell us much about the vital, subjective side of the long evolution from realism to "formalist" modernism. Indeed it seems to have been the presence of a hyper-Romantic, expressionist intensity that distinguished the highly subjective, almost fanatical projects of Cézanne and the Cubists from the aloof scientism of the Impressionists. Cézanne's early canvases are personal and impulsive in the extreme—his subsequent naturalism is no less intense. Picasso's painting, at the very threshold of Cubism, is remarkable for its slashing savagery.

In characteristically expressionist fashion, Mondrian also projects his own feelings onto the motif and, at the same time, interiorizes it. The progressive fragmentations of the archetypal tree images may thus be considered equivalent in some sense to a process of internal disintegration and transformation, a process which only intensifies after 1911.

It should not be difficult, at this point, to understand the apparently paradoxical affinities between extreme realism and the expressionist impulse. The search for "objective" vision must ultimately involve consideration of the visual process itself which must, of course, have a subjective component. Only the artist with a strong subjectivity will in any case be aware of the extent to which the "real world" is a projection of the "world within." Only an artist with a passionate attachment to nature will so intensely internalize not only the motif but the naturalist project itself.

In this context we can much better grasp the deep inner need that motivates the struggle to see which lies at the root of naturalism and modernism both. It is a struggle which takes place "within," "without" and between the two, the expression of a profound desire for unification of the self through integration of self and world. At the core of this struggle, however, is the necessary reversal which takes us beyond the limits of the Romantic project. The self cannot be integrated with the world without first becoming *disunified*. The struggle to see involves the fragmentation

of self, the opening out of self, spirit, meaning, to the contingencies of the visible world.

What to the Romantic sensibility would mean death, madness or some totally otherworldly “spirituality,” becomes, ultimately, (simply?), the liberation of the senses. Thus for Mondrian the struggle to see is inseparable from what to him is the characteristically modern effort to overcome “the tragic.”⁴⁴

The ease with which Mondrian’s theories may be read as orthodox Theosophy attests to the difficulty of grasping the reversal that carries him far beyond any form of Romantic idealism. Only a reading of Mondrian in terms of the very different framework I have presented can reconcile his ideas with the salient characteristics of his creative output. The archetype, as a centralized, mandala-like, symbolic conjunction of opposites, can be regarded as the essence of pictorial syntax, thus, in fact, the mirror image opposite of a mature painting by Mondrian, the latter being a pure instance of that which destroys syntax, that which I have chosen, in another context, to call *negative* syntax (or *antax*).⁴⁵ Such a painting is, in fact, an *anti*-mandala, *decentralized* by the *disjunction* of opposites, and thoroughly *non*-symbolic.

While the Jungian archetype realizes unification on an ideal, totally non-material plane, the realm of the “collective unconscious,” a Mondrian painting becomes unified only on its own surface, a limited material entity which is the exact opposite of the archetype. On this surface as well, the limited, material realm of the senses attains unification with “the world” in terms of the concrete perceptual field created therein by the artist.

C. The Politics of Essence

Interestingly, those aspects of Mondrian’s thought which for Rosenblum reveal an extreme Romantic outlook have become, in our postmodern age, typical symptoms of modernism. Thus a quest for the “essential,” the “universal,” has been described as an especially noxious aspect of a grandiose, deluded modernism, conspiring within a politics of totalization and power.

An unusually penetrating and thoroughgoing analysis of Mondrian’s art and writings from this standpoint can be found in the recently published *Making Theory/Constructing Art*, by Daniel Herwitz.⁴⁶ By coming to grips with the rather harsh criticism presented in this book, we may better comprehend the ethical/Utopian implications of Mondrian’s thought in the context of the cultural politics of postmodernism. Our discussion of Rosenblum and Jung has prepared us for this strongly argued but ultimately misguided judgement.

Mondrian and Plato

Herwitz' dominant concern is with the manner in which theoretical discourse has come to dominate artistic awareness in the world of the "avant-garde," both modernist and postmodernist (and to his credit, Herwitz, though writing from an essentially postmodernist position, is equally skeptical of the more extreme claims emanating from both camps). For him, "Mondrian's art raises the question of the capacity of a visually abstract object to be the transparent bearer of ideas." To this end Mondrian, the "theosopher/philosopher," "aims to turn every inch of his paintings into abstract signifiers, so that, like the signs or words of a divine language or philosophical code, they can be invested with maximum semantic value."⁴⁷ The point of this enterprise is the idealist desire "to make his paintings into platonic forms which 'speak' or 'demonstrate' the truths of the world"⁴⁸ through "a perfected harmonization which exemplifies the inner harmony of all things."⁴⁹ This "turn to philosophical theory takes place in the context of his vision of utopia and of his perfect certainty that his artworks with their Platonistic form will bring utopia about by exemplifying it."⁵⁰

For Herwitz, as for Rosenblum and so many others, Mondrian's notions of "form," "space," and "harmony" are utterly traditional, unproblematic derivations from a fundamentally neoplatonic position. "Forms" are the Platonic forms which underlie and must ultimately replace all particulars; "space" is the ultimate dissolution of all such forms into a single, unified, transcendence; "harmony" is the ideal relation of forms and space, a pleasing, mellifluous consonance which can peacefully unite a painting, a nation, a world. Together they produce a message of abstract totalized essence, the perfect blueprint for the most perfectly soporific Utopia anyone might ever desire.

Herwitz, of course, is buying none of it. And clearly, such a "Utopia" would quickly degenerate into a nightmare of delusion, hypocrisy, control and exploitation in which "The Universal" would be achieved at the expense of individuality, "competing interests, divergent styles of belief, religion, historical consciousness, political taste,"⁵¹ etc.

Is this cloying super-Platonic fantasy an accurate assessment of Mondrian's vision? His writings, liberally quoted by Herwitz, are full of high sounding pronouncements of the sort that might indeed encourage us to answer in the affirmative. Herwitz has not the slightest doubt: "Mondrian's [example], like Plato's and Christ's, is belief in the world-transforming power of ideas: he is a Platonist."⁵²

Mondrian's Sword

But, also like Christ, Mondrian comes offering "not peace, but a sword." The artist-philosopher who could say "I think the destructive element is too much neglected in art,"⁵³ wanted, as I have already argued,

to destroy not simply "the natural" or "the individual" but "any idea." If, for Mondrian, as Herwitz claims, "form" means "Platonic form," what are we to make of his many references to form as an outworn relic of the past which must be "broken up," "annihilated" or "abolished"? How, for example, are we to take the following, with its Nietzschean (and Derridian) overtones?

We now discover that the basis of form is not unchangeable as the old culture thought. The new culture abolishes form, together with the old morality ... Jazz and Neo-Plasticism are already creating an environment in which art and philosophy resolve into rhythm that has no form and is therefore "open."⁵⁴

And Mondrian's notion of "harmony"? "Neo-Plastic harmony arises from *constant oppositions*. The harmony of Neo-Plasticism is therefore not traditional harmony, but *universal* harmony, which to the eyes of the past appears rather as discord."⁵⁵

Herwitz sees Mondrian as attempting to sublimate the particular, the individual into a totalizing "universal." However a careful reading will show that Mondrian usually uses the phrase "particular *form*," designating the particular manifesting itself as a *gestalt*. As our earlier analysis has shown, Mondrian is opposed to this not because of a Platonic disdain for the particular in itself, as a concrete limited entity, but out of an awareness that within the particular *form* lies hidden and *repressed* the "living rhythm" that is the basic *principle* of particularity (materiality, concreteness, contingency) itself. If we substitute for "the individual" the term "Ego," the notion of repression comes into stronger relief and a link with Freud becomes evident.

A Dialectical Reversal

The psychotherapeutic meaning of Mondrian's work is the subject of an especially insightful recent essay, "The Geometrical Cure," by Donald Kuspit. Though, like Herwitz and so many others, he too easily reads geometry and traditional philosophy (in this case, Spinoza) into Mondrian's theories, Kuspit recognizes the connection between Mondrian's project and the eminently anti-Platonic healing program of Freud. For Kuspit, Mondrian (and Malevich) "are the truly transmutative artists, ... for their geometry evokes the original wholeness of the self by affording a peak experience of primordality."⁵⁶ Even more to the point in the present context, Kuspit is among the very few to have recognized that Mondrian, like Freud, must be understood *dialectically*. Comparing Mondrian with Malevich, he accuses the latter of having mistaken "totality for wholeness because he could not comprehend its dialectical character. (Mondrian obviously did, which is why his wholeness never has the look of stark totality characteristic of Malevich's abstraction.)"⁵⁷ In

recognizing that “wholeness” and “totalization” are not necessarily the same thing, we are reminded that modernism itself may be more subtle than the postmodernists (who are always attacking modernism for its “totalizing” ambitions) have been willing to accept, that we cannot afford to literalize the complexities of dialectic into crude affirmations of ultimate “Truth.”

This, as should now be evident, is exactly what Herwitz has done. Despite his many insights, and, unfortunately, like so many others who have tried to make sense of Mondrian’s writings, he is insensitive to the possibility that Mondrian might be struggling to say the exact opposite of what he appears to be saying. We cannot completely blame Herwitz or anyone else for falling into this trap. As Mondrian himself has bitterly complained:

How deplorable that such timeworn, conventional language must serve to express the new beauty: to describe the means and the goal of purely abstract art, we are compelled to use the same terms that we use for naturalistic art—but with what a difference in their meaning!

When we speak of “harmony,” we do not mean anything like traditional harmony: ... The words “equilibrium,” “pure plastic,” “abstract,” “universal,” “individual,” etc., can be similarly misunderstood ...⁵⁸

The meaning of words has become so blurred by past usage that “abstract” is identified with “vague” and “unreal,” and “inwardness” with a sort of traditional beatitude. Thus, most people do not understand that the “spiritual” is better expressed by some ordinary dance music than in all the psalms put together.⁵⁹

Theory vs. Art?

To his credit, Herwitz recognizes that there is something very wrong with the “meta-narrative” he finds in Mondrian’s texts: it does violence to the art. The discrepancy between a typical Mondrian painting, which “resists all prefiguration by words ... feels complete in itself, unreachable and uninterpretable ...”⁶⁰ and the conceptual burden Mondrian supposedly expects it to bear is in fact the point of much of Herwitz’ argument, hinging as it does on the premise that Avant-Garde theory is designed to direct and control the way we experience Avant-Garde art. Herwitz is claiming that while Mondrian the theorist is attempting to control the look and meaning of his art, to force it to signify Platonic ideas, the art itself resists by defeating signification of any kind.

That Mondrian’s art resists signification is indeed one of the major

points of this essay. However, to assume that Mondrian the writer nevertheless expects these works to actually symbolize specific aspects of his theory is to seriously misread—Mondrian never makes such a claim and is clearly opposed to any form of the symbolic in art.⁶¹ The discrepancy between theory and practice exists not because Mondrian the artist was a genius while Mondrian the thinker was “wooly” or “dotty,” as Herwitz implies (he is certainly not alone in this assessment), but because Herwitz has failed to plumb the depth of the dialectic at work in Mondrian’s thought.⁶²

This should not be surprising. Mondrian was an artist/thinker who made an important discovery that he was able to articulate perfectly in his art, but not his writings. Since in his theory he was attempting (not unlike Derrida!) to deploy the intellectual tools of idealism to undermine idealism itself it is not surprising that he was never able to make himself perfectly clear. I believe this situation confused him to the point that too much in his writings hopelessly conflates the conceptual and anti-conceptual, geometry and sensuality, idealism and materialism (despite some earnest attempts to make just these sorts of distinctions—he unquestionably lacked the literary and philosophical skills of a Derrida.) Not only does this make his writings especially difficult, it leads on occasion to political claims that are indeed dangerously naive (not because they are necessarily misguided or hopelessly Utopian, but because he has seriously underestimated the potential for the sort of misunderstanding that could oversimplify or even reverse his meaning with disastrous results).

Only when we concentrate on his art and, most especially, as we have in section A of this essay, the *development* of his art from around 1908 on, does a consistent theoretical picture emerge. We can, only then, turn back to the writings with some hope of understanding what is really meant.

A System For the Disruption of System

What, then, is really meant? What, ultimately is Mondrian struggling so patiently to communicate in essay after essay, statement after statement spanning a period of over twenty-five years? I have of course already had a good deal to say on this matter, in sections A and B above, but there is something more fundamental, something especially relevant in the age of post-structuralism and deconstruction, an age struggling to free itself from its own suffocating, totalizing “mastery” of technology, art and thought.

The Mondrian who was so profoundly influenced by Cubism, and the most radical aspects of Futurism and Constructivism was never a Platonist. Nevertheless, he *was*, in a sense, a Platonist, as is revealed in his purist attempt to attain the essence of that which *disrupts* limited

form, which disrupts "any idea." He operates *in the spirit of* Plato by pursuing an ideal,⁶³ but, as has been demonstrated by our earlier discussion of his theosophy, the ideal he pursues is the *destruction* of idealism itself. As we learned in our analysis of the Tree series, he has discovered a unique *structural principle* which promotes that which has been repressed and bound by form and "essence." This principle is itself a new universal, a new essence, a new order, the antipode of the Platonic essence, an order that can *oppose* repression by opening out Platonic ideas like "particular form" and "the individual." This is the "essence," the "universal," the "unity" that Mondrian speaks of when he is sounding Platonic.

What Yve-Alain Bois has had to say with regard to a particular Mondrian painting (but which could in fact be applied to many) seems especially relevant at this juncture:

It goes without saying that this picture—like the classical neoplastic paintings in general—does not come under the heading of systemic or programmed art. But if it is not systemic, isn't it, in some way, systematic? Isn't there a system functioning within it, entirely apparent, whose goal is to prohibit any stasis or fixing of perception in a systematic assurance?⁶⁴

Mondrian's discovery of what we have called "the perceptual axiom," the anti-axiom which explodes the "axiomatic" itself, opens up just such a possibility: a system for the disruption of system. The disruption would be radical indeed, for Mondrian, artist and thinker, has taken us far beyond the sort of dialectic which, like the signifying process itself, disrupts only to reunite its fragments on a "higher" level in a perpetual process of unfolding "transcendence." Nor could a disruptive force of such magnitude be contained by the "informal" workings of postmodernist bricolage or rhetoric, weak-tea notions totally alien to Mondrian's diamond-hard vision. The new, essentially *contingent*, spatial field revealed in the "classic" works from 1918 on is fully independent, fully the equal of the traditional "syntactic field" it negates (but does *not* transcend), and need not be "redeemed" by higher level incorporation into anything else whatsoever.

For me this profound discovery, firmly grounded in the extraordinary researches of predecessors like Cézanne, Braque and Picasso, paralleled by the remarkably similar discoveries of Schönberg and Webern, is both that which lies at the heart of modernism and exactly that which has escaped notice in the many postmodernist attempts to "go beyond" it. Such an oversight is deeply unfortunate, since this radical dialectic on some level achieves what most postmodernists have announced to be a

prime goal of their own: the neutralization, breakup and reconstitution of the overmastering, totalizing, controlling forces of our time.⁶⁵ If Mondrian's Utopian vision has any meaning at all, it prefigures exactly this.

Notes

- 1 See Victor Grauer, "Modernism/postmodernism/neomodernism," *Downtown Review* 3-1/2 (1982), 3-7.
- 2 Victor Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," *Semiotica* 94-3/4 (1993), 233-252.
- 3 Throughout this essay, I will refer to Mondrian's paintings and drawings according to the numbers and dates provided in the "Classified Catalogue" appearing at the back of Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York: Abrams, 1956), 355-395. The two studies referred to above are Seuphor 169 and 170.
- 4 Seuphor, 171.
- 5 Seuphor, 172, 173, 174. The last is also called (by Seuphor) *The Blue Tree*.
- 6 According to historian Hans Jaffé, Mondrian probably first viewed Cubist paintings at an Amsterdam exhibit held in the autumn of 1911, but had undoubtedly heard of the movement and seen reproductions before this time. Hans Jaffé, *Piet Mondrian* (New York: Abrams, undated), 24,25.
- 7 Seuphor, 177.
- 8 Seuphor, 190-200.
- 9 Seuphor, 294.
- 10 Alfred Jarry may have anticipated Mondrian with his only partially whimsical notion of "pataphysics," the "science of the laws governing exceptions."
- 11 Piet Mondrian, "Toward the True Vision of Reality" (1942), in Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (New York: Wittenborn, 1945), 10.
- 12 While it is my belief that the overall result does in fact reflect Mondrian's intentions, I may be wrong. (Perhaps those who might accuse me of concocting a Mondrian of "my own," will also be willing to credit me with "his" insights.)
- 13 Mondrian, 13.
- 14 "A New Realism," (1943) in *Plastic Art...*, 18.
- 15 "Toward the True Vision ...," 13.
- 16 "A New Realism," 20.
- 17 "Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art" (1937), in *Plastic Art ...*, 58.
- 18 "A New Realism," 25.
- 19 "A New Realism," 25.
- 20 "Plastic Art and Pure ...," 58.
- 21 "A New Realism," 25.
- 22 "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926) in Seuphor, 166.
- 23 "Pure Plastic Art" (1942), in *Plastic Art ...*, 31.
- 24 "Pure Plastic Art," 31.
- 25 See Victor Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," 236-239.
- 26 The "it would seem" is necessary in view of the extraordinary difficulty of defining Derrida's typically obscure neologism, a "non-concept" in which "différance," "deferral" and "erasure" apparently come together to defeat logic and meaning in a manner that seems especially relevant here. For a more thorough attempt at coming to grips with "différance," see Alan Bass, "Translator's Introduction," in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), xvi - xvii.
- 27 See, for example, Charles Bouleau, *The Painter's Secret Geometry* (New York: Hacker, 1963).
- 28 From the journals of Charmion von Wiegand, as quoted in Seuphor, 181.
- 29 Harry Holtzman, "Piet Mondrian: The Man and His Work," in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, edited and translated by Harry Holtzman

- and Martin S. James, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 6.
- 30 See Victor Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," 243.
- 31 Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 173.
- 32 Rosenblum, 36, 180, 184.
- 33 Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944, Centennial Exhibition Catalog* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), 35-51.
- 34 C. G. Jung, "The Philosophical Tree," in Jung, *Alchemical Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 253.
- 35 C. G. Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, 22.
- 36 C. G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1963).
- 37 Helena Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. II, as quoted in Robert P. Welsh, "Mondrian and Theosophy," 49.
- 38 Rosenblum, 193-4.
- 39 See "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," first three "scenes."
- 40 Jung ultimately distinguishes between the "archetype as such," a universal, imageless, essence, and the particular, though still highly generalized, "archetypal images" which represent it. See Jolanda Jacobi, *Complex/Archetype/Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959), 34.
- 41 Dore Ashton, "Mondrian: Notes on an Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum," in *Artscanada* 226/227 (May/June 1979). Ashton's notion of radiation from the center may derive from a particularly misleading essay by the artist, Max Bill, who claims that "one may visualize [Mondrian's lines] extending beyond the rim of the image. The fixed center becomes a nucleus, surrounded by possibilities of unlimited extension." Bill's notion has also been echoed by so noted an authority as Meyer Schapiro in an otherwise highly insightful essay, "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting" (1978). Both interpretations apparently derive from an overly literal reading of Mondrian's notion of "open" structure, as though the contents of an "open" painting were to be expected to spill out into the surrounding space. Such readings are refuted by the canvases themselves, where many of the lines do a 90 degree turn to continue onto the edge of the canvas, where they clearly stop. This sort of highly idealized interpretation would be better applied to the most ordinary Realist and Romantic landscapes, where hills and dales *ad infinitum* are implied before, behind and to the sides. Old ideas die hard.
- See Max Bill, "Composition I with Blue and Yellow, 1925 by Piet Mondrian," in *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944*, 75, and Meyer Schapiro, "Mondrian: Order and Randomness in Abstract Painting," in Schapiro, *Modern Art* (Brazziler: New York, 1979).
- 42 Ashton, 166.
- 43 "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," 312.
- 44 See, for example, his comments in "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," 318.
- 45 See Victor Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," 244.
- 46 Daniel Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art: On the Authenticity of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 47 Herwitz, 98.
- 48 Herwitz, 99.
- 49 Herwitz, 113-14.
- 50 Herwitz, 97.
- 51 Herwitz, 131.
- 52 Herwitz, 129.
- 53 From a letter to James Johnson Sweeney, in *The New Art — The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 357.
- 54 Mondrian, "Jazz and Neo-Plastic," (1927) in *The New Life ...*, 220-21.
- 55 "The Neo-Plastic Architecture of the Future," in *The New Life ...*, 197.
- 56 Donald Kuspit, "The Geometrical Cure," in *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 44.
- 57 Kuspit, 51.
- 58 "Purely Abstract Art," in *The New Art—The New Life*, 200.

59 "The Manifestation of Neo-Plasticism in Music and the Italian Futurists' *Bruiteurs*," in *The New Art ...*, 151.

Among the very few to have "gotten the message" of this dialectic is art critic and Mondrian scholar Yve-Alain Bois, whose comments on a well known Mondrian dictum should be taken to heart by postmodernists all too eager to read dreams of mastery and control into the meanings of Mondrian and so many others of his time: "[T]he famous 'if we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision' speaks also of a painting that would be entirely free of the tragic that perception necessarily entails in that it always seeks to impose an order, a particular structure, a "limitation," a stability upon the free rhythm of the visual facts that confront it: to liberate our vision is also to accept that we no longer master it." See Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting As Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 162.

60 Herwitz, *Making Theory/Constructing Art*, 125.

61 While to my knowledge Mondrian never even implies that his art might signify or symbolize anything whatsoever, he does frequently make what seems to me the perfectly reasonable claim that his art *demonstrates* fundamental aspects of his theory. To Herwitz such a claim is even more extreme than that of simple signification, but I disagree. To "demonstrate" is clearly different in kind than to "signify." We might for example say that a particular bird in flight "demonstrates" certain principles of aerodynamics. This doesn't mean that we expect that from now on this or any bird will therefore "signify" such principles or that anyone looking at such a bird is to be expected to grasp such principles just by looking at it, by virtue of some magical semiotic process. Clearly, Mondrian's paintings demonstrate his artistic principles in the same way that any art demonstrates the artistic principles of its creator. (It would be indeed quite strange if this were not the case.) Saying this is not the same as expecting that simply by staring at one of his paintings such principles will become known to us, nor is there any evidence that Mondrian had such an expectation.

62 Since I seem to be dumping on Herwitz at this point, I feel compelled to add that I find his book as a whole quite sympathetic and even important. Of the many to have missed the point on Mondrian, Herwitz is among the most thoroughgoing and perceptive, bothered by problems that others have never noticed, eager to give difficult issues the careful consideration they deserve. If I've chosen him as "whipping boy," it is largely for these reasons.

Herwitz' excellent treatment of Warhol and Cage, his thorough analysis of the ideas of Arthur Danto and his logical, skeptical approach to many key issues of modernism and postmodernism make his book worthwhile reading indeed.

63 Donald Kuspit, who associates Mondrian's "geometry" with the "geometrical method" of Spinoza, comes very close to what I am saying here, but this statement requires some explanation. As Kuspit assumes his reader already knows, and thus unfortunately never actually states, Spinoza was not a geometer in any ordinary sense. He called his method "geometrical" only because it was analogous to the axiomatic method of the geometer Euclid. As Mondrian's "geometry" is generally assumed to be more literally Euclidean, the comparison with Spinoza is a bit misleading. Also misleading, of course, is the suggestion that Mondrian proceeded axiomatically in any traditional sense.

But, as I have argued in section A above, Mondrian did operate axiomatically in a very untraditional sense, by simplifying his approach to painting to the point that each painting becomes itself what can only be called an "anti-axiom" of the contingent. He thus moves in the opposite direction from Spinoza, who built his *Ethic up* from axioms. But, in this very opposition, motivated by his intense hunger for the "union of the individual with the universal," so similar, as Kuspit notes, to Spinoza's "the universal within," Mondrian *does* proceed, in this special sense of the word, "geometrically." See Donald Kuspit, "The Geometrical Cure," 45-49.

64 Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting As Model*, 163.

65 The only major philosopher, to my knowledge, to have fully grasped the significance of modernism in this sense was also profoundly influenced by it. The "negative dialectic" of Theodore Adorno is rooted in modernist music (he was a member of the Schönberg circle), not painting, yet (not really surprisingly) key aspects of his thought have a great deal in common with that of Mondrian. In a comprehensive recent study of Adorno's

aesthetics, Lambert Zuidervaart writes:

"Adorno's arguments are dialectical in the sense that they highlight unavoidable tensions between polar opposites whose opposition constitutes their unity and generates historical change. *The dialectic is negative in that it refuses to affirm any underlying identity or final synthesis of polar opposites* ...

Substantive justification for a dialectical approach comes from the 'unconscious interaction' between universality and particularity within modern art. According to Adorno, modern art has taken a 'radically nominalistic position' ...

Dialectical aesthetics ... 'deals with reciprocal relations between universal and particular where the universal is not imposed on the particular ... but emerges from the dynamic of particularities themselves.'" [Emphasis is mine.] See Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 48-50.

