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Table of Contents

The Dead Mother in Käthe Kollwitz

Danielle Knafo

> The dead mother, contrary to what one might think, is a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care.
>
> — André Green

Hans Kollwitz, Käthe Kollwitz's older son, asserts that he repeatedly asked his mother to write her memoirs. He claims he did this because she was typically uncommunicative about her life, even to her children. When Kollwitz finally complied to his request, the first memory of which she writes with strong sensory intensity significantly involves a dead girl who was washed onto the raft in a neighboring yard. Recalling Freud's concept of the screen memory, the importance of this early impression cannot be underestimated. Although the screen memory may have some basis in reality, its primary function lies in its power to organize and symbolize a number of unconscious impressions.[1] Indeed, the dead child is probably the central organizing theme in Kollwitz's life and art. Three of her siblings died. Her mother became distant and reserved as a result of these deaths — unavailable — an emotionally "dead mother." And Kollwitz became the dead mother/child who internalized and identified with both her dead mother and her dead siblings. Later, she was forced to cope with the deaths of her own son and grandson which intensified these early identifications. In fact, hers was a lifelong struggle with the forces of death. Although she frequently succumbed to depression, she also strove to breathe life back into the dead who surrounded her as well as the deadened part of herself. Kollwitz's success in this struggle is marked by her ability to give birth to images of destruction and death, thereby reducing their unconscious power and rendering them immortal.

Twentieth century art can be characterized by a growing disbelief in objective reality coupled with an increased emphasis on inner experience.[2] At the turn of the century, the Expressionist Movement liberated the artist from the nineteenth-century notion that art was to represent reality. Since the pri-

mary interest of Expressionist artists, such as Egon Schiele, E.L. Kirchner, and Oskar Kokoshka, was the depiction of internal life, it is not surprising that this movement brought with it a proliferation of portraiture, or that the most psychological of art forms, the self-portrait, became popular in this era. Whereas self-portraiture had always been a known form of artistic expression, from Rembrandt to Van Gogh, the genre regained prominence at the turn of the century. German born Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) could not help but be influenced by Expressionist discoveries. Although she never joined either of the two German Expressionist groups, *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke*, Kollwitz shared Expressionism's strong German graphic tradition as well as its tendency to express psychological and social reality through the human figure.

With the advent of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century, the individual, the subjective, and the psychological not only became the focus in many artists' works, but also the tools by which they achieved that focus.[3] While encountering the new psychoanalytic model of the mind, Kollwitz further applied introspection and self-reflection to reveal the face of woman in a modern world. She accomplished this by creating a deeply honest and personal account of her life in over 100 drawings, lithographs, and sculptures of her own image. It is not a coincidence that Kollwitz was a contemporary of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud; her art documents her own self-analysis and she employs self-portraiture as a means of arriving at emotional truths for the purpose of healing.[4] Kollwitz believed that "For work, one must be hard and thrust outside oneself what one has lived through."[5] Her art, and especially her self-portraits, can best be understood as a therapeutic means through which she handled traumatic events in her life and embarked on a journey in self-discovery. It was necessitated by her need for self-examination and understanding rather than narcissism or vanity. The unique focus on the expressiveness of her facial features and the centrality of her steady, unflinching gaze was therefore meant not merely for the viewer but, also, for Kollwitz herself. The majority of her self-portraits consist of sober, realistic close-ups of her face that chart her psychological and emotional development throughout life.

One of the significant ways in which Kollwitz departed from traditional female depictions in art, then, was to shift the viewer's focus from a woman's body to her mind. Unlike her artistic ancestors, Kollwitz's art was not made for the pleasure of male surveillance. She avoided the usual pose and detail associated with female representation, thereby thwarting expectations and voyeuristic access to the female body as a thing of beauty or signifier of sexual difference. In Kollwitz's depictions, the image of woman moved away from being viewed as object to being appreciated as subject. She was among the first to strip away the externals of male-donated idealistic feminine iconography by showing how woman could take her image into her own hands. She was not alone in this. Marianne von Werefkin and Gabriele Münter were two

painters who were involved in *Blaue Reiter,* the only Expressionist group that allowed women to participate as full members. Although both of these women played key roles in the group, they were overshadowed by the male artists with whom they were personally involved.[6]