This last sounds very much like Mondrian's "clear realization of liberated and universal rhythm distorted and hidden in the individual rhythm of the limiting form." [See note 23.] Adorno's negative dialectic, refusing to resolve itself into a fixed, totalized conception, striving to maintain a radical gap between its irreconcilably opposed terms, has, with good reason, been getting more and more attention in the literature on postmodernism and is indeed a much needed corrective to some of its more simplistic assumptions. Whether *any* practice ultimately grounded in language is capable of resisting the synthesizing pull of traditional dialectics (metaphysics) has of course become, especially since Heidegger and Derrida, an open and very difficult question. To the extent that Adorno, Derrida et al. remain content to express themselves in language alone, as philosophers, their efforts to achieve this radical split may be necessarily self-defeating—inevitably destined, despite all "good intentions," to degenerate into yet another mystifying "transcendence." In my view, Mondrian, himself already split, *was* in his own way able, if not to explain, then to express something "essential" to this long sought "end of metaphysics." But this is a topic for another essay.

Bacon and Bataille

Peter Jones

Introduction

In recent years critical attention has been focused on the hitherto neglected work, at least in Anglo-Saxon academic circles, of the renegade Surrealist Georges Bataille (1897-1962). In 1990, Stoekl noted that:

There seems to be taking place, both in the US and abroad, a considerable revival of interest in the work of Georges Bataille. In the last five years, no fewer than five major works have been published in English translation.¹

Much of the attention to Bataille's work has been in relation to literature and critical theory, especially French post-structuralist thought, notably that of Derrida and Foucault. However, today "Bataille is no longer simply a footnote at best in the works of other writers, but a major theorist in his own right,"² whose concerns ran a gamut of disciplines such as literature, sociology, and philosophy.

In the light of this recent interest in Bataille, it is timely to consider his influence on art practice. Bataille's extensive writings on art (inseparable from his other concerns) are well known, e.g., his work on Goya, Manet, and Surrealism as well as Prehistoric and Primitive art. But Bataille's influence on art practice has been little explored until late. A 1991 French exhibition³ based on Bataille's last text, *The Tears of Eros* (1961), a combined illustrated history of eroticism and painting, traced Bataillean themes in the art of his time and ours. The exhibition featured work by such luminaries as Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti, who were among Bataille's close friends and collaborators.

With this paper I want to redress the relative neglect of Bataille's influence on art practice by looking at the work of an artist considered by many to be one of the most important painters of the 20th century, Francis Bacon (1909-1992). Bataille was familiar with Bacon's work, regarding the painter as "among the most important of his generation."⁴ Bacon's work was featured in the 1991 French exhibition. Although Bacon was often reticent about his influences and sources, they were extensive and highly diverse, ranging from Greek tragedy to Velazquez,

from T.S. Eliot to Eisenstein. Bacon's voracity for source material is well known. He stated: "I've looked at everything," adding, "I'm like a grinding machine. Everything I've seen has gone in and been ground up very fine."⁵ In this paper I shall argue that Bataille was part of the grist for Bacon's mill.

In linking Bataille with Bacon, I also want to attempt to answer Dawn Ades' call for the "closer examination"⁶ of the links between the two, and lay some of the groundwork for a more varied and richer reading of Bacon's work. Surveying the literature on Bacon, one finds that much of the analysis is confined to seeing his painting as "reflecting" the horrors of the 20th century. Such analysis is often couched in a quasi-existentialism. An example of this is Grey Gowrie's statement: "Francis Bacon has, more than any other painter, provided the age with an image, in Ezra Pound's phrase, of its 'accelerated grimace'."⁷ This (dominant) reading arguably results in the closure of Bacon's work. In contrast, linking Bacon with Bataille reveals an artist concerned with a much wider range of themes. I will discuss the ties, affinities, and parallels between Bataille and Bacon, arguing that they not only shared similar attitudes, concerns, and preoccupations, but that Bataille was an influence on Bacon and that one can read Bataillean themes in his work. It is not my intention to suggest that Bacon *directly* illustrated Bataille, but that Bataille seriously informs Bacon's art.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, socio-historical/cultural links between Bacon and Bataille will be established. Second, a summary of Bataille's ideas pertinent to the discussion will be given, to assist in the exposition of the relation between the writer and painter. This is followed by a discussion of the affinities and parallels between the two and Bataillean themes in the work of Bacon.

Bacon, Bataille and Surrealism

Here I want to establish the socio-historical/cultural link between Bacon and Bataille. I shall discuss it in relation to Surrealist discourse, common ground for both Bacon and Bataille.

Bacon first came into contact with Surrealism, most notably in the form of Picasso's series of biomorphic bathers, during his two year stay in Paris during the late 1920s. Bacon saw what is often regarded as Picasso's quasi-Surrealist work at the Rosenberg galleries in 1928. The Picasso show marked a turning point in Bacon's life. He recalled: "That's when I first thought about painting,"⁸ adding "I was very much influenced by Picasso ... I saw that exhibition at the end of the twenties. It had a huge effect on me."⁹ The influence of Picasso's biomorphic figures can be seen in protagonists of Bacon's triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of*

a *Crucifixion* (1944).

Bacon's exposure to full-blooded Surrealism came with the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition, organized by Herbert Read and Roland Penrose in London. The importance of this exhibition in regard to the introduction of Surrealism into British art discourses must be stressed. As Davis notes: the exhibition "provided the introduction on a large scale of continental Surrealism to the British Isles."¹⁰ Despite a few exceptions such as Max Ernst, "Surrealism as a movement had never been witnessed in England before the International Exhibition of 1936."¹¹ Davis argues that the exhibition was "a liberating conceptual experience"¹² for the young Bacon. Especially in terms of the willingness of exhibiting artists such as Hans Bellmer and Salvador Dali to "dislocate, distort and disfigure the figure or to invent grotesque biomorphic entities to supplant the human presence."¹³ At the time Bacon's work was considered by some critics as proto-surreal. It was viewed for possible inclusion in the London exhibition, but it was judged "insufficiently surreal"¹⁴ by Read and Penrose.

Surrealism influenced Bacon in other ways. Bacon's emphasis on the role of the unconscious, chance and accident in his art production has affinities with Surrealism, especially the Surrealist technique of automatism. Bacon stated: "I hope that chance and accident will work for me. I always think of myself not so much as a painter but as a medium for accident and chance."¹⁵ He goes on: "the best things are likely to happen when the artist is out of control, conjuring new visions of reality from his subconscious."¹⁶ In reply to David Sylvester's question as to the origins of this, Bacon answered, "those things come through from Surrealism."¹⁷ The influence of Surrealism on Bacon is also apparent from his early use of an umbrella motif, a signifier of Surrealism ever since Lautréamont, as in *Figure Study II* (1945-46) and *Painting* (1946). We might also note Bacon's interest in and extensive use of diverse photographic images as another link to the Surrealist discourse. Krauss argues that photography "is the great production of the movement."¹⁸ Bacon states: "I find that photographs are very much more interesting than either abstract or figurative painting. I've always been haunted by them."¹⁹

Although the influence of Surrealism on early Bacon is evident, his relationship to it was, as he himself remarked, "a little complicated."²⁰ While never showing any systematic commitment to Surrealist ideology, Bacon was interested in Surrealism's iconoclastic intent. He remarked: "I've been influenced by what the movement represented in terms of revolt against the establishment, in politics, religion and the arts."²¹ But it was Surrealism's theoretical and literary aspects rather than Surrealist painting that really interested Bacon. He stated:

I think it's the writers of this movement who were the best. All the texts, manifestos and reviews that they wrote, dreamed up and published and the great interest in reading and writing ... in my opinion, constitutes the most interesting aspect of Surrealism.²²

Bacon then, was not only conversant with (and assimilated) aspects of Surrealist art practice, but, more importantly, its theoretical and literary works. It is Bacon's interest in the theoretical and textual productions of Surrealism that brings us to Bataille and *Documents*.

Bataille was never really a card-carrying Surrealist. He worked on the margins of the movement in the early 1920s. By 1929, after various schisms within the Surrealist movement, he became the de facto leader of dissident and ex-Surrealists. This group included André Masson, Michel Leiris, Antonin Artaud and Raymond Queneau. Its locus was a glossy arts review called *Documents* (1929-30). Bataille was its editor-in-chief. A typical issue of *Documents* consisted of

hideously enlarged photographs of big toes; folk crafts; *Fantômas* covers (a popular mystery magazine); Hollywood sets; Pre-Columbian and French carnival masks; accounts of music hall performances; descriptions of Paris slaughterhouses.²³

The heterogeneous content and lay-out of the journal, which adopted the principle of collage, isolating, mixing and juxtaposing disparate images and texts, was a familiar Surrealist device. It is a strategy designed to subvert conventional hierarchies, categories and identities, and to produce strangeness and incongruity. Parallels can be seen between the type and layout of illustrations in *Documents* and Bacon's own disparate collection of visual sources. Like those of *Documents*, Bacon's images came from high art, newspapers, popular culture, history and science books, with the emphasis on the extreme and unusual. Peppiatt records that Bacon's collection, pinned up in his studio in collage form, included among other things, images of "Goebbels, Velazquez's *Portrait of Innocent X*, hippopotamuses, *Christ Carrying the Cross* by Grünewald, a man with a monkey and a crowd fleeing during the Russian Revolution."²⁴

Ades records that "Bacon possessed copies of *Documents*, and has talked specifically about the effect some of the illustrations reproduced in them had upon him, notably those of slaughterhouses."²⁵ However, the important thing for Bacon was the context of these images. As Ades notes, "It was not just the illustrations, but the whole context of ideas in which these illustrations were situated, that must have touched Bacon."²⁶

Despite being conceived as a collective endeavour and art review,

albeit an unorthodox one, *Documents* became a vehicle for Bataille's views. One of the journal's co-founders complained: "The title you have chosen for this journal is hardly justified except in the sense that it gives us "*Documents*" on your state of mind."²⁷ An example of this is Bataille's polemic against Breton's movement. Bataille accused it of selling out to the art market and of "Icarian reflexes"²⁸ with respect to all that is base, undesirable and excremental in society. For Bataille, all that is "base" had to be acknowledged and explored. In contrast to Breton's idealism, for Bataille it is impossible to behave "other than a pig who rummages in manure and mud uprooting everything with his snout."²⁹ Through *Documents*, then, Bacon would have been fairly conversant with much of Bataille's thought.

Bacon's awareness of Bataille's work could also have been engendered or stimulated by a number of personal relationships. I am suggesting that Bacon was possibly made aware of Bataille's work or had his knowledge of it argued through his long and close friendships with Michel Leiris, Alberto Giacometti and Isabel Rawsthorne, all of whom knew Bataille.

In 1924 Michel Leiris thought of Bataille as a kindred spirit. Leiris was associated with the Surrealist movement until the schisms of 1929, when he became part of the group of dissident Surrealists who centered around Bataille and *Documents*. Leiris became Bataille's co-editor and a regular contributor. Later, Leiris, with Bataille and others, formed the College of Sociology (1937-39), which aimed to recover and study forms of the sacred in everyday life in the light of the Enlightenment and capitalist rationalization of the world. Leiris continued to associate with Bataille until the latter's death in 1962.

Bacon met Leiris in Paris in the 1960s, forming a close and long-standing friendship, painting several portraits of him such as *Study for Portrait of Michel Leiris* (1978), and illustrating Leiris's work on bullfighting. One of Leiris's texts for *Documents*, "Picasso's Recent Canvases," discussed the artist's biomorphic bathers which so impressed Bacon. Both thought highly of Picasso and Giacometti, especially for their distortion of human forms. Bacon's knowledge and admiration of Leiris and his work is clear. Talking in 1992, just before his death, Bacon stated:

I liked Leiris very much. He was a wonderful friend and an incredibly inspiring man. He's written some works which I admire very much, such as *L'Âge d'Homme (Manhood)*.³⁰

Leiris in turn admired his art and has written on it extensively. Leiris regarded Bacon's paintings as realist, representing "the human condition as it truly and peculiarly is today: man dispossessed of any durable

paradise.”³¹ Bacon shared Leiris’s anti-idealism: “I remember looking at a dog-shit on the pavement ... this is what life is like.”³²

Alberto Giacometti was also part of the group of disaffected Surrealists that formed around Bataille and *Documents*. His work was featured in *Documents*. Leiris and Bataille both wrote on it, attracted by Giacometti’s use of Primitive art in such work as *Spoon Women* (1927), reflecting their anti-Western, ethnographic concerns. The significance of Bataille and *Documents* for Giacometti needs to be stressed. Bataille’s predilection for erotic and violent fantasies corresponded with Giacometti’s own, materialized in *Woman With Her Throat Cut* (1932). Giacometti associated with Bataille for many years, in 1947 illustrating Bataille’s *Journal de Dianus (The Catechism of Dianus)*. As for *Documents*, Krauss notes that Giacometti retained a lifelong attachment to it, owning a full-set which he “carefully guarded during his entire lifetime.”³³

The importance of Giacometti *vis-à-vis* Bacon must be noted. Ades states:

Giacometti was of central importance to the generation of artists starting their career in the late 40s and 50s: his work and his ideas were brought to the fore in Britain by the critic David Sylvester [a close friend of Bacon].³⁴

Bacon named Giacometti as “the greatest living influence on my work.”³⁵ His main value at this time lay in his commitment to the representation of the human figure in face of the growing hegemony of Abstraction. Giacometti’s concern with the human figure encouraged English figurative artists such as Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and of course Bacon. Bacon stated: “Abstraction has never been enough for me. As a human being I’m more interested in the representation of people.”³⁶ Giacometti’s other value pertained to questions of realism. He warned against exactitude, lifelike representation, “because on one hand it would seem too real or too great an illusion of the real, and then one would only be conscious of its immobility.”³⁷ Too great a realism, then, tends to negate any sense of life in the figure. A necessary alteration or rather “distortion” or “injury” must be practiced to capture it. Bacon has talked in similar terms:

What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of appearance. ... Who today has been able to record anything that comes across to us as fact without causing deep injury to the image?³⁸

Bacon’s distortion of the human form brings us to Bataille, as shall later become evident.

Finally, Bacon's awareness of Bataille's work could also have been augmented by his close relationship with the avant-garde groupie, Isabel Rawsthorne. In the 1930s Rawsthorne moved in Parisian avant-garde circles, being a highly sought after model and a mistress of, among others, Giacometti and Balthus. Bacon met Rawsthorne in Post-War London. According to Farson, he admired her for her intellect as well as her looks, which he painted in a series of portraits, the most notable perhaps being *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho* (1967). In an interview Bacon names her as Bataille's girlfriend.³⁹ One can assume that Rawsthorne was *au fait* with Bataille's work.

Considering then, Bacon's close, long term friendships, particularly with Leiris and Giacometti, and their mutual interests and similar preoccupations, it is highly probable that Bacon discussed Bataille with them. Fletcher records that Giacometti was "a compelling conversationalist ... [who] avidly debated avant-garde ideas of art, literature and philosophy."⁴⁰ Bacon may have obtained his copies of *Documents* from them.

I now want to turn to the affinities and parallels between Bacon and Bataille and the Bataillean themes in Bacon. They are readily discernible in his work. The affinities, parallels and themes will be discussed as separate topics, each contextualized by the relevant ideas of Bataille. However, their intertextuality must be stressed. Their formal compartmentalization is to facilitate the exposition of a complex, shifting set of discourses, which generally center around the body.

The Body

For Bataille, the body, as a privileged site of order in bourgeois society, is a prime target. Bataille wrote: "It is still possible to take it out on the human body."⁴¹ *Contra* the ordered body with its ideal form, the basis of orthodox notions of beauty and aesthetics since classical times and idealist notions of autonomy, unity and rational control, Bataille posits the "disordered body" marked by difference and physiological chaos. Where, according to Bataille,

the vicissitudes of organs ... traversing innumerable animal species and individuals, carries the imagination along in an ebb and flow it does not willingly follow, due to a hatred of the still painfully perceptible frenzy of the bloody palpitations of the body. Man willingly imagines himself to be like the god Neptune, stilling his own waves, with majesty; nevertheless, the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval, brusquely put an end to his dignity.⁴²

Bataille's disordered body is not just part of an anti-idealist/anti-humanist project. It also constitutes an heterogeneous element that, along with "otherness," the unconscious and base/abject matter resists "the establishment of the homogeneity of the world."⁴³ For Bataille, the aim of Western philosophical, scientific, religious, social, economic, political and cultural discourses is the classification of all things, their reduction to productive utility and the assimilation of all differences. As he said, to put "a mathematical frock coat"⁴⁴ on the universe. Anything that cannot be assimilated is excluded by these discourses. As Weiss notes: "The history of Western ontotheological tradition is the history of the disavowal of chaos, matter, the formless, *the body proper*" (my italics).⁴⁵ Bataille argues for the "return of the repressed."

In my discussion of the Bataillean body, I shall draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque body," used by him in his analysis of the representation of the body in the work of Rabelais. For Bakhtin, a new mode of representing the body came into being from the 15th century, with the rise of classicism and humanism, marking the emergence of what was consequently termed the classical, naturalist or modern body. According to Bakhtin, this discourse

in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed strictly limited body. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade. The opaque surface and the body's 'valleys' acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world.⁴⁶

This body corresponds to the body as represented by the discourses which aim for "the homogeneity of the world."

In contrast, Bakhtin posits the grotesque body which, as Taylor notes, offers a concise description of the Bataillean body. I want to extend it to the Baconian body. Bakhtin writes:

Contrary to the modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, complete unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means the emphasis is on apertures or the convexities, or on the various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs.⁴⁷

Bataille's disorganized body, intertextual with the world, is exemplified by a passage in his pornographic novel, *The Story of the Eye* (1928):

In unspeakable disorder, brazenly stripped bodies were sprawled about. During the orgy, splinters of glass had left deep bleeding cuts in two of us. A young girl was throwing up ... we had wet our clothes, an armchair, or the floor. The resulting stench of blood, sperm, urine and vomit made me almost recoil in horror.⁴⁸

That passage could serve as a description of scenes in Bacon's work in which figures violently couple on beds, merging together. They defecate, vomit and are splashed with blood and semen. As Lands notes:

[Bacon's] favorite images were of men screaming, naked bodies, interlocked in throes that looked more like agony than bliss, figures sitting on toilets or vomiting in washbasins.⁴⁹

See *Triptych-May-June* (1973), in which Bacon depicts the circumstances of his lover's (George Dyer) death. Here Bacon reveals another (the ultimate) heterogeneous element—*death*.

The Baconian body is an "open text." The ideal of the body as an impenetrable façade, separate from the world, is countered by figures punctured by nails and syringes. In the Baconian body, the body's boundaries are disrupted, violated. It is incomplete and fluid, transgressing its limits, leaching into others and the surrounding pictorial space. For Leiris, it is "on the point of overflowing or in a state of liquefaction,"⁵⁰ as in *Triptych-August* (1972). The Baconian body corresponds to the Bataillean body, and as such constitutes a heterogeneous and hence transgressive element. As Kuspit argues: "It is too indecorous to belong to any reasonable order of things, too subjective and disorderly with its own instinctive energy to be brought under control."⁵¹

It is also heterogeneous in another way, as it is often the site of homosexuality and sodomy, as in *Two Figures* (1953). As Weiss notes: "Sodomy ... is an unproductive act, a wasteful expenditure of energy ... whereby 'natural' sexual differentiation is denied in an act of sexual indifferentiation."⁵² Its value is that it contests the system, the "natural" order of things. Bataille took Breton's Surrealists to task over their timidity in this area in relation to the Marquis de Sade's work. Breton's homophobia is well documented. Bataille argued that sodomy was central to Sade's work, "being emblematic of the libertine's struggle against the natural order."⁵³ Bataille viewed sexuality in terms of a particular concept of eroticism, a form of non-productive expenditure—a modality of the

heterogeneous. As homosexuality, in particular sodomy, constitutes a wasteful, unproductive act, it is especially erotic. As opposed to socially sanctioned sexual relations whose aim is reproduction, under the auspices of reason, homosexuality is “a perverse sexual activity.”⁵⁴ The value of eroticism is that it is transgressive, rupturing social boundaries and norms. As Barthes notes: “the transgression of values ... is the avowed principle of eroticism.”⁵⁵ Eroticism for Bataille is linked to *jouissance*, “which is always designated as loss of self-control ... [It] proceeds by breaking up a body’s unity, literally dislocating it,”⁵⁶ releasing the subject momentarily from the tyranny of reason. He writes: “Anything that suggests erotic excess always implies disorder.”⁵⁷ Bacon’s sodomizing, disordered bodies in a state of *jouissance*, are, as Leiris notes, “directly linked to eroticism, indeed rooted in it.”⁵⁸

The Baconian body is transgressive in other ways. In the context of traditional art/aesthetic discourses, it challenges the normative codes of representation. According to Forge, Bacon’s work violated “every taboo that existed in English painting.”⁵⁹ For example, Bacon often represented figures in the fetal position, the stance for defecation which as Davis notes, is the “extreme antithesis of traditional, classical poses of erect subjects.”⁶⁰ Bacon was fully aware of the transgressive nature of his representations. He stated: “images can shatter the old order leaving nothing the same as before.”⁶¹ There is arguably a heterological aspect to Bacon’s style, in which it evades the orthodox and oppositional categories of abstract and figurative painting. Bacon regarded his work as a “tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction.”⁶² Bacon wished to avoid the figurative because of its narrative connotations, and abstraction because it is merely “aesthetic, a fashion.”⁶³ His work not only evades, but also disturbs the boundaries of the two categories of painting. Deleuze has coined the term “figural”⁶⁴ in an attempt to categorize it. The blurring of boundaries and evasion of form has parallels in the medium Bacon used. He commented that oil painting “is such a fluid and curious medium. It breeds another form that the form you’re making can take.”⁶⁵

In challenging normative codes of representation, the Baconian body challenges our narcissistic self-image. Bacon’s figures seemed to have regressed to a pre-“mirror-phase,” before the recognition of the self, with the body imagined as a unified totality, as in *Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror* (1968). Like Bataille (and Lacan), Bacon shows the illusionary nature of our mastery over our bodies and challenges the discourses of the unitary and homogeneous Self. Russell’s remarks on Bacon’s work are pertinent here:

What painting had never shown before is the disintegration of the social being which takes place when one is alone in a

room which has no looking glass. We may feel at such times that the accepted hierarchy of our features is collapsing, and that we are by turns all teeth, all eye, all ear, all nose.⁶⁶

The most striking feature of Bacon's representation of the human form is its distortion. For Bacon, it is an unavoidable practice, part of a pictorial struggle against figuration, and central to his quest for a more realistic representation of reality. Leiris uses the word *décalage*,⁶⁷ which can be translated as an "unavoidable alteration or displacement," to describe Bacon's practice. Distortion or injury of the human form is the very basis of art for Bataille. In his discussion on the Prehistoric art of the famous Lascaux caves, Bataille points to the unequal mode of representation of animals and men:

As against most of the Lascaux animal figures, rather than a faithful, naturalistic imitation of appearance, ... [in man] we have only the naïve and intelligible schema of form ... awkward to the point of extreme and similar to children's simplifications.⁶⁸

"This crude and distorting art has been reserved for the human figure."⁶⁹ Bataille concludes that it constitutes willful vandalism of the human form. This signifies a sadistic impulse behind art. Bataille writes: "Art ... proceeds ... by successive destructions. Thus insofar as it liberates instincts, these are sadistic."⁷⁰

Behind Bataille's theorizing is an anti-humanist, anti-idealist project. Such art is essentially a record of automutilation. Citing Van Gogh's severance of his ear, automutilation for Bataille is, as Hollier notes, "the pictorial act, par excellence. For painting is nothing if it does not attack the architecture of the human body."⁷¹ Hollier states that "Bataille will always define painting as the defacement of the human figure."⁷² This constitutes a refusal of self-duplication. In strict opposition to the classical/humanist idea that the narcissistic assertion of the human form was the original pictorial urge, Bataille sees modern art linked to Prehistoric art by this sadistic impulse: "Our modern art is ... fashioned round a core of inner violence."⁷³ The modern art that Bataille respected was "art that rather quickly presented a process of ... destruction, which has been no less painful to most people than would have been the sight of the ... destruction of a cadaver."⁷⁴ There are parallels here with Bacon's distortion of the human form. This is possibly what Bataille admired most in Bacon's art. Bacon's struggle against figuration and his creative process constitute a record of willful (auto)vandalism. He stated: "I have deliberately tried to twist myself ... my paintings are ... a record of this distortion."⁷⁵

Man-Animal

Bataille's interest in heterogeneous elements—all that repels, his *heterology* defined as “the science of what is completely other”⁷⁶—is not only an exploration of elements which resist “the homogeneity of the world.” It also constitutes a project to strip away ideological screens or veils, to expose the (bourgeois) hypocrisies which try to conceal and make palatable a basically meaningless and squalid existence. As a result, Bataille, as Breton commented, considered “the vilest, most discouraging and corrupted things in the world.”⁷⁷ One such thing was the slaughterhouse. In a *Documents* text entitled “Abattoir,” Bataille links slaughterhouses and religion to tell us what we cannot stand the sight of, our proximity to animals, our dirty selves, exposing the hypocrisy and dishonesty laying at the heart of bourgeois society. Bataille writes:

The slaughterhouse relates to religion in the sense that temples of times past ... had two purposes, serving simultaneously for prayers and for slaughter. Nowadays the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a boat with cholera aboard ... The victims of this curse are neither the butchers nor the animals, but those fine folk who have reached the point of not being able to stand their own unseemliness.⁷⁸

Bacon held a similar view: “Well, of course we are all meat, we are all potential carcasses.”⁷⁹ Meat is the common ground between men and animals. Bacon makes an explicit connection between sites of religious sacrifice, in this case the Crucifixion, a recurrent theme in his work, and slaughterhouses. In response to a series of slaughterhouse photographs, possibly those taken by Eli Lotar of the abattoir at La Villette, Paris, which accompanied Bataille's “Abattoir” text, Bacon states:

I've always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of the Crucifixion. There've been extraordinary photographs which have been done of animals just being taken up before they were slaughtered; and of the smell of death ... which to me is very, very, near this whole thing of the Crucifixion.⁸⁰

Bacon also shared Bataille's distaste for the hypocrisy of averting one's eyes from the “baser” aspects of life:

When you go into a butcher's shop and see how beautiful meat can be and then you think about it, you can think of the whole horror of life, of one thing living off another. It's like all those stupid things that are said about bull-fighting. People will eat meat and then complain about bull-fighting covered with furs.⁸¹

Bacon had a similar project to Bataille's, in his aim to tear down ideological screens and expose the baser aspects of life. Bacon stated: "We nearly always live through screens—a screened existence ... [With my work] I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two screens."⁸² For Leiris, Bacon's work is "demystified art, cleansed both of its religious halo and its moral dimension."⁸³ In Bacon's art, according to Russell, "certain facts about human nature have been dragged round the dark side of reality and brought back into the light."⁸⁴

The intertextuality of man, meat, animals, slaughterhouse and Crucifixion is evident in Bacon's work. In the 1946 and 1971 versions of *Painting*, the figure is framed by a carcass, as if in a matrix of meat. The semi-circular rail in the foreground links the figure to the meat, recalling Bacon's statement "we are all meat." In the backgrounds of these works, a hung, spread carcass is depicted, evoking a Crucifixion. In the right-hand panel of Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), the flesh and exposed rib cage and vertebrae of the inverted figure/carcass make the connections explicit.

The stress on man's proximity to animals was part of Bataille's continual attack on man's idealism. Animality constitutes an heterogeneous element. Bataille writes:

We cling tenaciously to the dissimilarities that set us apart from the animal. Anything that recalls the animality subsisting in us, appalls us unflinchingly and, quite like a prohibition, makes us recoil in horror⁸⁵

Bataille's intention was to release the repressed beast in man. He wrote: "There is in each man, an animal shut up in a prison like a convict ... if one cracks the [prison] door the animal tears out like a convict finding an exit."⁸⁶ Although this should not be seen as the "lowering" of man to beast, Bataille's (proto-deconstructionalist) intention was to subvert hierarchies and traditional oppositional terms, where one term is privileged over another, e.g., high/low, man/animal. But without replacing them with new ones or resolving them into new unities.

A deliberate dwelling upon man's proximity to animals is a major theme in Bacon's work, comparable to Bataille's intention to decenter "noble" man, while avoiding privileging man or beast. Bacon's similar interest in man and animals is clear. Peppiatt noted that Bacon's photographic sources, "although varied, they are mostly of human beings and animals."⁸⁷ Bacon states: "I look at animal photographs all the time ... animal movement and human movement are continually linked in my imagery."⁸⁸ Russell records that during a trip to Africa in the early 1950s, Bacon was fascinated with the behavior of wild animals because of "the analogies which it suggested with human behavior."⁸⁹ Figures in Bacon's

work often exhibit animal features, such as the simian face of the reclining figure in *Study of Nude with Figure in a Mirror* (1969). As Bakhtin notes, a feature of the grotesque body is "the combination of human and animal traits."⁹⁰ Deleuze argues that:

Instead of asserting formal correspondences, Bacon's painting creates a zone of imperceptibility, of ambiguity between man and animal ... the stress is on the qualities common to both man and animal.⁹¹

Furthermore Bacon's figures and animals share common characteristics and environments, perched on frames in cage-like interiors in *Study for Crouching Nude* (1952) and *Chimpanzee* (1955) or crouched in open grasslands as in *Man Kneeling in Grass* (1952) and *Study of a Baboon* (1953) with its wide open jaw suggesting a link with the screaming Popes which preceded it. The decentering of "noble" man and the subversive foregrounding of animality can be read from *Man with Dog* (1953). In it man's top "noble" half, his head, locus of reason and expression is sharply obliterated. All that remains of the man is a hazy outline of legs and feet. The figure is linked by a chain to a somewhat blurred dog in the foreground. The chain suggests an unbreakable bond between the two. The man-animal theme is also evident when we examine perhaps the most important part of the Bataille/Baconian body, the mouth.

The Mouth

Bakhtin writes: "The most important of all human features for the grotesque [body] is the mouth. It dominates all else."⁹² One entry in the *Documents* team's parodic *Critical Dictionary* is Bataille's "La Bouche." It is accompanied by Jacques-André Boiffard's photograph *Bouche (Mouth)*, of a wide open mouth, wet with saliva. It functions to add further layers of suggestiveness to Bataille's text, hence aiding the dictionary's subversive aim of displacing words from any absolute meaning. In his text Bataille discusses the fact that through the mouth man's greatest experiences of pleasure or pain are physiologically expressed, thus revealing our proximity to animals. The text is an attack on man's "idealist deception" of his supposed separateness from animals. The mouth, normally the locus for the emission of language heralding the human, serves in extreme moments as an orifice emitting bestial cries. Bataille wrote:

On important occasions human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth: rage makes men grind their teeth, while terror and atrocious suffering turn the mouth into an

organ of rending screams. On this subject it is easy to observe that the overwhelmed individual throws back his head while frenetically stretching his neck in such a way that the mouth becomes, as much as possible, an extension of the spinal column, *in other words, in the position it normally occupies in the constitution of animals.*⁹³

In his analysis of Bacon, Davis argues that the open mouth “becomes an obsession in his work in the 40s and early 50s.”⁹⁴ Indeed, in much of Bacon’s work from this period, the mouth stretched in a cry or scream was often the most prominent feature of his heads and figures. As Davis notes, “the theme or subject of the scream, which entered Bacon’s imagery with the Tate painting of 1944, dominated his work for the next ten years.”⁹⁵ *Head I* (1948), *Head VI* (1949) and the famous *Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) are prominent examples. Bacon has confirmed some of the sources for this work, for example, the screaming nanny from the Odessa steps sequence of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). He has also spoken of his fascination with a “book which had beautiful hand-colored plates of diseases of the mouth; they fascinated me, I was obsessed by them.”⁹⁶ I want to suggest another source: Bataille’s aforementioned text “La Bouche” and its accompanying photograph, *Bouche*. Going further, some of the features of Bacon’s heads and figures, the open mouths, the animal-like extended necks and the concern with man’s animal characteristics, also correspond to Bataille’s text.

In *Head I* (1948), the head is thrown back, as in a spasm of pain or pleasure. The mouth is open and nearly vertical, suggesting Bataille’s extension of the spinal column. The neck and cheek bulge evoking the moment before the eruption of a bestial cry. In Kuspit’s reading of Bacon’s screaming mouth, we can see its relation to Bataille. He writes:

Bacon’s great achievement with the screaming mouth is to turn it from being an abstract, formal device—an emblem of suffering—accompanying tragic scenes ... to a highly charged concrete space involuntarily ejaculating feeling into the world. [In Bacon’s scream] feeling dominates fact ... formal control is released ... the sense of an appropriate relationship between the cause of the scream and effect is stretched to breaking point.⁹⁷

For Davis, Bacon’s work from the late 40s to the early 50s represents “a stuttering progression from primeval skull to papal portrait.”⁹⁸ But the progression is not evolutionary, Bacon reveals the animality present even in the man set highest above his fellow men, Christ’s representative on earth. This is surely in the Batailleian spirit.

Krauss writes:

In the anatomical geography of Bataille's thought the vertical axis emblemizes man's pretensions toward the elevated, the spiritual, the ideal: his claim that the uprightness separating him biologically from the bestial distinguishes him ethically as well. Bataille, of course does not believe this distinction.⁹⁹

For him, man's true nature is "grounded" in the horizontal axis which signifies animality and base material existence. Bataille makes this point with his definition of the big toe as "the most *human* part of the human body."¹⁰⁰ It is in direct contact with the dirt of the earth as opposed to the erroneous transcendentalism of the head. In "La Bouche," Bataille conducts an axial rotation of man, from the vertical to the horizontal. Krauss notes that:

[Bataille] contrasts the mouth/eye axis of the human face with the mouth/anus axis of the four-legged animal. The first, linked to man's verticality and his possession of speech, defines the mouth in terms of man's expressive powers. The second, a function of the animal's horizontality, understands the mouth as the leading element in the system of catching ... and ingesting prey, for which the anus is the terminal point. But, beyond this simple polarity, to insist that at its greatest moments of pleasure or pain the human mouth's expression is not spiritual, but animal, is to reorganize the orientation of the human structure and conceptually to rotate the axis of loftiness onto the axis of material existence.¹⁰¹

The axial rotation of the human form is found in Bacon's work. In *Figure Study II* (1946), the figure's straight, horizontal back suggests the animal axis. Along with screaming mouths and abnormally extended necks, it is also evident in the Furies of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). They correspond to Bataille's definition of man as "a tube with two orifices, anal and buccal."¹⁰² Finally, *Three Studies of the Human Head* (1953), can be seen as representing something akin to a sequence of cinematic stills showing the process. First, the extreme condition of the subject, then, the bestial scream and finally, the "fall" to the horizontal, to animality and humanity "proper."

Horror-Abjection

Here, I want to draw a parallel between Bataille and Bacon, using Julia Kristeva's notion of horror-abjection. It is not my intention to suggest that Bacon illustrated Kristeva, although it is possible he was familiar with her work. I want to bring Kristeva to bear on Bacon to suggest a fresh

reading of his work and to align it with some of Bataille's concerns. First, I will briefly outline Kristeva's notion of horror-abjection.

According to Kristeva, the construction of a unified, independent subject is founded on the exclusion and disavowal of what is considered by the individual and society to be unclean and disorderly. These are essentially elements of the subject's corporeal existence. They become the "abject." There are parallels here with Bataille's heterogeneous elements. Allied to this process is the delimitation of the "clean and proper" social body. However, as Grosz notes, Kristeva argues that "what is excluded can in fact never be excluded, but hovers at the edges or borders of our existence,"¹⁰³ threatening the subject's precarious unity and identity. "The impossibility of excluding these threatening elements provokes a particular response in the subject: abjection."¹⁰⁴ The abject demonstrates the subject's disavowed relations to corporality, to animality and death. Although culturally variable, one category of the abject against which social taboos are erected is bodily fluids and waste. They evoke disgust and horror. The horror results from our inability to accept our materiality and realization of the impossibility of maintaining a hard, fixed distinction between clean and unclean bodies.

For Kristeva, religious, moral and rational discourses, along with most of the arts, repress and sublimate the abject and individual's sense of abjection. As Kristeva puts it: "[the] religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of society. Such codes are abjection's purification and repression."¹⁰⁵ This refusal to confront abjection means that our ability to understand and cope with the abject and horror is diminished. As a result, we live, Kristeva writes, "in times of dreary crisis."¹⁰⁶ However, for her, avant-garde literature, notably that of Bataille, and by extension all esoteric art forms, can reveal horror, and thus help us to come to terms with it. She writes: "literature may also involve ... an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration ... a hollowing out of abjection."¹⁰⁷ Such art does this in two ways. First, by "speaking of horror," by representing it. As Lechte notes:

To face horror, to look at it and thus avoid the lie, is to render it in language or in some symbolic form; it is to utter it, and therefore communicate it, even if this be only to oneself.¹⁰⁸

This is what Bataille aimed to do in such texts as *The Story of the Eye*, with its emphasis on horror and the abject. Lechte states: "To read Bataille is to be confronted by ... horror."¹⁰⁹

Bataille noted our propensity to flee from the abject, our "bad faith." He writes:

The mainspring of human activity is generally the desire to reach the point farthest from ... [that] which is rotten, dirty and

impure. This distressing inclination may play a greater part in our assertion of moral principles than our reflexes. Our assertions are no doubt veiled. Great words give positive sense to a negative attitude.¹¹⁰

Prefiguring Kristeva, for Bataille, the result of this is that abject elements are excluded, but not negated. They are always on the margins, threatening the subject. Bataille continues: "The constant recurrence of abominated elements ... exists ... in normal conditions."¹¹¹ Again foreshadowing Kristeva, Bataille argues for the unveiling of the abject. So we can attempt to come to terms with it. This is the role of transgressive avant-garde art. It attacks normative signifying practices that are part of society's masking of abjection. Bataille writes:

We must still revive them voluntarily [the abject]—in a way which corresponds precisely to our needs. It is to this purpose that we put the arts: they manage ... to arouse in us the highest possible degree of anxiety. The arts—or at least some of the arts—incessantly evoke these derangements, these lacerations, this decline which our entire activity endeavors to avoid.¹¹²

But it is not only *what* is represented, but perhaps more importantly *how* it is represented. For Kristeva (and Bataille) avant-garde art, by its radical mode of representation, subverts and disrupts the religious, moral and rational discourses which veil the abject. These discourses are signified by normative codes of representation, such as the discourse of the "ordered body," that is the clean, sealed and unified body, manifest in classical and naturalist representations of the body. Bacon's painting can be seen as such an avant-garde art. We have already noted his aim to clear away ideological screens which exclude that which is unseemly. Bacon's art reveals the abject, confronts horror. For Deleuze, Bacon represents "horror or abjection."¹¹³ And not only because of what is represented—scenes of horror, bodily fluids, excrement, death, and homosexuality (Kristeva regards sexual difference as a form of the abject)—but also because of how it is represented. As we have noted, Bacon's style transgressed and disrupted the normative codes of representation in relation to the human form. To quote Forge again, Bacon violated "every taboo that existed in English painting."¹¹⁴

Architecture and Corporality

Hollier states that Bataille's work is marked by the use of architectural metaphors. In Bataille's writing, architecture signifies system and edifice builders, and as such those discourses that aim for the "homogeneity of the world." According to Hollier, "Architecture under these conditions is

the archistruature."¹¹⁵ Architecture also means the building of facades which veil unseemly things, heterological elements. Bataille, as Hollier notes, is against architecture. In his text "Architecture," published in *Documents* in 1929, Bataille regards architecture as a symbol of a repressive and authoritarian society. He writes:

Architecture is the expression of the true nature of society, as physiognomy is the expression of the true nature of individuals (But) only society's ideal nature—that of authoritative command and prohibition—expresses itself in actual architectural constructions.¹¹⁶

Not only is architecture a symbol of social order and authoritarian hierarchies, but also it imposes them, acting in complicity with society's ruling class. "Great monuments," says Bataille,

rise up like dams, opposing a logic of majesty and authority to all unquiet elements; it is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that church and state speak to and impose silence upon the crowds.¹¹⁷

Bataille goes on to argue that the presence of ordered architectural forms in other areas of life, such as art, signifies a desire for authority. Bataille writes: "whenever we find *architectural construction* ... whether it be in physiognomy, dress, music, or painting, we can infer a prevailing taste for ... *authority*."¹¹⁸

I want to suggest that Bataille's idea of architectural form as a repressive structure has parallels in Bacon's work. Bacon's isolated figures are set within finitely bounded areas, usually enclosed indoor spaces. In these "rooms," figures are often placed within skeletal linear cubes. Although in part a formal device for spatial articulation and the enhancement of figures, such cubes also constrain or imprison the figures, serving to bind them to the prison of the canvas. Limbs and protuberances of figures project through the skeletal linear cubes; bodies spill out of them as if attempting to escape confinement, as in *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969).

Bacon's figures are also sometimes held by tubular frames, with semi-circular rails placed in the foreground of many works, thus confining the figure and excluding the viewer. The brushed vertical lines most evident in the Pope paintings have a similar effect, suggesting prison bars, as in *Study for a Crouching Nude* (1952) and *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). Much of this relates to Bacon's early work as a designer of Bauhaus-type furniture. He stated: "The tubes do come from my own metal furniture."¹¹⁹ It also relates to Giacometti's "cage compositions" with their imprisoned figures, such as *Palace at 4 a.m.*

(1932), which Bacon would have seen at the 1936 *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London. Bacon's use of the crucifix can also be regarded as the constraint of the figure by an architectural form, like the locked door that is a recurrent motif in his later work. In these works figures attempt to escape from locked rooms, as in *Painting* (1978).

Bacon's figures are also constrained by the formal elements of the work. The large flat areas of color of the backgrounds are often sharply delimited by circular contours. This is suggestive of an encompassing movement. Deleuze argues:

In many paintings, the expanse of color is quite precisely involved in a movement that turns it into a cylinder: it wraps itself around the contour, around the place; it envelops and imprisons the figure.¹²⁰

Moreover, a constraining and repressive Bataillean architecture is also suggested by the architectonic nature of the material vehicle of Bacon's work. Bacon's paintings, following his wishes, are usually encased in heavy frames and glass. Bacon has referred to this as an "armature." Kuspit argues:

Bacon has for some time insisted that his pictures be hermetically sealed ...—finishing them off, packaging them, as it were—shows how determined he is to show the conflict between hysteria and its repression.¹²¹

Bacon's frequent use of the triptych also suggests containment and repression. In its traditional form, the wings of a triptych close to cover the work.

Later in "Architecture," Bataille goes on to connect human form with architecture in order to denounce the teleological discourses which anthropomorphize architecture and attempt to reduce the formation of man to architectural order, or to put "a mathematical frock coat"¹²² on man. That is to rationalize, homogenize and thus imprison man. Bataille writes:

[The] mathematical order imposed on stone is really the culmination of the evolution of earthly forms, whose direction is indicated within the biological order by the passage from the simian to the human form, the latter already displaying all the elements of architecture. Man would seem to represent merely an intermediary stage within the morphological development between monkey and building. From the very outset, in any case, the human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former.¹²³

Hollier outlines the implications of this:

If the prison is a generic form of architecture this is primarily because man's own form is his first prison. In other words, it is not possible simply to oppose the prison to free the man ... the only way for man to escape the architectural chain-gang is to escape his form.¹²⁴

That is, man must rebel against his own form, against the human figure. Here the body, especially the skeleton, constitutes a constraining "corporeal architecture."

The idea of man rebelling against his own form is symbolized by Bataille's mythical figure of *Acéphale*.¹²⁵ Weiss notes that:

Acéphale is a contestation of the Platonic body politic, where reason, seated in the head, rules the lower spirited and appetitive forces of the body. It is also a condemnation of the ideal form and perfect proportions of the human figure as a measure of all things, celebrated since the classic age of Greece.¹²⁶

Escape here, then, is from the classical/humanist conception of the body as an ordered physical and psychic "architecture." Represented headless, the violent alteration of the human form in *Acéphale* signifies the refusal of identification with and adoration of the "ordered body." Cephalic man is decapitated in an act of automutilation symbolized by *Acéphale's* sword. For Bataille, "Man will escape from his head as the condemned man escapes from his prison."¹²⁷ *Acéphale* is the "pure body, irreducible to idealizing, intellectual operations,"¹²⁸ a heterological element.

Rebellion against the ordered and repressive human form was central in the emergence of modern painting. For Bataille, classical and academic painting was under the control of architecture. It was, he writes, "characterized by a sort of concealed architectural skeleton,"¹²⁹ representing a petrified social order. By contrast, modern painting's dissonant form and structure are "distinctly at odds with social stability."¹³⁰ Rebellion against the human form is represented by modern painting's "defacement" of the human figure. Bataille writes: "the path traced by painters opens up toward bestial monstrosity, as if there were no other way of escaping the architectural straitjacket."¹³¹

There are parallels here with Bacon's rejection of academic conventions and defacement of the human figure. He was interested in the architecture of the body in order to subvert it. This is exemplified by his passion for X-ray photographs, and for the work of Degas. He stated:

I've always had a book that's interested me very much called *Positioning in Radiography* ... showing the positioning of the body for the X-ray photographs to be taken, and also the X-rays themselves.¹³²

In Degas, Bacon saw art's ability to show the architecture of the body and its vulnerability to distortion. In a conversation with David Sylvester, Bacon refers to a Degas pastel of a woman bathing:

You will find at the very top of the spine that the spine almost comes out of the skin altogether ... this gives it such grip and a twist that you're more conscious of the vulnerability of the rest of the body than if he had drawn the spine naturally up to the neck. He breaks it so that this thing seems to protrude from the flesh.¹³³

Bacon's figures seem to be trying to escape the constraining architecture of the body. In numerous works figures are twisted and contorted with the skeleton protruding out of the flesh, exposing the architecture of the body, as in the right-hand panel of *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962). Bacon could have been aware of Bataille's idea of the body's rebellion against its own form, through his relationship with Leiris. Leiris makes an analogy between Bacon's figures and the mythic Celtic warrior *Cuchulain*, whose body went into convulsions in the heat of battle, resulting in the contortion of his limbs and features. They were so great, Leiris notes, that *Cuchulain* "twisted around in his skin so he was literally back to front."¹³⁴

Tauromachy and the Eye

For Bataille, the *aficionado*, tauromachy is a polysemic sign. It signifies: mythology; the sacred; the Mithraic bull cult (the repressed *other* and one-time serious rival of Christianity); death; sacrifice; slaughterhouses; and heliocentrism with an ambivalent sun. Some of these complex associations were suggested by Bataille in his text "Rotten Sun":

The Mithraic cult of the sun led to a very widespread religious practice: people stripped in a kind of pit that was covered with a wooden scaffold, on which a priest slashed the throat of a bull; thus they were suddenly doused with hot blood, to the accompaniment of the bull's boisterous struggle and bellowing—a simple way of reaping the moral benefits of the blinding sun.¹³⁵

The value of myths for Bataille is that they not only give glimpses of

the sacred, but also represent unassimilable elements. Myths cannot be reduced to rational, conceptual schemes. In fact they threaten such discourses. Bataille writes: "the fact that reason denies any valid content in a mythological series is the condition of its most significant value."¹³⁶ Another of taumomachy's values is that it reveals what is normally repressed in bourgeois society—*death*. Bataille writes: "Death's theatrical entrance in the midst of celebration, in the sunshine, seemed somehow obvious, expected, intolerable."¹³⁷

Bacon talked in similar terms about taumomachy, its mythic and mortal aspects, all under the glare of an ambivalent sun:

When you have seen one, it remains in your mind forever. It takes you back ... to very ancient times—right back to Mycenae. It's about death. But it's about death in the sunlight, and for me that does conjure up all kinds of images.¹³⁸

I want to align Bacon's interest in taumomachy with a Bataillean and Surrealist taumomachy/eye discourse. For Bataille, "the eye appeared to me to be definitively linked to bullfighting images."¹³⁹

Bacon began a series of pictures on the theme of taumomachy in the late 1960s. *Study for Bullfight No. 1* (1969) is particularly exemplary. He also produced a number of lithographs to illustrate one of Leiris's books on the subject. In fact much of Bacon's work can be seen to have connotations of taumomachy. His curved interiors and struggling figures often suggest the *corrida*. For Deleuze, Bacon's distorted figures are engaged in "an internalized bullfight."¹⁴⁰ It is worth noting here that there are also connotations of the man-animal theme. This is perhaps another factor which accounts for Bacon's interest in the subject. During "the pass," a point of intimate contact, there is a temporary convergence of or fusion between man and bull, like Deleuze's *zone of indiscernibility* between man and animal, symbolizing the momentary unison of man with his animal self. Bacon returned to the theme of taumomachy nearly twenty years later with *Painting, Bull* (1987).

In this work a lone bull with bloodied horns is reflected in a concave mirror. The curved composition suggests the bullfighting arena. Above the bull on the edge of an indistinct form, within a pink smear, is a precisely delineated hole, circled in white. Although ambiguous, perhaps representing a bullet hole or orifice, I think it represents an eye, and relates to the Bataillean and Surrealist obsession with the eye and its enucleation. Bacon's *Painting, Bull* was influenced by and perhaps alludes to the chapter "Granero's Eye" in Bataille's novel *The Story of the Eye*, where the matador Granero has his right eye put out by the bull's horn. Bataille writes:

Granero was thrown back by the bull and wedged against the balustrade; the horns struck three times at full speed; at the third blow, one horn plunged into the right eye ... men instantly rushed over to haul away Granero's body, the right eye dangling from the head.¹⁴¹

The theme of an enucleated or mutilated eye is a feature of many of Bacon's works. Figures and heads have ocular injuries, eyes missing with bare sockets shown, for example *Self Portrait with Injured Eye* (1972). The theme of the enucleated or mutilated eye is also evident in other works which Bacon was familiar with and which can be seen as a trope of the Bataille/Surrealist eye discourse. Bacon often referred to the deep impression made on him by the infamous opening sequence of Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), where a razor slices through an opened eye. One might also note here the screaming nanny with her shattered glasses and bleeding right eye in *Battleship Potemkin*. Both films were admired by Bataille. He refers explicitly to Buñuel's razor sequence. The theme occurs as a childhood game called "eyes put out"¹⁴² in Leiris's text *L'Âge d'Homme*, which Bacon knew and admired. It also occurs in Giacometti's *Point to Eye* (1932), where a long, pointed form (a bull's horn?) threatens the eye of a tiny head. Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1932), with its crescent form cleaving a sphere, also suggests this theme.