Kollwitz's female images were neither idealized for their seductive physical charms nor assessed solely according to their external features. In fact, she wished to broaden the idea of female beauty by rejecting the image of woman as young, passive, and belonging to the middle or upper class. Consequently, her women do not resemble the timeworn standards of prevailing beauty and their bodies are defined primarily as working women or social activists rather than sexual objects. Kollwitz's style of unadorned realism expressed her wish to represent the true plight of proletarian women by using aesthetic standards that differed from the norm: "My real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me in a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful. ...the broad freedom of movement in the gestures of the common people had beauty."[7]

Expressionism's overt rebellion against bourgeois aesthetic standards suggested an implicit rejection of the political status quo. It was only in the wake of Germany's socialist revolution in 1918, however, that the avant-garde adopted an expressly political stance. It is interesting to note that whereas male artists, like George Grosz or Otto Dix, are usually given credit for this shift in art, women had been producing socially engaging art for several decades prior. Kollowitz' first major work, *Weaver's Revolt*, begun in 1893 and exhibited in 1898, was one of the first of this kind. The series of six prints was based on a play by Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Weavers*, about a group of Silesian peasants turned linen weavers who, in 1844, revolted because of low factory wages and miserable living conditions. Kollwitz employs her evocative graphic vocabulary to depict a tragic vision of working class life. The first print, entitled *Poverty*, recalls Edvard Munch's *The Sick Child (1894),* and portrays a mother clutching her head in despair over the illness and imminent death of her tiny, emaciated child. Father and another child sit anxiously in the background. A spiraling movement is created by diagonal forms in the room which evokes the atmosphere of a situation veering out of control. Indeed, the event of the child's death is that which motivates the workers to revolt in the following lithographs. The theme of grieving mothers is the most central in Kollwitz' oeuvre and one to which she returned periodically throughout her life. Kollwitz dedicated this work to her father, the person who had most encouraged her artistic career, on his seventieth birthday, the year before his death. Although *Weaver's Revolt* was so well received that it immediately established Kollwitz as one of the foremost artists in Germany, it was denied the gold medal at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1898 due to its political content. It is possible that Kaiser Wilhelm II's chauvinism was also responsible for Kollwitz not receiving

the prize. He is said to have remarked: "I beg you gentlemen, a medal for a woman, that would really be going too far....Orders and medals of honor belong on the breasts of worthy men!"[8] Her acclaim notwithstanding, Kollwitz too was ridden with doubts and insecurities regarding her art. She often compared it to the work of male artists whom she regarded as more talented and possessing something she lacked. In one diary entry, she discusses a similarity between herself and Thomas Mann and concludes: "A genius and a Mann could do it. I probably cannot."[9]

Throughout her long and productive artistic career, Kollwitz repeatedly transformed her personal pain into potent social message. Her maternal grandfather Rupp, a preacher of morality who founded his own Free Congregation, taught her that "every gift is a responsibility."[10] Kollwitz thus proved the personal to be political many years before such a motto would be claimed by feminists. As the most prominent woman to integrate the personal and political in art, Kollwitz championed the representation of social activism in real, as well as allegorical, women (see *Attack, 1897; Carmagnole, 1901*). The proletarian woman became the true heroine of her oeuvre.

During the Weimar era (1918-1933), German women were given the right to vote and hold office. The "new woman" worked and smoked cigarettes, had bobbed hair and wore stylish clothes (including male style tailored suits, ties and monocles), and was socially independent. Although this female image was widely promoted in media and advertising, it was an ideal realized by few. Unlike her contemporary, Jeanne Mammen, whose stylish watercolors were filled with depictions of Germany's "new women," Kollwitz' focus remained on the everyday heroines of physical abuse, unwanted pregnancies, tuberculosis, and poverty. Her figures were humble working women who encountered daily life-and-death dramas. Kollwitz thus depicted the duality of women: brave and socially active, warriors endowed with strength and fury, they were also unwitting victims and survivors of social and political misfortune.

Kollwitz was a social activist and mother like many of her subjects. The incisive social realism is evident in her recurring themes: poverty, disease, famine, unemployment, war, and death. It is also magnified by her choice of stark black and white charcoal drawings, woodcuts, etchings, and lithographs over the more conventional European tradition of painting. Following the example of the brilliant printmaker, Max Klinger, Kollwitz believed that graphic arts best expressed the darker side of life, a subject she intimately knew due to her lifelong struggle with depression. She also held that lithography was a technique that allowed her to "seize the essential."[11] The severity of chiarascuro stresses the painful gestures and heartfelt expressions of her figures, who become illuminated out of the darkness.