Linking Bataille with Bacon, for many one of the most important painters of the 20th century, reveals the importance of Bataille's influence on art practice. It also engenders a more varied and richer reading of Bacon's work, countering the closure of it by (the dominant) quasi-existentialist/horror readings. It reveals a more "radical" artist, concerned not only with challenging and transgressing the normative codes of representation, but also the idealist/humanist discourses of the body and the subject. The conjunction of Bataille and Bacon perhaps also enables us to assign a more "positive" role to Bacon's work. For rather than providing our age with an image of its "accelerated grimace," Bacon, as Deleuze argues,

in the very act of 'representing' horror, mutilation, prosthesis, ruin ... his figures are indomitable through their insistence and presence. He has given a new and immediate power of laughter to the living.¹⁴³

Something Bataille would have approved of.

Notes

1 A.. Stoekl, ed. *On Bataille* (Yale French Studies, 78, 1990), 1.

- 2 Stoeckl, *On Bataille*, 2.
- 3 See the exhibition *Georges Bataille* held at the Musée de L'abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables D'Olonne, France, 1991.
- 4 G. Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 187.
- 5 M. Peppiatt, "Francis Bacon: The Anatomy of Enigma," *Art International*, Sept/Nov 1984, 5.
- 6 D. Ades, "Web of Images," in D. Ades and A. Forge, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 18.
- 7 G. Gowrie, "Francis Bacon," *Modern Painters*, Winter 1988-89, 34.
- 8 H. M. Davis, *Francis Bacon: The Early and Middle Years 1928-1958* (London: Garland Publishing, 1978), 8.
- 9 M. Archimbaud, *Francis Bacon* (London: Phaidon Press, 1993), 32.
- 10 Davis, 31.
- 11 Davis, 31.
- 12 Davis, 33.
- 13 Davis, 33.
- 14 Davis, 32.
- 15 D. Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 150.
- 16 P. Jenkins, "Francis Bacon at Eighty," *Modern Painters*, Winter 1989-90, 42.
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- 31 D. Farson, *The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon* (London: Century/Random House, 1993), 133.
- 32 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 133.
- 33 R. Krauss, "No More Play," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 60.
- 34 D. Ades, "Figure and Place: A Context for Five Post-War Artists," in S. Compton, ed. *British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement* (Munich: Prestal, 1986), 74.
- 35 Farson, 167.
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- 37 Ades, "Figure and Place," Compton, 75.
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- 39 Farson, 167.
- 40 V. J. Fletcher, *Alberto Giacometti* (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 20. As to close friends augmenting Bacon's knowledge of Bataille, one might also note here the English critic David Sylvester, who has interviewed Leiris.
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- 50 M. Leiris, *Francis Bacon: Full Face and Profile* (London: Phaidon, 1983), 32.
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- 54 Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess*, 118.
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- 57 Taylor, 141.
- 58 Leiris, *Full Face and Profile*, 22.
- 59 Ades, "Web of Images," 9.
- 60 Davis, 131.
- 61 Archibaud, 152.
- 62 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 12.
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- 66 John Russell cited in Davis, 103.
- 67 M. Leiris, *What Francis Bacon's Paintings Say to Me: Francis Bacon: Recent Paintings* (London: Marlborough Fine Arts, 1967), 19.
- 68 G. Bataille, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art* (Geneva: Skira, 1955), 117.
- 69 Krauss, "No More Play," 54.
- 70 Krauss, "No More Play," 54.
- 71 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 80.
- 72 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 55.
- 73 Bataille, *Manet* (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1983), 50-51.
- 74 Krauss, "No More Play," 54.
- 75 M. Peppiatt, "From a Conversation with Francis Bacon," *Cambridge Opinion*, Vol. 37, January 1964, 48.
- 76 Bataille, "The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade," *Visions of Excess*, 102, footnote 2. One should note that Bataille does not mean 'science' or a 'theory' in orthodox terms, in the sense that science or a theory attempts to define and assimilate the other. The "objects" of heterology cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge, as they slip and overflow their definition. As Hollier notes: "The 'objects' produced by heterological practice are only defined by a certain virulence making them constantly overflow their definition. This virulence is one of refusal: They do not allow themselves to be subjected to concepts." (Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 88.)
- 77 Ades, "Web of Images," 12.
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- 79 D. Sylvester, "The Exhilarated Despair of Francis Bacon," *ArtNews*, May 1975, 26.
- 80 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 23.
- 81 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 23.
- 82 Sylvester, "Exhilarated Despair," 31.
- 83 Leiris, *Full Face and Profile*, 21.
- 84 J. Russell, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 38.
- 85 Bataille, *Lascaux*, 116.
- 86 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, xii.
- 87 M. Peppiatt, "Anatomy of Enigma," 7.
- 88 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 116.
- 89 Russell, 87.
- 90 Bakhtin, 316.
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- 92 Bakhtin, 317.
- 93 Bataille, "The Mouth," *Visions of Excess*, 59.
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- 95 Davis, 116.
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- 97 Kuspit, "Authority of the Flesh," 56.
- 98 Davis, 77.
- 99 Krauss, "No More Play," 80.
- 100 Bataille, "The Big Toe," *Visions of Excess*, 20.
- 101 Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," in R. Krauss and J. Livingston, 65.
- 102 Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," *Visions of Excess*, 88.
- 103 E. A. Grosz, "Language and the Limits of the Body: Kristeva and Abject," in E. A. Grosz, et al. *Futur* Fall: Excursions into Post-Modernity* (Sydney: Power Institute Press, 1986), 108.
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- 108 J. Lechte, "An Introduction to Bataille: The Impossible as (a Practice of) Writing," *Textual Practice*, 7 : 2, Summer 1993, 177-78.
- 109 Lechte, 173.
- 110 G. Bataille, *Literature and Evil* (London: Marion Boyars, 1985), 68.
- 111 Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 68.
- 112 Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 68. For discussion of the similarities and differences between Bataille and Kristeva on some of these points, see "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the Informe and the Abject," *October* 67, Winter 1994, 3-21.
- 113 Deleuze, "The Logic of Sensation," 10.
- 114 Ades, "Web of Images," 9.
- 115 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 33.
- 116 Faccini, 25.
- 117 Faccini, 25.
- 118 Faccini, 25.
- 119 Russell, 92.
- 120 Deleuze, "Logic of Sensation," 9.
- 121 D. Kuspit, "Hysterical Painting," *Artforum*, January 1986, 58.
- 122 Faccini, 27.
- 123 Faccini, 25-26.
- 124 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 33.
- 125 Acéphale was also the name of a review (1936-39) and the quasi-mystical secret society formed by Bataille and others, with no formal structure or leadership. Acéphale is precisely *without* a head.
- 126 Weiss, 13.
- 127 Stoekl, *Visions of Excess*, xx.
- 128 Weiss, 13.
- 129 Faccini, 25.
- 130 Faccini, 25.
- 131 Faccini, 26.
- 132 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 32.
- 133 Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact*, 47.
- 134 Leiris, *What Francis Bacon's Paintings Say to Me*, 21.
- 135 Bataille, "The Rotten Sun," *Visions of Excess*, 57.
- 136 Bataille, "The Pineal Eye," *Visions of Excess*, 81.
- 137 Hollier, *Against Architecture*, 167.
- 138 M. Peppiatt, "Reality Conveyed by a Lie," *Art International*, Autumn 1987, 30.
- 139 Bataille, "The Jesuve," *Visions of Excess*, 81.
- 140 Deleuze, "Interpretations of the Body," 34.

- 141 Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 53. There are two more references to the removal of eyes in the novel. One describes a scene in a picture where a rat is depicted gnawing through an eye socket (57). The other is after the rape and murder of the priest by the novel's protagonists (67).
- 142 M. Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46. One might also note here the work of the Surrealist Victor Brauner, which often featured mutilated and enucleated eyes. For example, *Self-Portrait* (1931), which shows him with a mutilated right eye. Brauner actually lost an eye in an accident in 1938.
- 143 Deleuze, "Interpretations of the Body," 40.

(A) History Of New Abstract Painting: Toward A Theory Of Domestic Abstraction

Tom Huhn and Georgia Marsh

The current abundance of abstract painting is awfully pretty. And yet curiously the discussion around these paintings seems to ignore just their obvious prettiness. Why has the reception of this work so insistently avoided any mention of its prettiness? And why is this insistent avoidance complemented by an equally insistent embrace of the supposed abstract nature of the work? Why is it that this work has been so readily titled abstract?

Much of the reception simply presumes that this work is unproblematically and obviously abstract; but what criteria inform this presumption? Perhaps the deeper impediment to our encountering this work afresh is just the seemingly obvious and intuitive “abstract” nature of it. Apparently the sole criterion for the denomination “abstract” is wholly determined by the observation of whether or not pictures can be discerned. The resurgence of the term abstraction prescribes that any figural painting be judged unreal, which re-erects the fictive opposition between the abstract and the real. This was undoubtedly a productive mystification seventy years ago, but no longer is, except as nostalgia for those halcyon days of simple oppositions.

Declaring these paintings without pictures “abstract” confers a bogus authenticity through an expropriation of historical specificity and thereby entitles them to an intellectual provenance and an historical credibility that remain unearned. By *naming* these contemporary works abstract the attempt is to transform an historical idea and its formal expression into a genre of painting, as though we might forget that abstract painting was an historically determined, culturally specific event.

Without making any claims as to the authenticity, import or truth of a previously named abstract art, we assert that this contemporary re-named “abstract” art has as its primary cultural function the erasure of any imagined or imputed force, relevance or memory of what previously was

claimed to have occurred under that title. We are less concerned with the look of contemporary painting and more concerned with contemporary production being premised upon a seemingly necessary evisceration of the past.

Historical abstraction predicated itself on the creation of a fiction of timelessness. The rhetoric of this timelessness was unrelenting in the sweep of its application: everything from human nature to color, line, and composition appeared universal and timeless. The conceit was that such a thing as a profound human nature could only adequately be expressed in a correspondingly essentialist language of pure color, line, etc. We propose that the term Compositional Formalism designate this dream of a universality configurable in a timeless visual language.

The ideology of Compositional Formalism is to effect the collapse of the specificity of abstract painting as an historical and cultural occurrence into something resembling a kind of natural category, thereby engendering the fantasy of a stable and inexhaustible wealth of cultural comestibles called "abstract art." If the project of abstraction was to constitute its own identity by creating the illusion of timelessness, then the irony of the current resurgence of "new" abstraction is that by its own inherited vacuity it points up not the timelessness of abstraction but its historicity, i.e., its timeliness.

There is in other words an intimate and strategic connection between the emptying out of the term abstraction and the construction of the category "new abstract painting". The connection relates to a particular kind of emptiness. The paradox of this dynamic of emptying out is that the historical closure of abstraction becomes the prerequisite for the elevation of "abstraction" to a fiction of timelessness.

By calling itself a natural category of painting—reifying a supposed opposition between abstract and figurative painting—so-called abstraction obscures its own historicity and covers the datedness of its tracks. One of the characteristics of contemporary "abstract painting" is to absorb this mystification and proceed as if it were a *fait accompli*. When the obscurantism within historical abstraction is no longer seen as such, the road is paved for a "contemporary" abstraction.

But historical abstraction perpetuates itself at the price of the emptying out of any other history that might have occurred between the beginning of that project and our own time. Hence the current popularity of the regeneration of abstraction is not to be registered as the success of Abstract Painting, but rather as a successful *distraction*, a deferral of contemporary painting from the present. The "new abstraction" is thus a deflection from the contemporary, and a diversion from its own forged historical pedigree. Since what is abstract can only be historical, there can be no "new" abstraction, but only a contemporary distraction from

that history and, more importantly, from any other contemporary event or production.

Our concern here is first to examine the significance of the *reiteration* of the term "abstract painting." We want to know what, if anything, might warrant the reuse or extension of the term to cover a branch of contemporary painting. We suspect that what appears as merely an art historical or linguistic mistake is instead a strategy performed by, and directed at, cultural production. The effect of this consistent misnaming is not only to obviate any encounter with the work itself but also to forestall aesthetic evaluation of the supposed genre. This strategy consists of the substitution of the appearance of taste for the need to exercise it.

In other words, by accepting the term "abstract" we are excused from the effort (and pleasure) of judging. When we look past the term abstraction and toward the surfaces themselves we judge this work simply pretty, indeed overwhelmingly pretty.

Our contention is that contemporary so-called abstract art is not publicly judged pretty because such a public declaration would disallow any further reception of the work under the name abstraction. (Moreover, historical abstraction predicated itself on a claim to authenticity. Conversely, prettiness was posited as *merely* decorative and therefore an inessential quality of visual appearance, thereby becoming the mark of inauthenticity.) In other words, though these paintings are *really* pretty it is not their prettiness alone which is deceptive, it is rather that so long as their prettiness remains unstated what remains concealed is the overwhelmingly obvious fact that these paintings have everything—and yet nothing whatsoever—to do with the historically closed event already named abstract art.

In short, in order for something like the aura and mystique (dare we say fetishism?) which surround historical abstraction to be transferred to contemporary so-called abstraction, the specificity of that original term must be alluded to and at the same time effaced. Prettiness is the technology of that effacement, indeed prettiness might even be that which elicits its own effacement.

We do not mean prettiness as a kind of lesser beauty. Prettiness is of course a judgment, indeed an *aesthetic* judgment levelled against something or someone. Prettiness courts dismissal, and in a very specific way. What impulse informs this judgment of prettiness? Perhaps we should take a cue from social life, where it seems the judgment is more often than not directed against women, though delivered in the guise of a tribute. Yet what if this tribute-paying is a strategic move, more specifically a strategy by which some potential threat is disarmed? To judge a woman pretty would then be an ideological move. There are no pretty women—and yet indeed there are, but it is only the judgment that

makes them so. But what truly is being done to them in the act of making them pretty? What power is being exercised *and* concealed in the judging of prettiness? (It is precisely the duality of power here that makes the judgment ideological.)

Our contention is not that women really are threatening and that judging them pretty is a way of disarming that threat. We believe instead that the judgment of prettiness serves at once to both constitute women as threat and simultaneously to insist all the more vehemently on the necessity of disarming the threat. The judgment of prettiness is a closed circle of constitution and suppression; it has nothing to do with women and everything to do with the fear of what one might imagine them to be.

New abstract painting is a somewhat different, but related kettle of fish. The manifest prettiness of these paintings preempts just that appropriate judgment. Prettiness is not in their case a judgment to be levelled against them, but is instead a simple description of their content and *modus vivendi*. Their very emptiness, the lack of any content beyond a strategic self-concealment, is precisely what allows them to be so readily appropriated as the new appearance of the old, under the name abstraction. And the meaning of the term "abstraction" is thereby transformed: it is now the name used to forestall the naming of the technology of prettiness through which these paintings actually deploy themselves as attractive and hence effective decoys. Put differently: there is nothing more timely than new abstract painting. And yet what gives it the appearance of being an advanced artifact is that its contemporaneity comes to appearance only under the guise of an old, supposedly timeless, project called abstraction. What we hope here to accomplish by pointing to the obvious prettiness of new abstraction is to point contemporary culture away from the device of clothing itself in the garb not only of a popular past, but a past that had in turn clothed itself in the illusion of timelessness.

Pretty women are but one aspect of a larger picture. There is a double movement at work here, and the larger term "domestication" embraces both aspects of this double movement. The two moves are as follows: first, by calling these paintings abstract they are domesticated by being assimilated, linguistically and pseudo-historically, to that which is already familiar. Domestication is not the process by which something wild and new is transformed into something tame and old, but rather a process in which something is made *familiar* by making it appear as though it always already was tame and old. And should this first strategy fail there is then a second domesticating strategy. Appearing on the surface of the paintings themselves is a strategically profound prettiness. But the strategy of prettiness, as we've tried to show, lies not so much on the surface or even in the content, but rather institutes the prohibition of a

content. Thus these paintings are themselves nothing more spectacular than the instantiation of the denial of their own content and possibility, though strategically framed under the contentful claim that they are abstract. Still, they are awfully pretty. Just as prettiness is not simply the misnaming of beauty, so too is "abstraction" not merely a misnomination. It is instead the act of domestication whereby the threat of something potentially resembling a truth is deflected into familiarity. The pretty is that uncanny, close at hand thing.

Our claim here that most contemporary so-named abstract art is pretty is thus not just a strategic judgment on our part in order to dismiss the bulk of this work. We believe that most people already judge the work pretty yet cannot bring themselves to declare it so. If the work is to remain commercially viable, no one dare utter this aesthetic judgment. But the chief charm and attraction of this work is its prettiness.

Previous discussions of what we have termed Compositional Formalism presuppose the visibility of all formal characteristics. But this is to omit what we take to be the pre-eminent formal characteristic of any artifact—the temporality of its production. Oddly enough then, an artifact's most important formal characteristic is invisible. This invisibility on which contemporary abstraction depends will be made visible when it is understood that this work is constituted through a mistaken projection of the past. (We might add that this invisibility is attested to, but only imaginatively eclipsed, when the artist inscribes a date on a work.) It is precisely this invisibility, and not the apparent evolution of formal compositional elements, that gives content to the discipline of art *history*.

What is especially cunning within the new abstraction is that it conceals its own historicity in the very gesture of pointing toward it. That is, the reiteration by new abstraction of all the formal *visible* components of historic abstraction elides the profound disjunction between two historically distinct epochs. All that separates the new from the old is the invisibility of history.

Still, what strikes us as excessive is just the insistent, over-determined strain of the repetition of visible formal characteristics. The near hysterical visibility of those referents designed to efface their own datedness instead reveals the emptiness of those referents. The solution is not to legislate that all "abstract" works of the past and present have the invisible formal characteristic of their date of manufacture inscribed indelibly on their surfaces, but instead to reveal the historical specificity of any supposed abstraction.

The object of contemporary painting is produced derivatively by alluding only to the visible components that have thus far been seen in historical abstraction. Our designation of Compositional Formalism implies that a work could be wholly constituted by its visible attributes.

Our contention is that a work's formal components can *never* be reduced to what is visible in the work. As an alternative to Compositional Formalism we propose the term Constitutive Formalism as the name for that formalism which takes the historical specificity of the work's manufacture as its primary formal characteristic. Constitutive Formalism implies that what constitutes the form of a work—what informs it—is the time of its production.

We have shown that this achievement occurs by way of the effacing of the invisible yet constitutive formal component of historical occurrence. That the term "abstraction" becomes timeless is the belated fulfillment of a desire on the part of historical abstraction.

There is a dual, complementary emptiness in abstraction. There is the emptiness achieved through the prejudice of a formalism that asserts that the form of a work consists wholly of its visible attributes. The other emptiness of "abstraction" consists of its refusal to die. The resurgence of abstraction is no accident since the essence of the historical project was its refusal to see itself as historical. Therefore, any painting that construes itself as in any way "abstract" automatically, and unfortunately, participates in this refusal. The founding and constituting moment of any and all abstraction is the necessary blindness to the historicity of each painting and the historicity of the project. (If the postmodern is an insistence on the utter simultaneity and interchangeability of, indeed indifference to, History, then "abstraction" is an insistent indifference to its *own* history. The current resurgence of abstraction is the vengeful bookend to the postmodern.)

The pervasive emptiness of new abstraction is most visible in the hysteria of its reception. The grandiosity of the terms through which the work is being presented recapitulates the emptiness and fungibility of the category. These terms are the expression of an impasse rather than an identifying description of the work. In other words, the reception of the work mimics the works' own empty core.

The choice of titles and themes of the exhibitions of this work is therefore also an unconscious recognition, and attempted recuperation, of the willful blindness at the heart of the work. The failure of the work, and the end of the project of abstraction, is symptomatically recorded in the reception of the work; thus the titles of the two major exhibitions of new abstraction: "Conceptual Abstraction" and "La Metafisica della Luce." Something historical is clearly afoot when the traditional rhetoric of abstraction feels the need of further rhetorical support from "concepts" and "metaphysics". The collapse of the rhetoric that sustained the historical project of abstraction is further evidenced in the increasing fungibility of the term itself. "Abstraction" is all too readily coupled with yet another bit of dated rhetoric masquerading as a category of nature:

“The Feminine in Abstract Painting.”

One might object here that these three examples are the product of curatorial decisions and so not truly indicative of the critical reception of this work. But if we turn to David Carrier’s essay-review of the first two shows named above, we find further evidence of rhetorical decay attempting to conceal the mortality of the project of abstraction: “Paintings that matter right now manifest faith in our culture’s capacity to build upon its artistic traditions, a faith all the more important because it is hard to come by at this moment.” (*Arts Magazine*, March 1992, p. 60.) Faith, culture and tradition are redeemable only at the expense of the particularities of the object. “Paintings that matter right now” becomes merely the excuse for, or vehicle of, something transcendent called culture or whatever. The insistence within Carrier’s reception is the insistent mis-reception that recapitulates the insistence within the project of abstraction: evisceration in exchange for immortality. The new cult of abstraction prescribes an insistent reaffirmation of faith in a pretty, empty culture.

The Tomb Of The Zombie: AICA 1994

Thomas McEvelley

The following is a reconstruction of statements made by Thomas McEvelley at the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics in Stockholm in September of 1994. Some of these remarks were uttered in a report on a workshop he conducted on "Breakdown of Art Systems," and others came out of a free-ranging theoretical discussion held in the final plenary session. They've been combined here, with minimal editing which hasn't changed their content.

One thing that interested me about the workshop I moderated was a significant tendency toward consensus on certain points—I don't mean a complete unanimity, but nevertheless a significant tendency. There were two points in particular that this consensus arose around, both of which are among the major issues of our moment.

The first near-consensus was that most of us weren't persuaded by the idea of the breakdown of art systems which was the announced theme of the workshop. We felt that the word "breakdown" involved an unnecessary implication of misfortune, catastrophe, and loss, and that we would be more comfortable seeing the situation which we are in now in art and culture as simply a process of change which we don't need to be afraid of and which we may even feel is desirable.

The second point is a little more complex. Most of us agreed that we didn't like post-Modernism as a system of prohibitions. Two of the papers that were delivered in the workshop dealt with claims to the effect that if you are post-Modernist you are supposed not to exercise value judgments; if you are post-Modernist you are not supposed to structure your thought and your discourse around the concept of history; and thirdly, if you are post-Modernist you're supposed to be turned around to gaze at the past and are prohibited, on principle, from being motivated by ambitions for the future.

In our discussion following those papers I remarked that viewing post-

Modernism as a set of prohibitions makes it simply an inversion of the value hierarchy of Modernism. Modernism was an essentially puritanical and exclusionary ideology, and post-Modernism as a mere inversion, a mere system of prohibitions of the Modernist tendencies, would be equally puritanical and in that case I would see it not genuinely as post-Modernism but as a kind of shadow of Modernism or an altar ego of it—the evil twin, as it were.

There does in fact exist an ideology which is simply an inversion of the value structure of Modernism, but I suggest calling it not post-Modernism but anti-Modernism. What happened in the United States, anyway, though maybe not over here, is that we went through a Modernist period and then, starting in the 1960s, we went through an anti-Modernist period; this was of course the age of the so-called Death of Painting, the attempt to eliminate aesthetic elements through conceptualism, and so on—the most direct possible attack on the so-called formalist (or Kantian) tradition. But true post-Modernism did not emerge until Modernism and anti-Modernism began to coalesce in the late 1970s and even more so in the 1980s, with the return of painting in a conceptual mode. I see post-Modernism, in other words, as non-puritanical, a shifting sequence of impure and conflated positions which give up no options.

In that case it would seem, for example, that one can in fact be a post-Modernist and exercise value judgments, as long as one does not delude oneself that they embody universals or absolutes. The fetishization of the value judgement is Modernist; its uncompromising rejection is anti-Modernist. From a post-Modernist approach the value judgment can be used, but somewhat tentatively, even with a great deal of suspicion of it. And post-Modernist practice will not ordinarily foreground the judgment by sensibility as it was foregrounded in the Modernist period, but rather relegate it to the periphery or the background, or include it in the arena of things to be criticized.

First the value judgment must be relativized, on the assumption that one's tastes do not reflect universality but are the result of the countless webs of conditioning factors that have made one what one is, with all the random or unaccountable forces involved in that process of self-formation. So that from this point of view, it would not really be proper to say in some absolutistic sense about anything, "It is good," or "It is bad," but rather simply to say, "I like it"—that is to say: given who I am, given all the countless random factors in the network of causality which has made me who I happen to be, I happen to like it, and there is really no accounting for this anymore than there would be an accounting for something that I would choose to select from a menu in a restaurant—assuming I was choosing by taste alone rather than by some dietary or aesthetic program.

When the critic makes an arbitrary value judgement based on sensibility alone, he or she is doing something about as important to the outside world as telling that world what flavor of ice-cream is his or her favorite. So that the value judgment used in a post-Modern way is tentative, somewhat humble, purely relativized—and exercised even after all those reservations with suspicion.