Kollwitz's attempt to distinguish her art from the sexual objectification of women contributed to her social realistic style. It also resulted in the

creation of androgynous and desexualized female figures, including herself, in her work. Despite the absence of sexuality in her compositions, however, the traditionally feminine theme of maternity remains a central issue. That this theme has captured the attention of many women artists is not surprising since motherhood has always been considered a primary life experience for most women. Maternity also represents a unique female experience in which women's body egos, the psyche's representation of inner and outer bodily sensations, are profoundly influenced by the fact that they are biologically designed for and potentially taken over completely by the procreative process.[12] By representing maternity in art, Kollwitz replaced phallic power with the power of the womb. This is not at all to say that male artists had not been interested in the theme of motherhood (e.g., Gustav Klimt). However, as with their idealized female nude portraits, most male artists tended to depict motherhood as the glorification of femininity.

Paula Modersohn-Becker, a contemporary of Kollwitz, was also known for her depictions of pregnant women and mothers with infants. However, her portrayals of motherhood involve mythic women (although she often used herself as model) who resemble Gauguin's native Tahitian beauties. They seem to live out their instinctual female destiny in a natural paradise-like surrounding of which they form an inseparable part. Kollwitz, on the other hand, overturns the usual tender, even sentimental, portrayal of mothers and children that characterized turn-of-the century art.[13] Her mothers are typically working class or poverty-stricken and are often compelled to confront disease and death in their infants due to social conditions, malnourishment, or war (e.g., *Poverty*, 1893-4; *Woman with Dead Child, 1903; Unemployment, 1909; Run Over, 1910; Death, Mother and Child, 1910; Mothers, 1919).*

Kollwitz's depictions of mothers grieving for their dead babies are arguably the most poignant images in her oeuvre. In *Woman with Dead Child (1903)*, reminiscent of Munch's *Vampire* (1895/1902) in its positioning of two figures, a mother hunches over as she cradles her dead child between her naked thighs and arms. Like an animal, she tries to swallow the child as if to return it to its source. In her early version of this work, *Pietà (1903)*, Kollwitz borrowed from traditional Christian iconography associated with the Madonna mourning the dead Christ. Her later versions are much more powerful. First of all, she rejects the earlier frontal depiction of the figures and replaces it with a more dramatic, angled one. In the earlier, mother's and infant's heads are separated, the mother's in the center of the work and the child's on the side. In the later works, mother's head merges into that of the child, as her body envelops his. Body parts are also drawn in segments to express the psychological fragmentation caused by such a situation. Furthermore, the two figures are stripped of all narrative and social context, thereby rendering a universal rather than religious meaning: the savage maternal pathos aroused in grief and loss.

Kollwitz's preoccupation with grieving mothers had personal as well

as social sources. Some critics attribute Kollwitz's mother and dead child series to the loss of her son and grandson. An earlier origin is indicated, however, since she made several of these prints prior to her son's death. In fact, it is sadly ironic that Kollwitz used her son Peter as a model in her *Woman with Dead Child* series, thus forshadowing his death by many years.

Of her three siblings who died, Kollwitz admits, in her diary, having felt responsible for the death of her younger brother Benjamin. From the morbid atmosphere in which she grew up, she also developed an inordinate fear that her mother would die or go mad.[14] As a child, Kollwitz experienced violent, screaming panic attacks that often lasted for hours. It is possible that her tantrums represented the only way she was able to obtain attention from her otherwise undemonstrative mother. She also suffered from stomach aches that she herself admitted were psychosomatic in nature: "These stomach aches were a surrogate for all physical and mental pains...My mother knew that my stomach aches concealed small sorrows, and at such times she would let me snuggle close to her."[15] This act notwithstanding, most of Kollwitz's descriptions of her mother were of an aloof, unavailable woman with a "distant look"[16] and a "remote air of a madonna."[17] Young Käthe was alarmed by her mother's unavailability and developed convulsion-like symptoms that had her parents fearing she was epileptic. She was also haunted by nightmares, many of which depicted her terror of losing her mother. The one she recalls as "the worst" follows:

> I am lying in my bed in the semidarkness of the nursery. In the next room Mother is sitting in the chair under the hanging lamp, reading. I can see only her back through the half-open door. In one corner of the nursery lies a large coil of rope such as is used on ships. The rope begins to stretch out and unroll, silently filling the whole room. I want to call Mother and cannot. The grey cable blots out everything.[18]

In one of several anecdotes in her memoir, Kollwitz poignantly describes her frustrated need for her mother's attention: "I needed to confide in my mother, to confess to her.... I decided to give my mother a daily report on what I had done and felt that day. I imagined that her sharing the knowledge would be of help to me. But she said nothing at all, and so I too fell silent."[19] Many years later, Kollwitz describes how, having identified with her mother, she too falls silent: "One turns more and more to silence. All is still. I sit in Mother's chair by the stove, evenings, when I am alone."[20] Indeed, many of her works of grieving mothers were executed during a period in which her mother, suffering from senility, came to live with her. In her July 8, 1916 diary entry, she wrote: "When I am here with Mother, I often feel like her."[21]

André Green, among others, has written about the devastating effects of maternal depression on the child. In his paper, "The Dead Mother," he

describes a type of mother who, while mourning the loss of one child, loses interest in a living child. This leaves an indelible scar on the child's affection for his mother; the mother is perceived as psychically dead and becomes transformed, in the child's eyes, from a source of vitality into "a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate." Through identification, the child consequently renounces her own connection to life forces.[22] Kollwitz's early psychosomatic symptoms transformed into lifelong depression which she chronicled not only in the bleak visions she depicted in her art but, also, in her diary entries. For instance, in April 1921, she wrote: "Now my work disgusts me so that I cannot look at it. At the same time total failure as a human being. I no longer love Karl, nor Mother, scarcely even the children. I am stupid and without any thoughts. I see only unpleasant things. The spring days pass and I do not respond....So there is *nothingness* in me, neither thoughts nor feelings, no challenge to action, no participation."[23]

Unable to find maternal affection in her mother, Kollwitz turned to her father. Karl Schmidt was a progressive man who was trained in law but worked in masonry. He did not believe in public schools and, as a result, the children learned at home, primarily under his guidance. Schmidt was a strong believer in his daughter's talent and actively encouraged her to pursue it. He provided for her art training by sending her to Berlin and Munich. One reason Karl sent his daughter away was to try to prevent her marriage to Karl Kollwitz, a promising young doctor to whom Käthe had become engaged. Her father believed she would not be able to combine marriage and a career. Käthe proved him wrong. Her husband, Karl, not only continued to provide her with the support her father had begun to give; he loved her unconditionally and became her anchor in life. Kollwitz's diary attests to her growing love and appreciation for this man with whom she lived for 49 years. Over time, she realizes the extent of her attachment and dependence on the man she came to refer to as her "lifelong companion." In fact, Kollwitz used a cane to walk from the day her husband died until her own death five years later. [24]

The growing appreciation of her husband in her life is witnessed in her inclusion of him in several self-portraits. In the first, an 1893/1904 etching, *Young Couple*, she is seated and faces front, self-absorbed; Karl is seen from behind. There is no physical or emotional connection between the two. Years later, in her sculpture (1924-32) honoring the memory of fallen soldiers in the war, we witness two figures, Karl and herself, who join together in the mourning of their son's death. Finally, a 1942 charcoal drawing, *Self-Portrait with Karl Kollwitz*, depicts the elderly pair seated side by side, an inseparable unit, looking off in one direction, sharing a single fate.

According to the psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, the reparative working through of destructive fantasies against the mother for having lost the state of oneness with her is *the* source of artistic creativity.[25] Kollwitz's early symptoms and tantrums may then have also represented the way she found to