As far as the prohibition about history goes, of course, it's obvious that massive catastrophic mistakes have been made in the way that concept has been used for the last couple of centuries. The worst abuse of the concept has been a tendency to melt it into simplistic totalizations which are likely to involve hidden power agendas. Still, it seemed to most of us in the workshop that the concept of history (histories might be more appropriate) could still be useful as long as, so to speak, one didn't trust it too much—if you know what I mean, and I am sure you do.

It's been said that the dangerous part of the concept of history is its tendency to try to appropriate the future in a quasi-prophetic way. Yesterday we heard Jimmie Durham say that he thought it was arrogant for any artist to say that his or her work was made for the future. Well, I certainly see his point, but I think perhaps he was referring to the kind of prophetic Hegelian approach to the future that Modernism featured, where certain things that one wanted to happen were somehow suddenly inflated to the stature of inevitability.

That is not the only way to approach the future. In our workshop we looked at slides of a couple of works by Mel Chin and Mark Dion which I feel show a humble, down-to-earth, feet-on-the-ground, non-delusional, pragmatic, and constructive approach to the idea of the future. In a work such as Chin's *Revival Field*, for example, which I will not describe but which I assume most of you know, I don't see how one could call the approach to the future arrogant. I would regard it as simply conscientious.

Aside from those points, lots of other interesting things happened in our workshop which will remain our little secrets. But meanwhile, since I haven't yet had a chance to address my colleagues together, I thought I would take a moment now, I hope with the forbearance of the organizers, to tell what has interested me most about this conference as a whole. And that is how little, almost nothing really, has been said about art criticism, or for that matter about art, in this conference of art critics. I think, for example, that an outsider could have listened to the fascinating talks given by Gerardo Mosquera, Jimmie Durham and Eri Camara without being able to infer that they were addressed to a conference of art critics. This has been a tremendous relief to me. Because the image seems to me to be of such fundamental cultural and psychological importance that to deal with it adequately we must deal first with the major issues of our time, rather than forcing our judgment directly on the artwork through

supposed sensibility alone.

Our fore-runners in the trade—and now I am referring to both art criticism and art history—ghettoized themselves and us by specializing in detail and nuance to the point of saying to the rest of the world of discourse: ‘Keep out! Only we are the priests of the image. Away, ye profane.’ And it worked. They left it to us—and they left us by ourselves.

The grim result of this deliberate ghettoization is that what we say doesn’t really matter any more in the general discourse of the culture around us. It only matters to other art critics, to artists, to curators, in short, to arts professionals. The image has been withdrawn and hoarded. For the most part people out there, outside the walls of our ghetto of arts specialists, don’t even bother to consult us on our own subject matter.

Consider for example the great 1993 book on post-Modernism by Frederic Jameson. Jameson, of course, has made monumental contributions to the discourse of our time. It would be hard to think of any one whose contributions have been more important in helping us define ways to articulate what is happening to us, to our culture and our traditions. But, while reading his book on post-Modernism, when I came to the chapter that was partly devoted to the visual arts, I felt mortified for him; it was so amateurish that it was embarrassing. He didn’t really know the first thing about it, or anyway, not the second thing. Why didn’t he? Because he hadn’t done his homework. He hadn’t bothered to read you, and he hadn’t bothered to read me. He had brushed us aside as irrelevant to our own specialty. I think we can be sure that he would not have been so cavalier in his approach to literary criticism, to historiography, to sociology, anthropology, economics, psychoanalysis. No, in any of those fields he would have done his homework and consulted the so-called experts.

Now reflect for a moment, if you will, on the talk that Julia Kristeva gave to us the other day. Kristeva is also a person who has made staggeringly important contributions to the vocabulary of the discourse of our time. I have lectured on her work, and I regard certain of the concepts that she has provided as gifts that have helped me in a number of situations to deal with the articulation of issues. But she didn’t do her homework either, did she now? No, she came here and talked to us on a child-like level about our own specialty. Her talk of a malaise in the arts and of the general reaction to contemporary art being disappointment belongs, to speak as an American, with Robert Hughes’s absurd denunciation of the 1980s as the worst decade in the history of American art, and so on. It was not an attitude in tune with what artists and critics actually think is happening.

While we were chatting after her talk, Kristeva remarked that she does not read art criticism—ever. That is to say, she also did not bother to read

you, and did not bother to read me. Yet she gave the keynote address at our convention.

It seems to me that there is an implication of a certain contempt for our profession in this cavalier treatment of our subject matter by these mighty intellectuals from outside the walls of our ghetto, and I think we deserve it. Anyway, we inherited it, and now—I address this communal exhortation to us all—Let's get out from under it (because the image should belong to everyone). Let's open our hoard and show the rest of the cultural world frankly and openly what we have been treasuring.

I've spoken to prominent intellectuals from disciplines such as Cultural Studies and asked them why they are so neglectful or dismissive of the writings of art historians and art critics, and consequently of the field of contemporary art itself, which rarely comes into their discussions. And they have told me several things. Most prominently, the lingering dominance of the issue of quality and of the value judgment seems to outsiders to render our discourse elitist and irrelevant. In other words, it is the lingering hegemony of the Kantian-Greenbergian tradition that has created this ghettoization.

In the Kantian-Greenbergian tradition, of course, the proper apprehension of an artwork is supposed to be limited to those with very special sensibilities. This was an exclusionary doctrine which had the effect of intimidating and alienating non-specialists and non-experts. It is precisely this that we need to get out from under: the lingering crypto-religious aura of the priestly caste which alone has access to the Mysteries.

This is why, in a kind of four point plan which I am about to present to you, for what I see as strategies of critical practice that might get us out of this situation and back into the genuine discourse of living culture, the first element is to concentrate on the issue of how it works. Of course, one might say that in the Kantian-Greenbergian tradition there was attention to how the artwork works in an aesthetic sense, but I am talking of something different now. First of all, in the Kantian-Greenbergian tradition how it works was approached as almost an automatic reflex, a reflex of sensibility rather than an act of cognition. What I am talking about is cognition: to emphasize iconography and meaning, to demonstrate to the rest of the world of discourse through our writings that artworks often do work in some ascertainable concrete way: that they can be analyzed, described and comprehended by anyone with a mind. That art is not a mystery that is beyond the grasp of ordinary human beings and available only to a priestly caste.

The other element of this first point I've already mentioned; that is the backgrounding and relativizing of the idea of the value judgment. To put these two together into the first of my four suggestions: *stress analysis, not*

appreciation.

For the second point: I think it is clear to all of us who regard ourselves as somewhat engaged in the post-Modernist point of view, that what the artwork has actually been doing in the world for a couple of decades now has had less to do with aesthetic delectation—less, that is, with the sameness of universality—than with questions of identity and difference and so on. Artworks are prominently functioning today as what might be called unofficial diplomatic channels, icons of communication between different communities. The artworks produced by a certain community express to the rest of the world what that community senses itself to be, how it feels to be a human being in that community, how that community wants other communities to see it, and what it wants or hopes to get from life, history, and the shared human project of civilization. So the second of my four points is: *to regard the artwork as an act of diplomacy between communities.*

To approach the third point I will note that in visiting marginalized or previously colonized cultures from around the world recently, and talking with the people in their art and cultural realms, I have found, as one interesting result of this activity, that sometimes when I come back to New York after such a trip and walk through Soho and look at the work in the galleries, I feel that there is something a little dead or artificial to it in comparison with the work which I see in almost any Third World community. I don't mean that I am out of sympathy with our white, western, highly-nuanced, bead-game-like art tradition; I still like it, I still follow it, I still recognize it as mine by heritage, I still have favorite works in it. Nevertheless, the third point in my program is: *a partial shift of attention to the third world.* How much, how far the shift will go, is a matter of individual sensibility and choice.

Fourthly, in response to the silent vacuum of isolation in which our discourse has been carried on for several generations, I would recommend a revision of our critical practice to bring it into a shape more similar to the type of activity that goes on in fields such as Cultural Studies. I mean, for example, that the artwork, rather than being regarded as some hieratic mystery separated by its intrinsic nature from the world of class distinction and class struggle around it, could to an extent be treated as just another part of visual culture, susceptible to the same analyses as the Coca-Cola logo or a portrait of Elvis. To what extent is, again, a matter of individual sensibility on the critic's part.

Finally I want to comment on the debate that has arisen here today. Frankly, I can't believe that at this convention of professional art critics—professional intellectuals who deal with the image—in 1994, I have heard phrases such as “the universality of aesthetic judgment.” I cock my ear back toward the 19th Century. The idea of the universality of aesthetic

judgment was no more than an imperialistic ruse to force the rest of the world into the imitation of Western sensibility. It is also this absurd crypto-religious claim which repels practitioners of intellectual discourse from other fields which are less sanctified and ghettoized.

Kant and Greenberg are both things of the past and we should just get over them. Yet somehow, they keep rising again from the grave like zombies (especially, I might say, among European intellectuals, many of whom seem prepared to cling to that romantic disguise of imperialistic impulse to the last gasp).

I happened to write the obituary article on Greenberg in the British magazine *Frieze* (September 1994). It was one of that unusual category of obituaries which, instead of listing the deceased's accomplishments, gives him no credit at all. Greenberg, as I have tried to demonstrate there, originated nothing theoretically; he merely simplified and Americanized the theories which Kant enunciated in the *Critique of Judgment*. Greenberg himself frankly acknowledged this, and anyone who has perused Donald Kuspit's book on him will see that the Greenbergian theory has been translated directly out of the Kantian doctrine (with rarely acknowledged Hegelian elements mixed in).

Unfortunately, the Kantian doctrine in the *Critique of Judgment* had certain crucial weaknesses which have not been focused on enough. The one which is most relevant to our discussion today is that Kant never managed to establish his attempt to create a hierarchy of pleasures. He admitted that the artwork gives pleasure, but he tried to distinguish this pleasure from other pleasures such as, say, the pleasure of an ice cream flavor. He never really managed to establish this point, but enshrined it in such a bush of brilliant verbiage that it has impressed everybody and become a part of our tradition. In fact, there seems to be no philosophical position from which one could establish that certain pleasures were spiritually somehow higher than others.

As the American artist and Kantian scholar Adrian Piper pointed out in an essay of a decade or so ago, the Kantian doctrine of the non-functionality of the artwork is wrong in the same way; that is to say, the artwork *does* perform a function, and that is to yield the particular pleasure which is specific to each different flavor of ice cream.

If we want the rest of the cultural world to even begin to take our discourse seriously we've got to demystify it from all of this insane, romantic, priestly power-tripping. In the same issue of *Frieze* that has my obituary article on Greenberg, there also is published the last (or one of the last?) interviews which he gave. In it he says that what the critic really does is point around at works and say "Good, bad, good, bad, good, bad ..." Two monosyllabic words: that's all the cognitive apparatus that the critic needs. Let's get out from under it!

Because you know and I know that art has got to be contextualized within society as a whole, and within history as a whole, and within culture as a whole, and within humanity as a whole; and we are in a period—yes, we are still in that period—when we need to focus especially on context, because the frameworks are shifting, and we as supposed custodians of the image must have our say about it.

So, to conclude, fundamentally I thought this conference in which art critics barely mentioned art or art criticism was on the right track—and that might even be enough to induce me to join this organization someday.

The End Of The (Art) World

Robert C. Morgan

In recent years, various attempts to define the “art world” have become increasingly vague in connotation and problematic in relation to their social context. As advanced culture moves toward the end of the millennium, one could say that the cultural and economic requirements needed for emerging artists (and many mature artists) to effectively pursue their respective goals have become severely limited, if not altogether neglected within the society. The absence of a consistent support apparatus, both public and private, within the current artistic community could be read as a kind of fallout from the absurd marketing strategies of the eighties. It was a system bolstered in part by an Anglicized postmodern rhetoric that disclaimed stereotypes of the “struggling artist” as irrelevant to the more ideological issues of art as commodity. As a result of this alienating mechanism one could no longer assume that the community of artists and what was being defined as the “art world”—collectors, dealers, investors—were identical.

In the eighties, the “art world” could offer a form of social detachment to conceal the boredom of image-repetition, rampantly displayed in galleries, art bars, discos, and clubs. On one level, these images constituted a “real life” representation, signs appropriated from popular TV soap operas, print media, and popular entertainment. On a mundane level, Postmodernism in the eighties became a kind of manifesto for the “art world”—the re-sale marketing and investments, the social gatherings, dinners, and drugs. The “art world” of the eighties was all about cultural Reaganomics—supply side art—as if clients were infinitely available to buy gargantuan paintings and bits of detritus called “installations.”

On a more academic level, Postmodernism was a form of critical theory that challenged certain assumptions about Modernism. One of the primary assumptions, somewhat ironical, in retrospect, was that Modernism was “elitist” and that its elitism was shaped by notions of quality that were presumably based on aesthetic formalism. Yet given the

limited views about Modernism being taught in American art throughout the seventies it was no surprise that the generation of artists that evolved into prominence during the eighties were possessed by the overburdening desire to let go of their collectivist “nom du pere” and relinquish the formalism of past decades. At this juncture, Conceptual Art became a code for anything that could be called an “idea,” and was fast becoming a radical presence in M.F.A. programs, an alternative to formalism.

At the beginning of the eighties, critical theory—whether French or German—became virtually synonymous with Postmodernism. To engage in the so-called “deconstruction” of cultural signs became a fundamental issue in art. Experiencing a work of art was no longer about any degree of heightened emotional awareness. Art was no longer about transformation. It was no longer expected to offer a heightened sensory cognition. Art was—in deconstructive terms—about a lack, a deficiency of the human psyche. Desire was considered inferior to information. Initially, critical theory was important as a method in coming to terms with the absent “aesthetics” of Neo-Expressionist painting. Gradually, it evolved into something else—an anti-canon to offset the canon of Modernism and the “elitist” conventions of a patriarchal culture.

Advocates of Postmodernism, weaned on the writings of Benjamin, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, began to declare intellectual warfare on “Eurocentric” art, suggesting that the latter was merely a representation of a much broader, yet concealed history of western colonialism and imperialist expansion. In such a climate, the term “aesthetics” was no longer useful. What replaced aesthetics—and, to some extent, criticism—was a form of applied theory, generally appropriated from philosophy, sociology, and psychoanalysis. For many of those who entered into the art world at the end of the seventies, it was evident that much of the theoretical rhetoric was already firmly established in other fields—namely, literature, cinema studies, and architecture.

By the mid-eighties, a popularized form of critical theory began appearing in various art magazines. Although commercially biased, the rhetoric suggested a reduction of options as to which artists they considered acceptable for publication. One result of this rhetoric was the introduction of the artist as a kind of rock star. Some artists, so inspired by this new model, began hiring assistants and press agents in order to fashion their image, to recreate themselves in order to appeal to “collectors” who demanded a new mystique. It was as if being an artist was simply a matter of successful publicity and promotion. The glossy art magazines had become important promotional vehicles for artists and galleries alike.

The “art world” today has become less a community of creative

people than a detached network of subscribers whose existence depends on a set of precise taxonomical divisions. Unfortunately, this suggests that the "art world" has become unnecessarily insecure about its current direction as a significant cultural force. Instead of taking a position in response to the cyberspace, loss-of-meaning, instant effect art of the nineties, the "art world" is buying into the most superficial, non-thinking aspect of information culture. Too often artists put themselves in a position where they are competing with the most predictable imagery found in advertising and the entertainment media, resulting in unnecessary pressures less beneficial than frustrating. This is not to imply that social and economic pressures cannot be real. Rather it is to suggest that when careerism becomes an obsessive goal these pressures can become unnecessarily inhibiting in terms of how one functions as an artist. The result is a hardened cynical approach to art, an approach that extends beyond irony. To see the opposite of cynicism one must return to the origin of one's emotional strata to see what one is doing and why one is doing it. What is the purpose of one's art? Why be an artist? What is the motivation?

These are tough questions. I think they have always been tough questions, but, of course, the present always outweighs the past. We are all up against the present. And part of this alienated present—which Postmodern terminology saw as absence—is a failure of trust. It is a failure to see the common basis that underlies artistic intentionality. Creative expression as an individual pursuit in this culture is not part of a society's normative structure. In fact, artists are an intellectual minority.

The splintering of factions within the community of artists at the current moment seems unnecessary and self-defeating. As society moves from an industrial to a conceptual base, artists are caught within a period of high transition, a new phase of acculturation. In view of this transition, one might ask why so many panels and articles have become fixated on the question of "otherness," when, in effect, the pursuit of art in itself has become society's "other." As for these separatist factions within the art world, it appears that the greater sector of our mediated global society does not particularly care. The ideological boundaries established within the current discourse are trivial, if not insignificant, to the vast majority of commercial technocrats and other work-a-day professionals. In this isolated context, artists might further ask: Where is the real community? And what kind of audience and support system is available?

I doubt that Postmodernism has changed the way society perceives what artists do. What society understands about advanced art is the media's view of art. This was true with the early Modernism and it is true of Postmodernism today. The populist view has no particular regard for either art or artists other than as a political rallying point. According to

the French Situationist Guy Debord, society wants its spectacles as a diversion from the pain of capitalist exploitation, a diversion from the masochistic lifestyles of a programmed recessionary economy in the late twentieth century. Still, in spite of the media "consensus," it is necessary that artists proceed as if their art mattered, as if their social role offered a spiritual infusion to society as opposed to a simulated careerism. If this role seems illusory, it is still an essential one. Artists cannot sustain their work in a cultural vacuum driven only by fashion and cynicism.

I would say that the more accurate use of the term Postmodernism today has less to do with a genre or style of art than it has to do with a condition of culture that effects the way we live in the world today. This is not a new idea, merely one that got derailed largely for the benefit of using theory as a marketing strategy. In contrast to the earlier emphasis on theory, it would seem more appropriate to let go of the rhetoric in order to claim a more practical application of the term—as a form of acknowledgement in relation to the general condition of culture, involving such variables as psychological distance, fragmentation of belief, and suspended oppositionality.

One might also cite the perennial information glut as obscuring the trace of historical memory, including aesthetic signification, and displacing it with effects of surreal brutality and violence that cross over between domesticity and public life. These effects are contingent on the cultural variables of everyday life. They are not directly responsible for art, though indirectly they influence the content of art. Art strives to be qualitative through the artist's experience but art cannot solve real life problems. Yet, increasingly, art is defining itself in relation to these transcultural effects.

Historically, art has been able to sustain itself as a conduit of expression, even under the most difficult and intensely disturbing situations, even in the most unprivileged situations. The individual's struggle to make art under dire circumstances has been, in some cases, one of considerable significance, and often lends itself directly to the content of the artist's work. On the other hand, one cannot ignore middle class privileges as a reality for artists whose external world has proven more fortunate. The luxury of not having to worry about rent, food, and survival is another case. Yet this does not and should not automatically disqualify the significance of an artist's work. It is a matter of how the means reaches the content.

Whether the struggle is an internal or an external one, there are important artists who are not being shown, promoted, or advertised in the delimited infrastructure of today's "art world." There is a problem when art becomes an overtly market-driven enterprise, contingent upon mystique, as it was in the eighties. To make art happen as a vital force

despite the Postmodern condition that supports this mystique, through the sale of escapist spectacles, is to recognize that artists may still have a community in which to muster strength and mutual support. This community may be defined as one that maintains as its basis an open sense of internal critique. It is only through a sense of dialogue within the community that artists can hope to contribute a presence in relation to the cultural context that exists outside.

Over the years—since art has become “radicalized,” or rather, acquiescent to theory—some advocates of Postmodernism have tried to diminish the separation between serious art and the wider market-driven “art world” as a conformist phenomenon as if the need for any kind of real dialogue among artists and critics was insignificant. It is precisely the artist’s dialogue that offers a spontaneous urgency and a necessary point of resistance to the conditioning processes inherent in an advanced capitalist world. If I understand the message of Joseph Beuys correctly, this is what he advocated in his “social sculpture.” For Beuys, the puritanical isolation of the “art world”—based solely on materialism—was a negative force in culture. Instead, he incited the activation of what he called “power fields” within the society—and artists were the instigators.

I would argue that in the most fundamental sense to be an artist is ultimately a task of liberation. This is to suggest that to be an artist in the international sense is not simply about marketing one’s logo, but is also about maintaining a certain ethical relationship to art. It is about the positioning of oneself in opposition to the assumption that the information network carries its own “natural” momentum and will automatically improve life. It would seem that artists cannot escape the ethical responsibility to resist this omnipresent pressure—the wholesale seduction—that the “art world” assumes in its desire for a revisionist informational environment. To be an artist—regardless of how one’s success is measured—has always been a matter of intelligence, passion, constraint, shrewdness, and will. This implies a position of resistance, but not one of denial. The power of art lies in its oblique angle to the accepted cultural norm. Artists define themselves *as* artists both in terms of their attraction and repulsion to this norm. The crucial issue here is in finding what sustains the necessity of one’s liberation, because artists will move in relation to this necessity more than in the pursuit of ideas.

Art must be willing to resist what Barthes designated as “the fashion system” or it will gradually deconstruct itself under the guise of political slogans and social codes. In doing so, art will cease to exist as a cultural force of any remarkable consequence. Becoming an artist is a matter of priorities. Again, one must be willing to ask: What is the motivation for doing what one is doing? It is within the context of a community that

these priorities can be tested and better understood. Liberation through art is both social and psychological. It is ultimately political in the sense of anarchy. To this extent, art is a force that resists institutionalization. Art is a force close to life.

While the term Postmodern art may have been useful in architectural theory in the late seventies, it does not fit seamlessly within a generalized discourse on the current situation in art. In fact, Postmodern art does not exist. It is not a style, because its very premise—being one of historicist appropriation—refutes style. While prerequisite to Modernism, style loses its function when applied to Postmodernism. It is merely another marketing device—a metonym for advanced capital.

Postmodernism signifies repetition within the reification of objects. In such a cultural climate—fraught with cybertech gadgets and signals—the “art world” emanating from the former decade constitutes an abundance of signs caught within a tautological system of privileged referents. The same signs get repeated; thus, there is no forward motion. There is stasis. There are no cause and effect relationships in most forms associated with Postmodernism.

Instead of art, there are the signs of art—signs in a state of flotation, signifiers that lead nowhere, without certainty. This describes the condition of society as it has come to frame corporate culture. Thus I would argue that Postmodern culture exists, and that Postmodern art does not. The mistaken idea of a Postmodern style has contributed, in large part, to an over-informed and under-educated art audience.

Postmodern culture is the rule, the predictable spectacle, the cycle of entertainment and arousal, all aspects of predictability, that artists must be willing to both accept and finally reject. Artists are both transformers and resisters who are capable of recognizing themselves not as de-centered but as re-centered subjects. Being an artist is a matter of trying to locate one’s position in Postmodern culture. It requires an inner-directed sense of reality, one that resists de-centering and the loss of self-esteem. The artist’s identity is contingent on a functional dialectical means, not a factionalized programming. The challenge for the artist is to rejuvenate the aura in art and thereby to re-discover the transmission of the creative impulse. Artists who are willing to recognize themselves as re-centered, creative individuals, are those possessed by a desire to function in an original way.

In contrast to the more utopian aspects of Modernism, artists today may become socially and politically involved not within an isolated and paranoid cultism, but involved with a community of artists willing to question the assumptions wrought by Postmodern culture. Being an artist has the ethical dimension, in the Spinozoan sense, of attending to specifics first and of avoiding the generalized moral imperatives of a

puritan social taxonomy.

For the inner-directed artist, skepticism will come to replace cynicism in art. To be skeptical is to have a necessary aesthetic distance in relation to one's production as an artist. To be cynical is a severe detachment in relation to one's experience with a work of art. In so doing, art is negatively transformed into a system of politicized representations. Cynicism assumes privilege as the condition of art without ever confronting the effect of privilege in relation to content. Privilege often disguises itself through arrogance and projection.

The dialogue between artists will become essential to the task of identifying the evolving possibilities for art in the future. It is the dialogue that allows experience to be articulated and that further opens the door to understanding the qualitative standard in art. Quality in art can no longer be dismissed, and it can no longer be confused with privilege. A large part of being an artist in today's cyberspace is to offer a purposeful resistance to the cultural programming that otherwise appears so inevitable and ironically, so inescapable. This alone should be enough for the artist to insist on another position in the world made possible through the determination of one's creative efforts.

This paper is based on a talk given in the Graduate School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on December 13, 1994. The initial idea evolved from a short statement that I prepared for M/E/A/N/I/N/G, issue #15 (Spring 1994). The title given to this essay was appropriated, more or less, from an early essay by the Surrealist poet, Phillippe Soupault.

Aesthetic Awareness in the Work of Rebecca West

James Roy King

Although best known today for her writing on politics and feminism, Rebecca West (1892-1983) was also a novelist of great sensitivity, an observer of beauty in myriad forms, and a considerable commentator on aesthetic issues. For the purposes of this paper, her most important books are *The Strange Necessity* (1928), a long essay on aesthetics; *The Fountain Overflows* (1956), a novel about a family of London musicians; and the travelogue/history she entitled *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1940), an account of travels in Yugoslavia, on which much of her fame rests. West made a solo trip to this troubled country in 1936 and returned a year later with her husband, Henry Maxwell Andrews, to share with him the delights she had found. Further material relating to aesthetics is scattered throughout other books and articles West published in British and American periodicals.