unleash the pent-up fury she harbored toward her mother for being unable to express feelings at the death of her children. In 1912, she describes her struggles with a sculpture of mother with child: "It still has a dead side that I do not know how to attack."[26] Her adoption of the woodcut technique around 1920 was one way in which she tried to attack this deadness. Not only is woodcutting a more aggressive technique, it also results in simplification and distortion of figures. Kollwitz used the gouge as her primary cutting tool, rather than the knife, which created white lines on a black background. Like E.L. Kirchner, Kollwitz adopted Expressionist effects that resulted in powerful images of primitive facial expressions and strong grasping hands that possess a sculptural character. *War,* her series of seven woodcuts, added to those by many artists who took the subject as their theme (e.g., Ludwig Meidner, Max Pechstein, Otto Dix, etc.) Unlike these male artists who usually depicted destruction in combat scenes, Kollwitz's *War* series illustrates the impact and horror of war from the perspective of those who stay home — mothers and children. Once again, the first of the series, *The Sacrifice (1922)*, shows a nude woman who closes her eyes as she lifts up her child in sacrifice. On a conscious level, this work represents Kollwitz' ironic reply to the nationalistic and propagandistic call on German mothers to urge their sons to fight in the war. On an unconscious level, it is another attempt to deal with the inescapable forces of death between mother and child. Although scenes of combat are absent in Kollwitz's woodcuts, her use of stark black and white colors, along with powerful expressions and gestures, clearly addresses the presence of destructive forces. Unlike her male contemporaries, such as George Grosz, who employ satire and acerbity to this end, Kollwitz does so with humanity.

Despite her efforts to express anger and resistance, Kollwitz's identification with her psychically dead mother emerged strongly in later years. When she lost a son and grandson, Kollwitz also adopted a stoic attitude toward life's miseries. In fact, her older son, Hans, describes her undemonstrative conduct; "Along with this reserve in talking about or showing love went a disinclination to speak about feelings at all, or about any personal matters."[27]

Kollwitz' "Mother" works therefore provide the most important insights into the conflictive nature of the artist's relationship with her own mother. The "mothers" in her art represent both her mother and herself. The "dead children," in addition to denoting her dead siblings, son and grandson, also stand for Kollwitz. In these works, the artist repeatedly depicts the tragedy that robbed her mother from her.[28] As a result of her mother's grief and unresponsiveness, something died in Kollwitz as a child. Her fascination with sickness and death, especially as it concerns babies, was most certainly related to the deaths of her siblings. As a child who survived, Kollwitz' sense of herself included the notion that she too should have died.[29] She identified with her dead siblings and returned again and again to the source of her greatest pain.

Kollwitz thus mobilized and channeled pain and mourning through her creativity. One way she accomplished this was to counter the separation and loss caused by family deaths and depression in her "Mother" drawings and sculptures. Whereas her earlier mother works depict a cycle of sacrifice, loss, and grief, her later works show mothers who refuse to allow their children to be harmed by malignant forces. In these works, mothers merge with their children to create an inseparable union. For example, sculptures *Tower of Mothers*, 1937-38 and *Protecting Mother;* woodcut *The Mothers*, 1922-23; and her final lithograph, named after a Goethe quote, "*Seed for the Planting Must not be Ground,*" 1942, all depict mothers who form a tight, impenetrable circle that safeguards their young ones who huddle to be sheltered beneath their limbs. The large, powerful, and expressive hands of the mothers became a Kollwitz trademark. She described the mother's emotions in *Seed for the Planting* in a letter: " the old mother who is holding them [the children] together says, No! You stay here!"[30]

Kollwitz's art, then, became a vehicle for mourning through which she gave shape to and attempted to overcome her losses. Although she did not always use herself in these works, the faces of her mothers and workers eventually became indistinguishable from her own. In this manner, she joined the countless images in her art of mothers who despair over the loss of their children. Kollwitz identified with their grief and sorrow, and also shared their inner resolve. Struggling with severe bouts of depression throughout her life, she depicts with stark realism the effort to retain a sense of dignity in the face of adversity. The deaths in her family of origin and those of her son in World War I and grandson in World War II were central to her creative/therapeutic struggle. In her diary, she wrote to her deceased son, Peter: "I pray that I can feel you so close to me that I will be able to make your spirit live in my work."[31] Indeed, Kollwitz labored for seventeen years over a monument at the war cemetary in Roggevelde, Belgium, where Peter was buried. This was perhaps the most ambitious project of her life. It certainly proved to be the largest and the most psychologically challenging. What began as a monument for Peter turned into a memorial to all victims of the war. Rather than sculpt the fallen hero, who was killed in the first weeks of World War I, as was her original plan, she sculpted the figures of his mourning parents — her husband Karl and herself — kneeling, arms pressed to their chests, huddled in pain. Part of the delay clearly had to do with her treatment of the parental figures. Kollwitz claimed she was afraid of the mother figure whereas the father figure "I expect to master more quickly."[32] Some of her fear was related to the realization that she could use her own head on the figure of the mother. Becoming one with the grieving mother — with *her* grieving mother — clearly frightened her and resulted in creative inhibition. Such a process was nevertheless necessary for her own mourning and creativity. She therefore continued to rework the theme of the grieving mother throughout the last third of her life, all the while claiming

that she was "a mother who will not give up her sorrow."[33]