West's passion for beauty was the motive for her keen interest in belles lettres, painting, architecture, and music. She regarded such activities as essential elements in the good life, and she gave them the most intense scrutiny. H. G. Wells, with whom she had a long relationship, speaks in his autobiography of West's power to *look*. "I never knew anyone else," he says, "who could so light up and colour and intensify an impression."¹ And how *personally* she *looked*, even when intense and stimulating critical activity that might have influenced her was going on all around her!² Thus she offers an aesthetic embracing highly refined but passionate responses to the many forms of art she encountered, an aesthetic that never neglects the links between art and life, personal experience and objective fact.

I

The "necessity" of which West speaks in her 1928 essay is the work of clarifying reality which art carries out for us.³ In a variety of ways West asserts that art gives us life as it actually is, i.e., provides an accurate, non-sentimental account of the world. It tells us the truth, enabling us to say: "This much we now know." Her observation about the novel—that its role is to give an account of values, not to create effects—could apply to

all the art forms that interested her. But art can only carry out such a function if it is strong enough to grip us. One work with such power she singles out for extended analysis was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. She finds it as remarkable for its lack of taste as for its absolutely convincing view of the world. It creates "excitatory complexes" which are "sound and strong."⁴ Such bundles of feelings, she argues, are essential to our full humanness. Elsewhere she praises Charlotte Bronte for telling "the truth even about matters concerning which the whole civilization ... has ... conspired to create a fiction."⁵

West's sense of the absolute necessity of art is also embodied in certain remarks near the end of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. When we consider human experience, West asserts, we must regard Susannah's aria from *The Marriage of Figaro* as somehow more important than all the threats of war (or other grim realities) to which life exposes us. Mozart helps trace our feelings and experiences back to their roots, and thus to understand them. Art is not to be regarded as a toy or decoration: it answers our need to understand what our lives mean. West touchingly supports her position by recalling that during the bombings of London in World War II she saw men and women walking in public gardens among the roses. She imagined them saying, "This is what roses are like, that is how they smell. We must remember that, down in the darkness."⁶

West finds art linked to experience in unexpected ways. She recalls an editor asking a young writer: Do you think you have lived enough to write a novel?⁷ She observes a peasant moving through deep snow in rural Yugoslavia and realizes she is seeing exactly what Brueghel saw in the sixteenth century.⁸ Goethe is great, she says, for "the ubiquity which he displayed scouting on every frontier of the collective intelligence."⁹ A house she visits reflects the "refined fragilities" of its inhabitants.¹⁰ Time and again as she tours Yugoslavia she encounters paintings which reflect diverse national strands,¹¹ even the tension between Eastern and Western ideals. Thus she can trace the very essence of her Yugoslavian experience to aesthetic issues:

Nothing in my life had affected me more deeply than this journey through Yugoslavia. This was in part because there is a coincidence between the natural forms and colours of the Western and Southern parts of Yugoslavia and the innate forms and colours of my imagination.¹²

And bad art, she says in *A Fountain Overflows*, is smudged and lifeless or sentimental and inaccurate. West's aesthetic is drenched in personal experience, actual living; it is, as Wolfe suggests, tangy, "opinionated, strongly argued, and profusely documented."¹³

II

But there is also *delight* in beauty—as well as a sense of the importance of its illumination of experience. “I value delight,” she says bluntly, thereby drawing even closer to the heart of her own aesthetic.¹⁴ Whether it be Susannah’s song (again), or the pleasure which German-speaking Slavs took in her husband’s perfect German,¹⁵ or the Muslim “tradition of tranquil sensuality,”¹⁶ or a perfectly gorgeous, utterly satisfying day in Paris¹⁷—joy is the product. Thus she speaks with particular pleasure of the way the residents of Sarajevo “greet delight with unreluctant and sturdy appreciation.”¹⁸

The delight West seeks—and finds—takes many forms, not the least of them sheer prettiness. Surely, she says, the boy Mozart must have found the little spinet his father gave him, with its brown and white keys, a pretty thing.¹⁹ Terraces being farmed outside Sarajevo are gay and neat, “pretty as a musical-comedy set.”²⁰ A visit to Diocletian’s palace in Split reminds her and her husband of Robert Adam’s book of engravings of scenes of his palace—a book which largely determined the course of Georgian architecture in England. West finds the book pretty “in the lightest sense ... like a flower or sweetmeat.” But she notes it was also “the foundation of a grave and noble art which has sheltered and nourished us all our days.”²¹ The same point is made in *The Fountain Overflows*: the Aubrey family visits Kew Gardens, where they devote special attention to the lapageria, whose attractive flowers remind Mamma that some things can be beautiful as well as pretty—like the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto.²²

West finds pleasantness and harmony to be other aspects of the delight which beauty can generate. Mr. Aubrey and his brother have lovely olive skinned faces, and long lashes and hair streaked with gold.²³ At Tsetinye, Montenegro, a river widens out “into a curd of yellow water-lilies.” Sailor boys row about in it, and in the distance there are wooded hills and a farmhouse with blue shutters.²⁴ Often she comments on the neat interiors of Muslim houses²⁵ or the “Chinese-box perfection” of some town,²⁶ or the peculiar grace of a room.²⁷ The pretty and harmonious quickly shade over into the exquisite, especially when urban areas are described: Korchula is “a goldsmith’s toy, a tortoise made of precious metals, sitting on its peninsula as on a show-stand, and we were chugging past a suburb of villas, pink and white like sugar almonds.”²⁸ Mostar, in the news lately for less happy reasons, is exquisitely planned, “with one of the most beautiful bridges in the world”; The Muslim houses have neat interiors; in the bakeries everything is arranged in “charming geometric patterns,” and the groceries reveal “a manifest pleasure in the colours and shape of the vegetables.”²⁹ Art, she says in *The Strange Necessity*, must achieve some equilibrium between elements in a situation, particularly between those

that shock and those that lull us.

Graciousness is yet another aspect of beauty. West savors it, I believe, because of a lifetime of experiences with gracious people in gracious settings. (Bath seems to have been a favorite town.) A Bosnian hostess gives her an armful of lilacs and sprinkles her hands with scent, gently rubbing it into the skin: "the most graceful farewell imaginable,"³⁰ says West, still savoring the moment years later. The blind arches of a cathedral create a "lovely span."³¹ The garden of a high church official was "golden-green in the slanting sunlight, [and] the church was honey-coloured and filled with the honey of the Abbot's voice."³² And simply watching people eating and drinking and confronting the morning is sufficient enchantment for her. So her condemnation of Prince Franz Ferdinand has a sharp edge: he was "as ungracious as only a man can be who has never conceived the idea of graciousness."³³

Sometimes this graciousness shades over into something formal, elegant, refined. Mrs. Aubrey, in *The Fountain Overflows*, has retained these qualities, even though her years of poverty and struggle. In Yezero, Bosnia, West finds in the lovely woodwork and tiled roofs of the old houses "a vital tradition of elegance strangled by poverty and neglect."³⁴ She is introduced to men in Sarajevo "with beautiful and formal manners."³⁵ And she is struck by the refinement of old ladies in Ochrid. This is not a matter of mere appearance: a woman "had fine manners, she knew certain things well, and she could express herself with perfect precision."³⁶

West's liberal sense of beauty also includes magnificence. It is suggested by a great knocker, depicting Neptune and two rearing dolphins, on the door of a Yugoslavian church.³⁷ It includes the sensuous—"It is good to wear red and gold and blue and green"³⁸—and the exotic, as exemplified by a singer who seemed to belong among the women of Persian miniatures³⁹—and the wonderful things "the Oriental himself does with Oriental themes."⁴⁰ Her quest clearly goes beyond what is usually regarded as art: it includes beautiful gestures, situations, interactions, even human beings whose lives project some unusual quality of integrity and wholeness.

III

But we must get beyond impressions, touching and dramatic as they may be, to consider the highly informed art criticism West offers in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. She speaks about easel painting, frescoes (the remains of Byzantine influence), architecture, and the minor arts. She often comments on objects she actually holds in her hands. Some of her sharpest critical barbs are directed at the furniture and paintings in a Croatian castle which she and her husband were shown. One painting is

much too large (“walloping”) and thus hideous; the paintings of “flushed nudes would have set a cannibal’s [or Edward VII’s] mouth watering”; the yards and yards of peasant girls with tambourines are sheer “foolishness” (“niaiserie”); and the portraits of Hungarian generals point to nothing but the corrupting influence of German culture.⁴¹

West and her husband visit a church in Zagreb where a diptych is proudly displayed. She finds it lacks spaciousness—the figures are correct but crowded together. Later, she studies the pleasurable illuminations of a Psalter, clearly the works of a “liberal and humanist soul.” West admires a sweet village scene with rosy nudes painted on the margin, and then is shocked to see, on the next page, a hunter being roasted on a spit and hares chasing limp hounds. “Of what use,” she asks, “are these lovely scenes in a world of such pain and cruelty?” At a church in Dubrovnik her sensibilities are further assaulted by a frightful ecclesiastical basin, with “the infinite elaborateness of eczema.”⁴² This experience is made all the more unbearable by the pride of citizens of the town in this celebrated *objet d’art*. Encountering certain “libellous” reception rooms in Sarajevo, she drops her eyes. Punch-drunk, the world seems to reel.⁴³

However, there is more that is positive. West’s trick of using a single feature of a painting as a metaphor for something she is really encountering, suggests how attentive she was to certain artists and paintings. In *The Meaning of Treason* she likens the expression on the face of certain figures at a trial to “the melancholy disdain of aristocrats painted by van Dyke.”⁴⁴ At a hotel in Korchula she watches two men tell the hotelier to cook a good fish for their dinner, a scene she associates to “a Venetian picture come to life, for the heads of all were bowed intently towards the argument, the men’s gestures were wide and made from expanded chests, the woman promised them obedience with the droop of her whole body.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the disorder, in the same town, on certain chapel steps, reminds West of Boucher’s famous painting of Mme. Pompadour, who kept her belongings lying about on the floor. The disorder she encountered indicated to West that the chapel had not yet become a museum.⁴⁶

West expresses a strong sense of the consonance between medium and theme a good artist maintains. Thus she objects to the redoing of certain Byzantine frescoes as mosaics.⁴⁷ “The eye is perpetually distracted,” she asserts, “by its failure to find the conditions which the original design was framed to satisfy.” The flames the original artist depicted were effective because they were smooth and transparent; but mosaics, made of sand, are inherently opaque. She repeats the same point elsewhere, praising another fresco because “it essays no task proper to another art.”⁴⁸ Her husband finds a true legacy from Byzantium in certain other frescoes, works of great sensitivity with “the right hieratic quality.” West’s alertness

to media is further suggested in *The Fountain Overflows* by the observation that a young composer is "essentially musical."⁴⁹ In an earlier novel, *The Thinking Reed* (1936), West describes a picture as just enough "in a water-colour way,"⁵⁰ and suggests that the Arc de Triomphe is "a shape appropriate less to architecture than to furniture."⁵¹

West is alert to the subliminal messages of art. In a Macedonian fresco she finds a powerful statement about the heartlessness of the physical body.⁵² She finds a similar mercilessness in certain frescoes in Old Serbia.⁵³ She several times characterizes, surprisingly, Byzantine art as non-stylized. This is once prompted by a series of family photos she is shown in Macedonia. She finds in one figure all the elements one expects in a Byzantine Madonna: enormous authority and grief, an awareness that her children would suffer. Like the Byzantine Madonna, the modern woman in the photograph seemed highly deferential to her husband and sons. What the ancient painters of the region painted was real life, she concludes.⁵⁴ Later, in Montenegro, she observes some peasants by the side of the road, and finds that one woman "resembled exactly one of the Madonnas of Dechani.... Again it seemed that Byzantine art is not so much stylized as we believe, and that it may be a more or less naturalist representation of a highly stylized life."⁵⁵

The subject of West's most extended analysis is a series of frescoes at Grachanitsa depicting certain key events in the life of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁶ West considers the roots of the painter's conceptualization of his material; describes the scenes, emphasizing the physical vigor displayed; brings in her husband's very sophisticated comments (and adds some of her own) on parallels with the work of the English poet William Blake; points out certain early abstract elements; explores the peculiarly Yugoslavian brand of mysticism revealed here (an affirmation of the spiritual richness of life); comments on various conflicting emotional tides that wash across the painting; examines in detail crowd reactions to the Virgin's death; and praises one panel in particular for doing what a painting is supposed to do: "it essays no task proper to another art."

West and her husband saw much architecture in Yugoslavia. They visited all the major cities, and explored buildings of many different styles and from many different periods. She often notes the strange effect of the hybrid styles so typical of Yugoslavia, such as a Byzantine dome on the flat of an Italian basilica⁵⁷ or a building in Kortula where Gothic melts into Renaissance style.⁵⁸ In the first case, West posits a forced union "by a mind that knew nothing of their origins and therefore not all of their essences."⁵⁹ The second case suggests that "the architectural spring was over and the summer was warm and drowsy."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, one of the rooms in this structure was "an astonishment," with Byzantine icons, colored flame and smoke suggesting spirit rising from matter.⁶¹ At

Dechani she is offended by a structure in which Armenian, Lombard, and Byzantine styles were fused.⁶² The style of the mausoleum of Diocletian at Split is so confusing that its original purpose is uncertain. It is "full of incongruities," West observes, "a lack of accord between the capitals and entablatures," with materials gathered from many sources. Yet in Old Serbia she lavishes praise on a church where "the Serbian genius had not commissioned an alien to make it a masterpiece but had worked according to its own nature." Here, as in the English Elizabethan age, "there was a coincidence between national expansion and a flowering of creative art."⁶³ The sense of unity which art should create, so important in *The Strange Necessity*, is illustrated in this building.

West often comments on the aesthetic impact of the long Ottoman Turkish occupation on Yugoslavia, declaring minarets "among the most pleasing architectural gestures ever made by urbanity."⁶⁴ In Kossovska Mitrovița (and elsewhere) she enjoys the old Turkish houses, "with their beautifully proportioned upper stories and intricately carved lattices."⁶⁵ She praises the Turks for knowing that "running waters, the shade of trees, a white minaret the more in a town, brocade and fine manners have a usefulness greater than use, even to the most soldierly of men."⁶⁶ Here as in many places it is clear that agreeableness was a major element in aesthetic pleasure for West.⁶⁷ Yet despite her praise for much that Islam gave to Yugoslavia, she asserts that the Turkish occupation "sterilized South Slav art for years."⁶⁸

IV

Folk traditions have exerted a powerful effect upon Yugoslavia, in part because so much of the country has remained rural and isolated, in part because the various ethnic divisions have made it vital for each group to keep its own traditions alive. Here again West's interest in the links between art and life has much material to feed on. Thus it is not surprising that she often comments on peasant ornamentation or design, condemning some examples, praising others, she purchases particularly fine examples of handwork. Her preference seems to have been for designs which defer to tradition but reflect some element of individuality. "Life is most apt to repeat a design and fall into a pattern when it is weak and diseased. When it is powerful and healthy it is always unpredictable."⁶⁹ She praises "the habit of ornament,"⁷⁰ regretting that poverty and lack of material sometimes make it impossible for people to make attractive objects for themselves.

She encounters plenty of bad examples of peasant design. One attempt at fruits and flowers suggested "Victorian Berlin woolwork."⁷¹ Some gypsy work had no sense of design at all, poor craftsmanship, and coarse materials. "Something alien and murderous" had influenced Slavic

patterns here, "and its virtue had gone out of it."⁷² Sometimes she is ambivalent: outside Skoplje she encounters young peasants wearing clothes "with the most beautiful designs being invented in any part of the world, masterpieces of abstract art."⁷³ Yet the effect was depressing, because the older women were wearing clothes and headdresses that were too plain and heavy—"shapeless piles of assorted haberdashery"—not simple embroidered garments. At Shestine, in early spring, West is delighted by the sight of peasants lavishly clad in magnificent peacock feathers, red and white stockings, and appliqued jackets that seemed to complement the local Orthodox church. Elsewhere she finds a certain "dull bright-green" particularly pleasing to Yugoslav peasants. They find it in the flow of waters over sand and pebbles, and adopt it for their clothing.⁷⁴ She suggests an interesting test of the validity of a peasant design: does a pencil trace it easily?

V

Another fundamental aspect of West's aesthetic is her belief in the importance of *Taste*. She and her husband were often prodded by their government guide, Constantine, a philosopher and distinguished poet, on matters of taste. He warned them that it would be useless ("tasteless") to visit Old Zagreb in the morning. In the evening, "when the dusk is sentimental," he would take them to see the colonnades and pediments "more remote than those of Rome."⁷⁵ On another occasion West is struck by three magnificent velvet boleros, encrusted with gold braid, a peasant woman is trying to sell. "The design ... sprung and thrust and never lost its vital purpose in mere incrustation." She regrets that an artist with such taste should have been swept away by time, and buys the garments to pass them along to others able to appreciate them.⁷⁶ She regrets the enormous influence of Austria on the Balkans, since Austrian "taste degenerated more rapidly ... during the nineteenth century than in any other country."⁷⁷ Of some pretentious collectors of art in Kossovska Mitrovitsa she says: "Having lost their taste, they lost their souls. For they could no longer base their standards on quality, and so developed their pride in quantity."⁷⁸ West's assumption of an international assembly of individuals of taste and sincerity and perception working in every style, in every country, and at every social level—individuals whose work as creators and collectors has the sureness of touch that indicates intuitive, impeccable awareness of what is good—lies behind such comments. She can be smug on this issue, however, or at least create characters who are smug. One figure in *The Thinking Reed* says: "I wanted to live at the center of a focus of pleasantness, and harmony, and things coming right."⁷⁹ Who would not!

The matter of taste enters with particular force into issues involving

musical performance. They are constantly raised in *The Fountain Overflows*. Aunt Lily's piano-playing is so bad that it is "not within the scope of criticism."⁸⁰ Improvements in Cordelia's technique serve simply to expose "her general musical ineptitude."⁸¹ The Mendelssohn Violin Concerto

deserved to be played at a height to which practice could never take one, the height on which Mamma lived.⁸² When Mamma played well she was making clear something which the composer had found out and which nobody had known before him ... when Cousin Jock played he created about him a world in which all was known, and in which art was not a discovery but a decoration. All then was trivial, and there was no meaning in art or in life.⁸³

And yet West clearly places some limit on the significance of taste. In *The Strange Necessity* she describes James Joyce as "a great man who is entirely without taste."⁸⁴ This judgment embraces one of his poems, which she quotes, and much of the subject matter—but not the absolute truthfulness—of *Ulysses*.

VI

Like her comments on taste, West's remarks on the imagination draw together many of the aesthetic issues that deeply concerned her. The role of the imagination, West asserts, in the course of noting the general lack of imagination among the Serbs, is to assure that "the factual elements in an experience combine into more than themselves."⁸⁵ In short, imagination brings out the broader significance of things. From an analysis of the ugliest *kitsch* comes a ringing assertion of the importance of the creative imagination "that conceives vast and simple visions, as a nomad would see them, who, lifting his eyes from the plains, looks on a huge procession of the clouds."⁸⁶

Her indictment of the Mithraic cults of late antiquity (remains of which she encountered in Yugoslavia) centers on problems related to the imagination. She concedes that "Power rushes from this legend" of the slaughtering of the bull, power "to irrigate and give life." But then she goes on to ask: "How did this faith alter the morning? How did it improve the evening? What explanation of birth could it furnish, what mitigation of death? My finger-tips could not find the answer." There was the central tableau, so familiar through ancient depictions of the hero and the bull. But after this, West observes, "the imagination came to a dead stop." There were, she concedes, a series of roles an initiate had to pass through—Raven, Occult, Soldier, Lion, etc. "But when one had put on one's Lion's head and walked about in procession, what did one do? One

went home." Mithraism declined and Christianity triumphed, "by virtue of its complexity, which gives the imagination unlimited material." After these meditations, West moved further into one Mithraic site, hoping that something would stimulate her imagination. But nothing did: "again I found no journey could be made."⁸⁷ All this from a woman who despised St. Paul and regarded Augustine as a great artist who had gone astray.

There are also many important references in *The Fountain Overflows* to imagination and fantasy, its step-child. Mr. Aubrey, the failed journalist, builds and furnishes doll houses for his daughters. He fills them with "little wooden figures, whose names and entire lives, were given to us by a common revelation delivered piecemeal through the years, after he had started it with the first hint."⁸⁸ For his son Richard he creates an Arabian-Nights palace, "with looking-glass fountains in arcaded courtyards, and domes painted strange colours, very pale, very bright."⁸⁹ His wife wonders, in a combination of desperation and admiration, where these ideas come from.⁹⁰ But Nancy, an outsider, "hardly ever made up things. She had never made up an animal in her life, which seemed to us quite dreadful."⁹¹ The Aubrey family demonstrated an enormous, almost tidal overflowing of a pictorial capacity which came out most clearly in its failed head.

It is difficult to determine the sources of West's aesthetics of elegance and experience. The magisterial quality of her pronouncements seems to rule out any significant dependence on other critics. Yet it seems clear that West's emphasis on the way art reflects or grows out of a culture, and her capacity for clear perception, suggest Ruskin's influence, although as a moralist she is far subtler than the author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*. Her interest in the way beautiful objects enhance daily life reminds one of Morris. Mozart is the earlier artist she mentions most often. She finds something unearthly in his work. She loves Jane Austen for her integrity, precision, and refusal to be humbugged.⁹² Her "governing fantasy,"⁹³ West observes, nearly coincided with reality. She praises Blake for his intense, fiery mysticism, which suggested Byzantine spirituality to her, and for giving up "his mind to prophetic fury that his mind might find its way back to the undefiled sources of its knowledge of goodness."⁹⁴ She praised Robert Adam for his refined line and form. But not even these great English figures appear to have been absolutely formative: West placed the imprimatur of her own intelligence and sensitivity on the books, music, and painting she favored. This dowry far outweighs external "influences."

As we have seen, the creative artist is the general theme of her finest novel, *The Fountain Overflows*. It is about a family of musicians—a mother who was a piano virtuoso before her unfortunate marriage, a relative who is a virtuoso flutist but a thoroughly crude individual, one daughter who has technical skills as a violinist but no musical sense at

all, and two other daughters who are truly fine pianists. One of these girls, Cordelia, is the central figure of the work. Just as her career is about to be launched, she decides to give up the piano because all her musical gifts are “transmittals” from her mother. But then she and her sister are unexpectedly requested to play two duo-piano pieces by Schumann, which they had worked out on their own. This leads her to conclude:

I was a musician in my own right, though I could not yet say to what degree, and I was a human being and liked my kind, so I went with my sister back into the concert-room. Or perhaps I was swept on by the strong flood of which I was a part.⁹⁵

This is the central point about aesthetics for West: in its highest forms, art is a product of immersion in some great tradition of honest, sensitive, talented individuals, with sufficient resources and a profound awareness of what is “right.” West found all these elements in Yugoslavia, at least on certain occasions. At the monastery dedicated to Sveti Naum she states:

Man is not powerless when life grows ill, [for] he can assemble sounds and colours and actions into patterns which make spells and evocations, which persuade the universe to give up the antidote it holds against its poison.⁹⁶

It is a revelation, she admits, that is incomplete, but, for however brief a time at Sveti Naum, it does correspond to reality.

Notes

- 1 H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 79.
- 2 West belongs to a group of women writers whose work on aesthetics needs to be brought together. They include Edith Wharton (of a preceding generation), Rose Macaulay (West's slightly older contemporary), and, more recently, Mary McCarthy.
- 3 West's title brings to mind Ernst Fischer's study of Marxist aesthetics, *The Necessity of Art* (1959). Although a “leftwinger” and a Socialist, West was hostile to Marxism for its suppression of human freedom, and kept herself extremely well informed about anti-Communist movements after World War II.
- 4 R. West, *The Strange Necessity* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 181-83.
- 5 R. West in Louis Kronenberger, ed., *Novelists on Novelists* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 27.
- 6 Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (London: Penguin, 1928), 1130.
- 7 West, *Black Lamb*, 61.
- 8 West, *Black Lamb*, 70.
- 9 West, *Strange Necessity*, 65.
- 10 West, *Black Lamb*, 685.
- 11 West, *Black Lamb*, 864.
- 12 West, *Black Lamb*, 1088.
- 13 Peter Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 19.
- 14 West, *Black Lamb*, 661.
- 15 West, *Black Lamb*, 28.

- 16 West, *Black Lamb*, 298.
- 17 West, *Strange Necessity*.
- 18 West, *Black Lamb*, 298.
- 19 West, *Black Lamb*, 27.
- 20 West, *Black Lamb*, 396.
- 21 West, *Black Lamb*, 140.
- 22 Rebecca West, *The Fountain Overflows* (New York: Viking Press, 1956), 377.
- 23 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 52.
- 24 West, *Black Lamb*, 1037.
- 25 West, *Black Lamb*, 325.
- 26 West, *Black Lamb*, 1067.
- 27 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 48.
- 28 West, *Black Lamb*, 221.
- 29 West, *Black Lamb*, 287-89.
- 30 West, *Black Lamb*, 401.
- 31 West, *Black Lamb*, 130.
- 32 West, *Black Lamb*, 1000.
- 33 West, *Black Lamb*, 334-35.
- 34 West, *Black Lamb*, 433.
- 35 West, *Black Lamb*, 307.
- 36 West, *Black Lamb*, 716.
- 37 West, *Black Lamb*, 212.
- 38 West, *Black Lamb*, 298.
- 39 West, *Black Lamb*, 323.
- 40 West, *Black Lamb*, 647.
- 41 West, *Black Lamb*, 73-4.
- 42 West, *Black Lamb*, 265.
- 43 West, *Black Lamb*, 322.
- 44 Rebecca West, *The Meaning of Treason* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 291.
- 45 West, *Black Lamb*, 203-04.
- 46 West, *Black Lamb*, 209.
- 47 West, *Black Lamb*, 493.
- 48 West, *Black Lamb*, 868.
- 49 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 433.
- 50 Rebecca West, *The Thinking Reed* (New York: Viking Press, 1936), 18.
- 51 West, *Thinking Reed*, 59.
- 52 West, *Black Lamb*, 665.
- 53 West, *Black Lamb*, 967-68.
- 54 West, *Black Lamb*, 818.
- 55 West, *Black Lamb*, 1004.
- 56 West, *Black Lamb*, 864-68.
- 57 West, *Black Lamb*, 635.
- 58 West, *Black Lamb*, 206, 225.
- 59 West, *Black Lamb*, 635.
- 60 West, *Black Lamb*, 206.
- 61 West, *Black Lamb*, 206.
- 62 West, *Black Lamb*, 980.
- 63 West, *Black Lamb*, 984.
- 64 West, *Black Lamb*, 271.
- 65 West, *Black Lamb*, 918.
- 66 West, *Black Lamb*, 907.
- 67 Several years ago in Divrigi, a remote mining town in Southeastern Turkey, my wife and I were entertained at breakfast in a typical Turkish home. It was immaculate and beautifully decorated. There we experienced the refinement West so often encountered in Yugoslavia, partly Turkish in origin.
- 68 West, *Black Lamb*, 253.
- 69 West, *Black Lamb*, 877.
- 70 West, *Black Lamb*, 896.

- 71 West, *Black Lamb*, 48.
72 West, *Black Lamb*, 67.
73 West, *Black Lamb*, 673.
74 West, *Black Lamb*, 1025.
75 West, *Black Lamb*, 57.
76 West, *Black Lamb*, 435.
77 West, *Black Lamb*, 439.
78 West, *Black Lamb*, 949.
79 West, *Thinking Reed*, 57.
80 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 196.
81 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 137.
82 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 219.
83 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 118-19.
84 West, *Strange Necessity*, 15.
85 West, *Black Lamb*, 69.
86 West, *Black Lamb*, 503.
87 West, *Black Lamb*, 409-10.
88 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 73.
89 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 236.
90 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 236.
91 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 253. Making up stories about animals is an important English tradition and, West suggests, a training ground for the use of the imagination. There is a similar account of this activity in the first chapter of C. S. Lewis's *Surprised by Joy*.
92 West, *Black Lamb*, 831.
93 West, *Strange Necessity*, 115.
94 West, *Black Lamb*, 831.
95 West, *Fountain Overflows*, 435.
96 West, *Black Lamb*, 747-48.

*On August 13, 1995 Divisions 10 and 39 of the American Psychological Association (Psychology of the Arts; Psychoanalytic Psychology) cosponsored a seminar devoted to Donald Kuspit's book **The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist** (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1993). Dr. Kuspit summarized the book, and Drs. Danielle Knafo and Will Wadlington commented on it. Here are their papers.*

Author's Comments on *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*

Donald Kuspit

The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist is an attempt to reevaluate avant-garde art in psychological terms, which has not been done in 20th century American art history. It tends to be naively positivistic when not ideologically driven, and in general resists the psychological understanding of art as a kind of degradation of its sublimity, however much, self-contradictorily, there is a fair amount of talk about the artist's "attitude" and Weltanschauung, usually derived from some notion of the Zeitgeist. It is worth noting that this repression of the psychological is, implicitly, an attempt to deny the validity of what for the 19th century German art historians who founded the field was the ultimate goal of art history: to articulate, with all the subtlety at one's command, the psychological meaning of art, or, more particularly, in the words of Heinrich Wölfflin, to be a "psychologist of style." For the majority of 20th century American art historians, this made art history a kind of Geistesgeschichte rather than empirical, documentary history—the only genuine kind of history for them.

From Max Dvorak's studies of medieval art through Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, which in a sense was the final fruit of the conception of art history as Geistesgeschichte—the conception played itself out, or rather ingeniously went underground in Erwin Panofsky's ostensibly empirical studies of Albrecht Dürer and Early Netherlandish Painting—art history was concerned to understand the "emotional values" of art, to again use Wölfflin's words. The indifference of American art historians to such values, or more broadly to the

psychological process in history—it is a general problem for historians, as Peter Gay's *Freud for Historians* makes clear—has ultimately to do with American society's elevation of social issues, and social reality, over psychological issues, and psychological reality, and above all the refusal to see any connection between them. In art history as in the society at large, there has been a reluctant and somewhat shallow, if at times loudmouthed yeasaying of emotional values.

They have been most acknowledged in studies of Italian mannerism, which was systematically analyzed for the first time, and upwardly re-evaluated in contrast to the Renaissance art it follows—it was regarded as overemotional and thus decadent in comparison to Renaissance art—and in studies of avant-garde art, which was recognized as involving not only a major change in formal values but, correlatively, the emotional values the new forms struggled to express, and often involuntarily did. Avant-garde art seemed to be mysteriously subjective—a regressive explosion of the irrational and unconscious—in contrast to Renaissance art, which was transparently objective, consciously social, and progressively rational. But the psychological language the art historians interested in mannerism and avant-garde art—one prominent art historian, Arnold Hauser, finds the root of the latter in the former—used to understand their emotional values and issues is remarkably impoverished not to say inadequate and banal. It was even less revelatory than—simplistic in comparison to—the terms the 19th century German art historians used, which were derived from philosophical psychology and the *Geistesgeschichte* investigations of such figures as Dilthey and Simmel.

What I am saying is that my work involves a regression to a *Geistesgeschichte* conception of art history, but involves a more updated—more theoretically sophisticated or at least elaborate psychology, namely, psychoanalysis—than that used by the 19th century German art historians and *Geistesgeschichte* theorists. More particularly, I have tried to use psychoanalytic concepts—no doubt in a fashion many of you will find too eclectic, although you will note a tendency to use object relational and self psychological ideas—but also to let the artists and their works speak for themselves, if interpreting what they say psychoanalytically. Thus, my basic thesis—that avant-garde art is therapeutic in intention, which is part of what gives it its authenticity, and motivates its stylistic innovations, while neo-avant-garde art has lost or rather forfeited that intention, which is part of why it is inauthentic—derives from the avant-garde artist's recurrent, stated fear of decadence and disintegration in the modern world, which is what leads him or her to search for self-renewal and rejuvenation through the innovations of avant-garde art, and from the neo-avant-garde artist's explicit acceptance of the decadence and disintegration of avant-garde art, involving its

institutionalization or socialization and academicization, and his or her determination to benefit from this ironically decadent institutionalization. Where the avant-garde artist feared for the relevance of art in the modern world of science and technology—did it have any place in such an enlightened, demystified world?—the neo-avant-garde artist realizes that art is an important, major way to fame and fortune, that is, social success in the most grandiose terms—one becomes a part of art history—which is partly why it is conceived of as the ultimate cure for all emotional ailments.

More broadly, I trace the emotional values underlying the shift in attitude from avant-garde to neo-avant-garde. I argue that the avant-garde artist's therapeutic intention is socially empathic, if also involving the notion of art as self-healing, while the neo-avant-garde artist is essentially narcissistic, for all his cynical social attunement. My book is not simply an intellectual exercise: I see a psychomoral lesson—indeed, a basic psychodynamic paradigm in modernity—in the shift of attitude from avant-garde to neo-avant-garde. I think the avant-garde artist discloses an ironical truth about the modern world: one's mental health in it is necessarily paradoxical—at least if it is health in a meaningful sense—in that it reflects one's way of dealing with one's recognition of the pathology of one's social situation, symptomatic of the larger social pathology of modernity. In modernity one becomes truly healthy emotionally by recognizing and making the best of one's abandonment by society. More particularly, mental health involves using a kind of artistic cunning to come to grips with and survive the anguished experience of existential groundlessness—the profound annihilation anxiety or disintegrative effect of recognizing that modern society gives one no reason for being and is indifferent to one's particular being, except as an instrument of its larger purpose. In modernity one's instrumental value replaces what traditionally was conceived of as one's transcendental value. To become aware of this, to experience and not deny it and the anxiety it arouses, which most people for good reason dare not do—it is the true existential shock of recognition in modern life—is to be awakened from one's naive, somnabulistic relationship to the modern lifeworld, and to try to respond to it critically and creatively, in order to survive in it. I may be idealizing them, but I think avant-garde artists were individuals who experienced such existential agony and awakening. Their innovations were attempts to critically and creatively cope with that disillusioning, debilitating experience symbolically—that is, to make new symbols (and thus new selves) of the experience and its "existential-artistic solution." In a sense, they make clear that whatever else it may be avant-garde art is a response to a destructive, psychotic experience of modern society, which itself is destructive and psychotic, as it were, in

that it does not recognize the inherent value of real individual life, but reduces it to an instrument of collective purpose.

Avant-garde art is the most important artistic development since the Renaissance, a genuine change of sensibility and reconceptualization and reorientation of art. We are now witnessing its demise, corruption, and exploitation—appropriation is the fashionable term, or ironic repetition (masking compulsive dependence on it)—in so-called neo-avant-garde or postmodern art. As I have suggested, the irreconcilable difference—stylistic and attitudinal—between them is emblematic of a basic, seemingly unresolvable (or at least ironically resolvable) split in our culture. The former stands to the latter as the seminal to the decadent, the insecure original to the contented copy, the creative to the pseudo-creative, anxious nonconformity to eager conformity, the search for integrity to cynical indifference to inner integrity as an impediment to social success, the true self to the false self.

According to Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg the avant-garde—the “famous break with tradition”—lasted for about a century: from, as Rosenberg wrote, the time when “Baudelaire invited fugitives from the too-small world of memory to come abroad for his voyage in search of the new” to the time when, as Greenberg said, it became institutionalized, that is, when art that was once considered unfit to be shown in a museum became the only kind of art one could see in it. As Greenberg said, when everyone is a revolutionary the revolution is over. Or, as Rosenberg put it, when a revolutionary “new look is ... a professional requirement,” the new is not only a tradition, but no longer meaningful. The avant-garde artist was a genuine “antenna of the race,” to use the felicitous phrase Ezra Pound used to describe the artist at his or her best. He or she was attuned to modern society, which was still fresh and surprising and not the unsurprising cliché it has become—Baudelaire thought that art’s purpose in modern society was to convey the surprise of the new, but today the new is no longer surprising but peculiarly stale. The unpredictable is predictably manufactured. The avant-garde has become a tyranny. That is, the avant-garde artist registered, in his or her own individuality and art, the pressures and threat to individuality and mental health a new, modern society presented. The avant-garde artist wanted to be of service to this society, if only by suggesting various ways of critically and creatively working it through. In contrast, the neo-avant-garde artist conceives of his or her relationship to society and the purpose of art in a completely different way. He or she is an ironical conformist, using art not only to become part of the establishment, but as an empty fetish—commodity. For the neo-avant-garde artist art is a cynical career rather than a desperate, uncertain calling.

I use various exemplary artists and their art to make my psychosocial

point. I deliberately cut across conventional stylistic categories. On the avant-garde side, I combine Picasso and Duchamp, Mondrian and Malevich, and Expressionism and Surrealism. Each double unit represents a different solution to the problem of being anxiously modern—the feeling that to be modern is to be inherently sick. Each avant-garde innovation is conceived of as a different therapeutic technique, if also articulating the pathology of modernity. On the neo-avant-garde—or pseudo-avant-garde—side, I use Warhol and the appropriationists, with Beuys as transitional between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde attitudes. My entire discussion is framed by a deconstruction of the modernist myth of the artist as having unique power of perception, unique spontaneity, and as a revolutionary transmuted of negative into positive values. I show the ironies of the myth, and debunk it, even as I argue that it was the sustaining myth of the avant-garde artist.

I regard Picasso as instituting perceptual distortions and Duchamp as instituting conceptual distortions—a deliberate destructive use of deformation or “negation” or contradiction for subliminally constructive, therapeutic purpose. The shock value of their work—its frequently black humor—had paradoxical proto-curative effect, for it shook one out of one’s conventional assumptions about perception and the possibilities of art, making one critically conscious of both and the critical consciousness invested in both at their best.

I argue that in Mondrian and Malevich, on the one hand, and Expressionism and Surrealism, on the other, avant-garde art becomes explicitly therapeutic in purpose. The former represent what I call the geometrical cure, the latter what I call the expressive cure. They are opposite in character, but in both cases cure involves contact with the primordial—in the first case primordial detachment or transcendence, represented by abstract geometry, and in the second case free, spontaneous expression of primordial emotions, whether by means of automatist gestures or dream images. Cure, in other words, is effected by contact with and articulation of what is fundamental in existence—the absolutely “higher” and absolutely “lower” are equally fundamental—which is understood as liberating one from the unessential pathology of the modern, everyday lifeworld, with its banality and indifference to individual existence.

The tenor of my argument changes as I move to Warhol, who signals the end of the avant-garde attitude and the beginning of the neo-avant-garde attitude. Warhol is explicitly indifferent to therapy—he in fact hates and dismisses it, suggesting watching television as an alternative—and concerned only to become famous, which he achieved. I examine the narcissistic effect of this wish and achievement on Warhol’s life and art—it is largely devoted to portraiture of famous people—as well as the

ironical emptiness involved in fame and narcissism. I also show that his art represents an abandonment of avant-garde innovation and a return to banal, everyday means of representation, confirming the social status quo of perception, "art," and importance or value. As such, it is postmodern—nontransformative or minimally transformative. Overinvested in fame, Warhol becomes a non-person, that is, a machine, as he himself said, no doubt unaware of Tausk's influencing machine and von Bertalanffy's idea that a conflict basic to modernity is between the closed system robot and open system organic model of human being. (He thinks the former is demonstrably false.) I also distinguish between fame and celebrity, arguing that the latter, which is dominant in the everyday postmodern lifeworld, has bankrupted or at least corrupted the meaning of the former.

I then discuss Beuys, whom I regard as transitional between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde attitudes, and between a modern and a postmodern lifeworld. I conceive of him as a tragic victim of his own therapeutic ambition. His art is addressed to a postwar German audience, which it hopes to heal—I argue that all his art, which is essentially a performance art, symbolizes the healing process—but it increasingly tries to reach its audience by using methods, objects, and images derived from the everyday modern lifeworld, as well as by manipulating his own position as a celebrity. As his art became more accessible, it loses its therapeutic power. That is, Beuys begins as an avant-garde artist and ends as a postmodern artist—begins, as he himself said, as a shaman, and ends, as he was aware others thought of him as being, a showman. He was caught on the horns of a dilemma, realizing that in both the modern instrumental and postmodern cynical, all too knowing worlds a shaman with therapeutic intention could not help but be regarded as just another kind of manipulative showman and celebrity. "Trickster" has an unresolvable ambiguous meaning in both modernity and postmodernity.

Finally, I conclude by examining appropriationism, which has become, wittingly or unwittingly, the dominant mode of artmaking in postmodernity. Quoting another artist, especially an avant-garde one, and in the process denying his or her therapeutic intention, trivializing his or her creativity and innovations, and supposedly deconstructing his or her art—showing that it means the opposite of what it was thought to say, and turning it into an ironical cliché or shadow of itself—has become *de rigueur* in many quarters, a supposedly major conceptual achievement. I analyze appropriationism as the ultimate cynicism about art in general and avant-garde art in particular, as well as about creativity, and distinguish appropriation from influence, finally arguing that appropriationism signals a creative deadend—a feeling of the futility of creativity to effect any change in the lifeworld, and thus a failure. In appropriationism critical consciousness capitulates to the status quo,

ironically but also smugly. Appropriationist art is neither transcendently abstract nor spontaneously expressive, nor is it addressed or of service to anyone, but simply confirms the status quo of media consciousness, there for the asking by everyone. Appropriationist art is a kind of historicist spectacle or show with little or nothing to tell—the ultimately decadent, indifferent art, blending almost seamlessly into the pathological Potemkin Village media facade our culture increasingly depends upon for its “self”-consciousness. I do suggest that certain appropriationists who work in a comic way offer what seems to be a critical consciousness of art’s and society’s tragicomic situation, but I am not sure I am right, although I believe that comedy is ultimately more therapeutically effective than tragedy. As Freud suggested, humor is a sign of ego strength, and it was the strength of the individual ego in the face of a society that weakened it through its indifference and failure to be an existentially facilitating environment, and that they thought would sooner or later destroy itself, that was of basic concern to the first avant-garde artists. They wanted to save people from society, not society from itself, however much some of them fantasied a social utopia in which reason was triumphant. Thus, the comic appropriationists may be the new avant-gardists, if that idea makes any real sense these days.

I think there is a larger lesson to be learned from the change from avant-garde, modernist to neo-avant-garde, postmodernist art—a lesson about creativity: it is not a guarantee of criticality, and criticality is ultimately more important in life than creativity. Criticality is a major ego function, and the only source of adult autonomy and independence, whereas any dependent child, with a limited ego, can be creative. T.S. Eliot thought that genuine creativity was an act of criticality, but that was a modernist idea that is no longer necessarily—indeed, hardly—the case in postmodernity. One of the modernist claims—articulated particularly by Duchamp and Beuys—is that everyone can be creative. That is, creativity is not the prerogative of the artist, but a potential of every human being, even if people who are actually creative are regarded as superior to those who are not. But what postmodernist art makes clear is that the creative everyman does not necessarily use his creativity critically. The issue is not simply to be creative, but to use one’s creativity in the service of critical consciousness. One cannot assume that it automatically will be. Indeed, I want to argue that it is harder to develop critical consciousness—I think, incidentally, that it is what psychoanalysis does, with respect to psychic but also social reality—than to be creative. Indeed, creativity is all over the place these days, if to no critical purpose.

Now the therapeutic use of creativity I talk about in my book is a genuinely critical use of it, while its ironical use in appropriation art is

not, however supposedly critical it is of the art appropriated. In fact, appropriation art is an ironical demonstration of the universal acceptance of the modernist idea of universal creativity: it suggests that anyone can appropriate any creative product and call himself or herself creative, by ironical identification. In appropriation art creativity has become a social spectacle—which hardly means it furthers critical consciousness of society, and thus helps the individual survive in it.

When Sherrie Levine appropriates the work of male artists, from Walker Evans to Duchamp, in her so-called conceptual art, she is supposedly calling attention to the fact that they are all male artists, and that their fame in part—I think, for Levine, in large part—depends on their maleness. Certainly, for her—and she is no doubt right—males are given more of a social chance to grab the brass ring of fame than females. She is also saying that she, as a woman, has as much right to make art—and be famous—as they do. But she is indifferent to the critical character of the works of art—photographs in Evans's case, conceptual objects in Duchamp's case—that brought them fame. For her, they are simply creative trophies. That is, her "argument" is implicitly reductionist, for it ignores, and is perhaps blind to, the particulars of their fame. She completely overlooks the fact that it is due to the critical consciousness their works embody; it is not simply a tribute to their creativity. Does this mean that males have more critical consciousness than females? Levine, in her labored effort to be critical—to develop, in however stilted a form, a critical consciousness of Evans and Duchamp—doesn't say.

Anybody can be creative and make interesting photographs or objects that would engage somebody or other, but not many people can make works of art that can make one critically conscious of the world. Levine rather precariously balances the creativity of Evans and Duchamp on the fact of their masculinity. Thus she is critically conscious to an extent—a very limited extent—just as the appropriation she uses to establish her critical credentials is a limited kind of creativity. Largely through redundancy—the repetitive appropriation of different artists who have only their maleness in common—she forces a new perspective on their art, supposedly the true perspective. Never mind that this falsely unites very different artists, indeed, stupidly blurs the great differences between them. But my point is that creativity always becomes trivial and presumptuous when it does not serve truly critical consciousness. This is the problem with creativity in postmodernity: it serves no important psychosocial purpose, that is, does not address any developmental-existential issue that has become a particular problem in the lifeworld, and it tends to blow up a half-truth into a whole truth. Finally, postmodernist creativity is a social fetish and self-fetishizing spectacle. The postmodernist artist says "Look at me, look at what novel stunts I can do, especially with old artistic

props.” In contrast, the modernist artist said “Look at this difficult psychosocial issue through the lens of my art, which I hope clarifies it, and illuminates the general problem of living in the modern world.”

What do I mean by critical consciousness? There are a number of ways it has been understood. Adorno’s is perhaps the most intellectually trenchant. Critical consciousness is not the “duplication of reality by means of thought,” such as occurs in positivistic science. Rather, critical consciousness of a psychosocial phenomenon results when it is viewed “from a perspective of true interest—the perspective of a free society, a just state, and the full development of the human being. Whoever does not measure human beings by what they themselves are supposed to signify will not merely see superficially but falsely.” To this I would add Baudelaire’s idea of art criticism as passionate, partisan, and political advocacy of art within the widest possible horizon of understanding. Critical consciousness involves advocacy—of a free society, just state, full development of the human being, and the art that furthers them, if only by pointing to the unfreedom, injustice, and blocked development that exist in society, the state, and the individual. But critical consciousness also means bringing to bear on a particular human being or human product every possible perspective that might be of use in understanding its complexity.

But this is too abstract and intellectual—insufficiently intimate and immediate. I think Clement Greenberg’s ironical conception of Kafka’s writing offers a more down-to-earth understanding of critical consciousness. Greenberg thinks that “the frustrations of his art” can be explained by the existential dilemma it implicitly addresses. “Might not all art,” Greenberg asks, “begin to appear falsifying” of reality “to the Jew who looked closely enough? And when did a Jew ever come to terms with art without ever falsifying himself somehow? Does not art always make one forget what is literally happening to oneself as a certain person in a certain world? And might not the investigation of what is literally happening to oneself remain the most human, therefore, the most serious ... of all possible activities? Kafka’s Jewish self asks this question, and in asking it, tests the limits of art.” Greenberg implies that what is of the utmost importance in life, particularly for a Jew in a Christian world that is not always friendly to him, is to be aware of what is literally happening to one, in all one’s particularity, in the particular world one lives in. This is really quite hard to do, but one must do it to survive and develop oneself despite one’s vulnerability to the world. To do it is to humanize oneself, which art, which is ultimately unrealistic according to Greenberg, cannot do.

I think Greenberg’s concept of unflinchingly facing and understanding what is literally happening to oneself as a certain person in a certain

world is equivalent to Harry Stack Sullivan's idea that the therapeutic task is to become aware—as comprehensively and deeply as possible—of what is going on around and in one. Such awareness is critical consciousness at its most existential: critical consciousness is consciousness of society and its effect on one in order to survive and hold one's own in it, and to develop one's being in all its humanness despite society's inhumanity. (However, I think the Marxist idea that one can never be fully human—perhaps never afford to be, unless one wants to be a saintly martyr—in an unfree society and unjust state is correct.) Greenberg thinks that art is inimical to such doggedly realistic awareness, which is motivated not only by the will to survive in an alien, unfacilitative world, but to overcome the self-alienation it induces in one. I think he is wrong because he overgeneralizes: avant-garde art, as I have argued in my book, involved a profound awareness of the wound the modern world inflicts on the individual, and attempted to heal it. Avant-garde art was an effort to reaffirm as inherently valuable the individual self modern society insidiously negates by conceiving in collective instrumental terms. Avant-garde art was thus a mode of critical consciousness. It in effect acknowledges that we are all Jews in the modern world—a world which, as Adorno said, is becoming more and more like a concentration camp. Or, as Beuys said, the spirit, if not the letter, of Auschwitz is alive and well—and, in literal fact, versions of Auschwitz continue to exist in the modern world, and in fact seem inherent to modernity.

But I think Greenberg is right about postmodernist art, which he did not address: it does not make us aware of what is literally happening to us in postmodern society. Rather, to use Adorno's idea, it duplicates the postmodern world through art. It thinks duplication is ironical, but it is reifying. More particularly, postmodernist art reifies the facile creativity that exists everywhere in the postmodern world, and seems to me its essence. Postmodernist art does not offer a critical perspective on this facile creativity, that is, it does not ask what its social function is and how it stands in relation to the idea of a free society and just state in which human beings can develop. Postmodernist art is in fact indifferent to all three: it does not believe there is any point in striving for anything so unrealistic. Its indifference to such striving is typical of the postmodern world. Thus, postmodernist art duplicates—confirms the status quo—of the postmodern world more than it knows. It confirms unfreedom, injustice, and blocked humanity by fetishizing the facile creativity that exists in the postmodern world into a higher social business, that is, a pseudo-high art. In fact, the issue of postmodernist art is whether show business can foster critical consciousness despite itself. Can a paradox be achieved: can show business—the business of spectacle—which has

control of public consciousness in the postmodern world, and militantly simplifies or one-dimensionalizes consciousness, be used to critical effect?

Simply put, the lesson in the shift from a modernist to a postmodernist attitude is that advocacy of creativity as such is uncritical and naive, even dangerous to mental health. Creativity is not significant in itself, at least no more than any other innate potential, but only insofar as it serves a critical purpose. In therapeutic terms, therapy has to develop critical consciousness in the patient, not release the patient's innate creativity. Creativity can inhibit critical consciousness, especially when creativity is celebrated as the be-all and end-all of life. It is a false salvation, unlike critical consciousness, which is not innate but has to be learned, for it is reason at its most dialectically cunning.

Discussion: *The Cult of the Avant Garde Artist* by Donald Kuspit

Danielle Knafo

I am very pleased to have been invited to discuss the work of Professor Kuspit. I have admired Kuspit's work for years as he is one of the only art critics or art historians who writes about art with profound insight and psychological knowledge. I would like to discuss Professor Kuspit's paper by illustrating some of his major points by focusing on two artists on whom I've written: Egon Schiele and Cindy Sherman. I will refer to Egon Schiele as an example of the avant-garde-artist and Cindy Sherman as an illustration of the neo-avant-garde or postmodern artist.

Egon Schiele

Kuspit states that the basic contention of his book is that "the avant-garde artist makes his art to restore himself to health, an intention that not only informs his art but influences his public's perception of that art (p. 28)." As if written to illustrate Kuspit's point, in my book, *Egon Schiele: A Self in Creation*, I tried to show how Schiele's art was a reaction to modern life in fin-de-siècle Vienna and that he employed self-portraiture as a means of self-healing and transformation. Schiele's self-portraits were focal points for restitutive efforts aimed at objectifying and mastering his identity problems. Through his confessional self-portraits, he laid his life out on the canvas and embarked on an analysis of his personality as deep and ruthless as Freud's analysis of himself. When viewed chronologically, Schiele's self-portraits reveal his transformation from a solitary adolescent tormented by his sexuality and morbid fears of body damage and psychic dissolution into a man with a more integrated character structure. An unfolding of his personality as well as an increasing maturity in his work become evident over time. I further argue that viewers of Schiele's art identify and empathize with his search for order and wholeness, thus, as Kuspit states, his art's therapeutic effect is not reserved for him alone.

Schiele used his art to come to terms with a self that had been damaged by bereavement over the death of his father, a man who died completely insane from syphilis. Schiele portrayed his sexual conflicts as

he tried to establish an identity separate from that of his father. His art also demonstrates the effort to recreate his early experiences with his mother. Because his mother could not adequately provide for his needs, Schiele felt abandoned by her and experienced her as psychically dead. He depicted this struggle for a differentiated self in his art and offered himself that which his mother could not: a mirror image.

Kuspit claims that "avant-garde art ... involves a wish to regress to the primordial beginning to escape the decadent end (p. 29)." He adds that "avant-garde art's melting forms are simultaneously symptoms of disintegration anxiety and indications of a process of creative reintegration of the self (p. 29)." Schiele explained his need for ugly art in similar terms. He said: "I want to tear into myself, so that I may create again a new thing which I, in spite of myself, have perceived." In this extraordinarily complex statement, Schiele depicts the makings of the creative process. At least for him the artist must first destroy something in himself (in Kuspit's words, return to the primordial) to discover something previously unknown to him. Creativity, like psychoanalysis, involves destruction (of defenses), rediscovery (of the past), and reconstruction (of the personality). And like a patient in psychoanalysis, Schiele deconstructed his self-image in order to reconstruct it anew. He underwent a regression that in the end worked toward reintegration and employed his art as a corrective emotional experience whereupon he repeatedly nurtured, and ultimately repaired a battered psyche.

As spectators, we are repulsed by the emotional turmoil expressed in his art and, at the same time, attracted to the release of powerful feelings. Through his art, we can identify with and vent emotions that we were not even conscious of having without needing to take direct responsibility for them. We can project ourselves onto his image and empathize with his anguish and personal trauma as well as his search for order and unity. Thus we are not mere voyeurs happening upon the artist's private world, intruders on his isolated *cri de coeur*. Rather, we share in his creative authority as he transforms his image before our very eyes and watch with excitement and suspense as he fits together the lost pieces of a puzzle to create a new self.

Cindy Sherman

Kuspit discusses neo-avant-garde art in parasitic terms: "The neo-avant-garde artist lives among the ruins of the avant-garde past. He preys on it like a cynical vulture on a rotten carcass (p. 16)." The neo-avant-garde artist, according to Kuspit, reverses and undoes what the avant-garde artist accomplished or strove for: affirmation of life and self, will to power, originality, and most importantly, healing. Employing simulation

and appropriation as major strategies, neo-avant-garde artists seek fame as compensations and substitutes for therapeutic failure.

Cindy Sherman, whom I've recently written about, illustrates Kuspit's thesis regarding the neo-avant-garde artist on several (not all) points. She is among today's most successful contemporary artists. Her oeuvre consists primarily of photographs of herself in a variety of guises and has provoked questions of alienation, female identity, disguise, and transformation in a postmodern age. Whereas Schiele removed layer upon layer of pretense and defense to reveal a self in its raw starkness, Sherman puts on endless masks and disguises so that her real self becomes lost amid an array of the false selves she presents, mockeries of a self that in the end reveal an empty underside. One message of Sherman's art is concerned with the fictitious nature of the self. And it follows that if there is no such thing as a real self, perhaps no healing is necessary or even possible.

I will briefly discuss two phases in Sherman's work to illustrate some of Kuspit's ideas about postmodern art. In the late seventies, Sherman became known for a series of black-and-white "film stills" in which she photographed herself in a variety of 1940's and 50's Hollywood B movie situations, particularly of the film noir (Hitchcockian) genre. Alternately resembling a film starlet (Marilyn Monroe or Sophia Loren look-alikes), a worn-out housewife, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, a woman on the run or waiting in anticipation, she dressed up and posed as one stereotyped female after another. Erikson (1950) demonstrated that the anxiety of modern times often leads to the taking on of "pseudo-identities" like that of Ms. Sherman. Postmodernist and feminist interpretations of her work address her exchangeable feminine guises in terms of the lack of a set female identity in modern life. While this may be true, Sherman's dressing up as different types of women also reveals a game of playing with identity issues by manipulating one's exterior much the way children do when they dress up in their parents' clothing. Trying to bypass the process of maturation, they hold onto the wishful and magical thinking that they can *be* the parent without having to *become like* him or her (A. Reich). A fundamental confusion therefore exists between superficial imitation of the parent and real identification. Thus, rather than get closer to a real self, Sherman only reinforces alienation from the self by revealing that exchangeable exteriors and environments are not sufficient to fill a vacuous interior. Kuspit's statement that "we are all Jews" in a world that, according to Adorno, comes closer to resembling a concentration camp recalls Sherman's photographs, all of which are assigned serial numbers rather than titles. Akin to the personal identification numbers tattooed on victims of Nazi concentration camps, Sherman's figures are similarly denied true identity, definition, or belonging.

Sherman's talent for costume and makeup, and her appropriation and mockery of previous art styles climaxed in her "history portrait" series which she produced in the late 1980's. Just as the film stills of the 1970s did not refer to specific films, the portraits of this phase merely recall master painters and portraits. Both series exemplify what Kuspit calls the *déjà vu* quality that exists in much postmodern art. Thus, Goya, Ingres, Titian, Raphael, Holbein, David, and others are suggested but never identically copied. Jarring the spectator's recall of portrait masterpieces from the past in her game of cultural charades, Sherman reincarnates herself as a madonna, a Renaissance prince, a scholar, a balded monk, a hairy-chested Romantic rake, a lord, a lady, and more. No longer trying to convince the viewer that the clothes she wears are her own, she allows the seams to show; disguise is even flaunted rather than merely implied. The illusion is recognized as such. Sherman does not hesitate to reveal the overlapping lines of a false nose or oversized prosthetic breasts. Mocking and ridiculing masterpieces of the past in this way, Sherman illustrates Kuspit's point on appropriation art. The inspiration and creative value of Sherman's master portraits is denied by the matter-of-factness and nonchalance with which she appropriates and makes fun of them. In Kuspit's words, Sherman is, in a sense, "dancing on the graves" of these old master artists.

One point on which I have a somewhat different view than Kuspit has to do with his claim that postmodern artists have eschewed the therapeutic as a motivation or aim for their art. I agree that their attempts at the therapeutic may seem quite antitherapeutic at times, nevertheless, I believe this often has more to do with the profound difficulty of being therapeutic in the postmodern era than a true reflection of the lack of motive for the therapeutic. Like severe narcissistic or borderline patients, who through their acting out behaviors and resistant defenses, may appear on the surface as though they don't want treatment, in actuality, are expressing their need for help the only way they know how.

Although they went about it in different ways, both Egon Schiele and Cindy Sherman searched in their artistic mirrors for answers to a series of questions aimed at knowing and healing the self.

The Death of Art: Review of Donald Kuspit's *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*

Will Wadlington

As an artist and psychologist, I have certain expectations for the art criticism I read, expectations that are not easily fulfilled. I look for writing about art that enhances my experience of art works and that deepens my understanding of artists, without doing injustice to either. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to do injustice to both. At its worst, art criticism can unwittingly reduce the experience of the sublime and beautiful to mere perception, and creativity to ordinary behavior. It can also carry interpretation too far, committing deterministic reductions and "intentional fallacies" and risking either romanticizing or pathologizing the artist. (Positivism and Freudianism have both taken a toll on our understanding of modern art.) What I need, therefore, is balanced art criticism, that is both sensitive to the subtle phenomenology of aesthetic perception and that leaves the psyche of the artist intact.

Good art criticism also meets more general needs. It helps us understand why we like what we like. It gives meaning to our preferences and interests. Moreover, it puts things in context; It creates an historical and cultural backdrop for what we see. It also allows us to see more, or more clearly. It reveals a previously hidden order of perception or a new perspective, orienting us toward experiences in the world—and in ourselves—that we might otherwise miss.

The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), by Donald Kuspit, meets many of these needs. It does so because Kuspit has successfully integrated aesthetic and psychological perspectives. The book makes explicit Kuspit's theory of twentieth-century art, a theory evolved over several decades during which his reviews of hundreds of works of visual art have appeared in major art magazines and in *Art Criticism*, the journal he edits.

Donald Kuspit is an art historian, philosopher, and art critic who is trained in psychoanalysis and well-versed in post-psychoanalytic thought. He employs concepts from Freud, Fromm, Winnicott, and Kohut along with his own contributions to psychobiography and psychodynamic personality theory, to explicate the shift that has taken place from avant-

garde to postmodern art. His approach to criticism focuses the same kind of attention on visual art and artists that has long been given to literature and writers. It brings together a cultural critique of Capitalism and of Postmodernism with a penetrating psychological analysis of the cult phenomena that pervade the contemporary art world. Kuspit is keenly aware of the narcissistic dangers that abound for artists who attempt to shape an identity while living in a culture that values celebrity over authenticity, and surface over substance.

Kuspit's writing is rich and expressive. His method is more aligned with what Baudelaire called "poetic" as opposed to "mathematical" criticism. It is criticism that attends to what the artist *evokes*—not just what his or her work *signifies*. Because he is as comfortable in the art world of Soho as he is in the academic settings of Cornell University and The State University of New York at Stony Brook where he teaches, his style is both hip and scholarly.

Kuspit begins with the assumption that most avant-garde art has a therapeutic intention. He further posits that

neo-avant-garde, or postmodern art at once mocks and denies the possibility of therapeutic change. As such, it accommodates the status quo of capitalist society, in which fame and fortune count above everything else. Stripping avant-garde art of its missionary, therapeutic intention, neo-avant-garde art converts it into a cliché of creative novelty or ironic value for its fashionable look. Moreover, it destroys the precarious balance of artistic narcissism and social empathy that characterizes modern art, tilting it cynically toward the former.²

Kuspit thus attempts to make sense of contemporary art that broadcasts an image of the self as drained and depleted. He also gives voice to the widely-felt fear that, as the twentieth-century ends, visual art is dead.

Through seven densely-packed chapters, Kuspit uses philosophic language interchangeably with the terminology of contemporary psychodynamic personality theory. Thus "object" may refer at one time to the perceptual object, at another to the aesthetic object, and at another to a referent in the self-object relationship. This technique is not confounding; instead, it unifies the theoretical strands of his argument, especially in Kuspit's retelling of the myth of the modern artist.

Artists, according to the myth, are special: they seem possessed of genius by virtue of their unique perceptual powers. Kuspit invokes Whitehead's notion of "presentational immediacy" to describe the direct perception attained by the artist and presented to the viewer. Avant-garde artists are also distinguished by a deeper commitment to authentic being

and original action. They are "initiated into the mysteries of primordial experience,"³ and because of greater freedom and spontaneity, like that found in Fromm's "integrated personality" or Winnicott's "True Self," able to "quintessentialize"⁴ reality for us and bring us to fuller experience and a more meaningful life. According to the myth, the artist can overcome the fundamental ambivalence each individual feels about intimacy and connection to achieve what Kuspit calls "the ultimate object relationship—the most intense engagement possible with an object."⁵ Although Kuspit doesn't say so, the original ambivalence undoubtedly arises from the anticipation of object-loss, to which the artist is exquisitely sensitive. Avant-garde artists are individuals who "regress to the primordial beginning to escape the decadent end."⁶ Kuspit equates the "saying yes to life" of the Nietzschean Overman with Kohut's "healthy nuclear self" in the individual who is able to overcome "disintegration anxiety."⁷ Postmodernism pits the artist not only against his or her own mortality but against the demise and death of art itself. Kuspit's book addresses the important question of whether any artist these days can survive the disintegrative forces of commodity culture in which art's only value is monetary and the artist's personality is grist for the mill of celebrity and fame.

The times we live in have become decadent, and an intensely self-conscious art reflects this reality. This is an age of insincerity, vicarious life, and derivative truth. Nietzsche, the first modernist, foresaw this a hundred years ago. He told of it in a myth that has subsequently been retold as the myth of the modern individual as culture-hero and artist: Art is therapeutic and the artist is a healer who overcomes alienation and depletion to create works that return power and the will to live to individuals living in a decaying, barbaric, and spiritually-bereft culture.

Kuspit has anticipated the need for an approach to art criticism that acknowledges the profound psychological impact of this myth on artists. Much of the psychobiography of the past has called attention to unconscious and regressive aspects of creativity, viewing art as compensatory in nature, or at best, as the product of the sublimated desires of the artist. It has ignored the artist's explicit, conscious, and culturally-conspicuous motives. Since Freud, with his well-known ambivalence toward the artist and antipathy toward visual art, much psychological criticism has over-interpreted the artist's motives, often ignoring the art work itself and cultural factors influencing the way it looks. There is a conspicuous need for an approach which accounts for the complex interactions of artistic style and personality dynamics among current artists, which provides a means of distinguishing healthy from pathological motives behind artistic expressions, and which enhances the discrimination of good from bad art. Kuspit's book shows that such an

approach is possible.

Kuspit's method is microcosmic. He defines styles by reference to characteristic works by exemplary artists: Malevich's squares, Duchamp's readymades, Warhol's portraits. He also uses the art-historian's method of comparing and contrasting to flash simultaneous slides of important art works or to juxtapose artists' statements. Kuspit consistently allows the artist to speak for him- or herself and, where possible, he allows the work to speak for itself. There is no excess interpretation.

A chapter on Picasso and Duchamp (strange bedfellows!) shows that they share a common interest in "distortion" and "provocation"⁸ as a way to evoke an earlier, primordial state of the object. Just as Picasso's cubist deformations of things stir emotions related to the real objects they distort, so do Duchamp's acts of negation ultimately affirm the primordial objects (art historical and personal) they deny.

Mondrian and Malevich are similarly joined stylistically. Kuspit sees both as exemplifying the pursuit of principle in seeking something eternal in geometric form. Both artists attempt to find a way beyond the transience of the object to the realm of the universal. Mondrian's way is a "dialectical geometry"⁹ and Malevich's approach is totalistic, but both attempt and fail at a purification of art and an objective relation to (rather than a relationship with) the object. Kandinsky uses geometry but steers his art toward a spiritual goal, the achievement of "subtler emotions, as yet unnamed."¹⁰ But art's desire for innocent vision and spontaneous expression is repeatedly thwarted in an entropic, decaying culture.

For Kuspit, Warhol is the beginning of the end of the belief in art's healing power. Warhol's aspiration to "be a machine" is a denial of the will to originality, and therefore of the assumption that an original, primordial, state exists. A strength of the book is that Kuspit neither reduces the complexity of the art scene to economic behavior, nor romanticizes the artist as a hapless victim of Capitalism.

Kuspit's chapter on German artist Joseph Beuys is especially important. Beuys is difficult to understand. His oeuvre consists of highly personal fetishistic objects such as a felt suit and various sculptural forms made of animal fat, as well as drawings and documents concerned with the artist's philosophically- and politically-charged performances and public gestures. (In the early 70's, for example, Beuys squared off with a wild coyote in a New York gallery for three days.) The enigmatic quality of Beuys' works is compelling even without knowing the complex personal associations of the artist. (A series of honeybee drawings, for instance, relate to Beuys' process theory of sculpture as continuous and transformational—chaos is transformed into order and liquid to solid to liquid again in the making of the honeycomb.) But the drawings stand alone, as do many of the artist's works. Beuys, who Kuspit regards as a transitional

figure between avant-garde and postmodern art, attempted to be more a "shaman" than a "showman," but he was finally the victim of his dependency on an audience, on becoming a guru to the cult that formed around him. He also was the tragic hero, the "physician manqué" in a failed effort to heal a society that perseverates in believing that it is "fundamentally sound" and denying the need for a cure. Although art, like that of Beuys, has the power to put the audience in touch with previously unfelt emotions, "in general the artist is more likely to solve his own narcissistic problems by making art than to solve any of the audience's emotional problems."¹¹ Beuys fails because he takes himself too seriously and, therefore, too tragically. He is not enough of a clown, who can enchant through naïveté and foolishness, the only antidote for the hyper-consciousness and arch-seriousness that characterize contemporary social life.

The visual art of the twentieth century is multiform and diverse. The boundaries between painting, sculpture, gesture, and performance, for example, are quite fluid. There is no "essence" of twentieth century art. It is a proliferation of styles and a profusion of objects, the same object having different meanings in different contexts. Only from the vantage point of the approaching millennium, does contemporary art become comprehensible. As Kuspit shows, Postmodernism itself is a mocking explication of what was implicit in modernist art.

Kuspit understands Postmodernism as a narcissistic style: It speaks "only to and about art, rather than to the self and its needs and experience."¹² In a society that prefers mirroring to confrontation, the artist has become a "stylish symbol,"¹³ a surface instead of a self. Because who one is has become more important than what one does, the postmodern artist "thinks he is significant simply because he is an artist."¹⁴

The commercialization and banalization of art points to a breakdown of boundaries between things in the world, and the cult of the artist reveals a loss of depth and creative will in the individual. Kuspit sees postmodernist art as both a defense against decadence (and death) and as a form of decadence itself. Postmodernism promotes what Modernism tried to avoid: cynicism, humorlessness, and despair.

Kuspit's interest repeatedly comes back to the primordial as representing an earlier, purer state. What is therapeutic is always a return from a jaded, cynical attitude to a feeling of being alive and having desires. But the way back is blocked at times by art itself. Postmodernist appropriationism (which Kuspit traces from Duchamp to Warhol to the present) is self-stultifying. "Art today," says Kuspit, "has reached a new extreme of decadence, in which it dialectically incorporates all the past signs of artistic rejuvenation—the dregs of old and already won struggles

for reintegration, reinvigoration—while denying their contemporary possibility.”¹⁵ Appropriationist works like Sherrie Levine’s copies of modernist paintings and photographs, and other such works in which the copy is more important than the original, reveal the postmodernist’s “disbelief in primordially and its transmutative power.”¹⁶ Postmodernism is an aesthetic impasse. It is ultimately the death of art by self-incorporation, the loss of the wish for rejuvenation, and the end of the myth of the artist as healer.

In *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, Kuspit sees beyond the postmodernist insincerity about the self and the mockery of history (and therefore primordially) to an important irony, that despite its desire to invert art history and to subvert meaning in art, Postmodernism affirms by negating, and thus ultimately discloses artistic values implicit in Modernism: originality, authentic expression, and good faith. By maintaining ironic detachment, Kuspit is able to see beyond appropriation to what is worth appropriating and beyond mockery to what is worth mocking.

When insincerity is the norm it is hard to know how to take things. There is risk of failure inherent in criticism that is either too earnest or too easily deceived. Kuspit has avoided that risk, and without instilling false hope and the wish for a post-Postmodernism, he has shown that healthy detachment about twentieth-century art is at least possible.

Notes

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- 1 Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846,” in *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic*, eds. L. Hyslop and F. Hyslop, Jr. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), 38.
- 2 Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) iii.
- 3 Kuspit, 5.
- 4 Kuspit, 8.
- 5 Kuspit, 12.
- 6 Kuspit, 29.
- 7 Kuspit.
- 8 Kuspit, 31.
- 9 Kuspit, 51.
- 10 Kuspit, 53.
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- 12 Kuspit., 13.
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- 15 Kuspit, 13.
- 16 Kuspit, 15.

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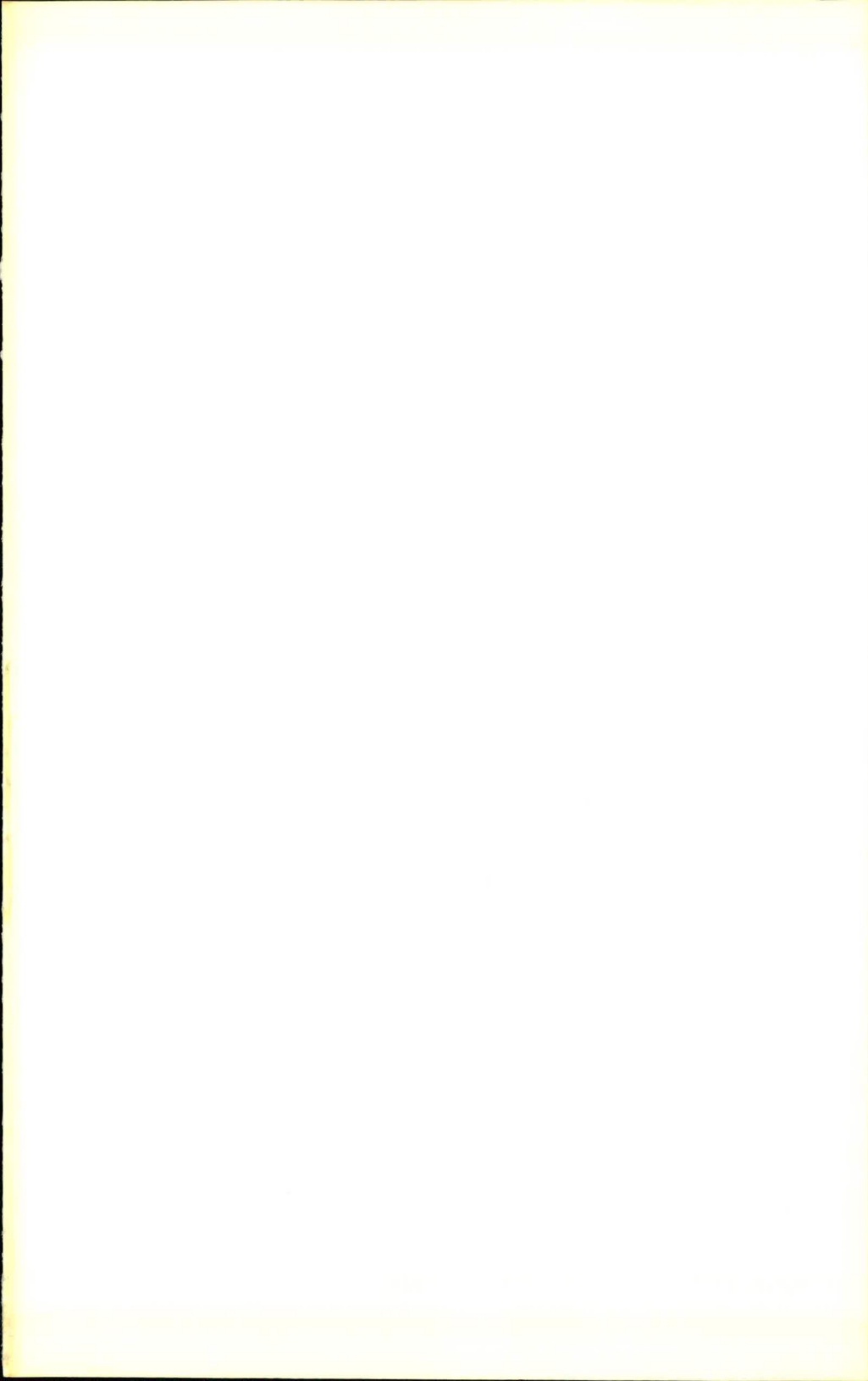
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