The Weimar era came to an end with Hitler's rise to power in 1933. So did Kollwitz's career. Because she had signed an appeal for left wing parties to form a coalition to resist the National Socialists, Kollwitz was forced to resign her position as professor at the Prussian Academy of Art (she was the first woman appointed to such a position). She was forbidden to publish or exhibit. Her studio was closed and her work was banned by the Nazis who classified it as "degenerate." She continued to make sculptures privately. Kollwitz died shortly before the end of World War II. Much of her work was deliberately destroyed and her home and studio were bombed and burned.

Before her death, Kollwitz overturned another barrier in the artistic representation of women. She broke the spell of invisibility associated with older women and entered uncharted territory by portraying her own aging process in a fascinating series of late self-portraits. These final drawings, mostly lithographs, also reveal Kollwitz's mature combination of a simple idea with an economy of means. She does not prettify or conceal the inevitable changes — both external and internal — that accompany aging. Rather, she stares at us with courage and dignity, as she must have done in her mirror, and forces us to face and accept the reality of an aging woman. Her lined, weary face fills the entire frame; it demands its place; there is no avoiding it (see *Self-Portrait*, lithograph, 1934).

Kollwitz's earliest self-portraits indicate confidence and self-assurance. In fact, her first, *Self-Portrait en face, Laughing*, 1888-9, is the only one that portrays her laughing. Another, *Self-Portrait on the Balcony*, 1892, shows her looking out to the world, skirt lifted and leg exposed. Her early self-portraits are also the only ones in which she used color, as several were done with pastel. As she enters middle age, her visage became filled with doubt and fatigue, even depression. In her diary, she complains of menopause and expresses longing for the years when her sons were babies. After Peter's death, many self-portraits, like *Woman Lost in Thought*, portray Kollwitz's anguish and grief as well as her valiant attempts to master sadness. Self-knowledge becomes the goal of these more mature works. With increasing age, Kollwitz's need for external experience and knowledge further diminishes: "I am no longer expanding outward; I am contracting into myself. I mean that I am noticeably growing old."[34] Assuming the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker* in one self-portrait, Kollwitz does not contemplate the external world but, rather, the world within. Thus, Kollwitz's self-portraits represent a major psychological as well as formalistic shift. In her own words, she went from being a "revolutionary to being an evolutionary."[35] Whereas early depictions are of an ideological fighter, albeit one who is often forced to surrender to powerful external forces, later works reveal a focus on the acceptance of inner strength and faith. Having shown compassion for others, she now turns to herself and comes to terms with her lost mother in herself. Although the art changes over time, and we

witness the deepening signature of experience on her face, one constant remains: the iron will, honesty and intelligence in the face of a woman who "sees the suffering of the world." [36]

Kollwitz carried on a dialogue with death throughout her life. Whereas her early drawings show her struggle with the forces of death, later versions reveal her making peace with death. Making peace with death, for Kollwitz, meant making peace with the "dead" mother with whom she had so strongly identified. In her final self-portraits, her gaze remains steady, but has become more internalized; it turns away from the viewer as if directed beyond this life. A good example is *Call of Death* (1934-5), the last in her final eight-lithograph series entitled *Death.* Kollwitz's face glances up toward the recognizable figure of Death, whose hands we see tapping on her shoulder to beckon her forward. Beyond gender, ego, and fear, she appears to accept her fate with resigned anticipation. The aged artist makes only the necessary strokes with her black lithographic crayon to create this powerful final image.

Kollwitz's aging self-portraits represent one of the first artistic acknowledgments of the essentially historical nature of the female body.[37] They also paved the way for women artists to reevaluate the conventions of female beauty in the fine arts and to challenge viewers' expectations regarding the kind of woman who is "fit to be seen." One thinks of artists, like Anne Noggle, who charted their own aging in a number of self-portraits. Noggle's *Face-lift series* (1975), in which she documents a face-lift she underwent, personally confronts her concerns about female aging and beauty. Alice Neel, like Kollwitz, also became known for her images of poverty and disease. In a striking nude self-portrait (1980) painted at the ripe age of eighty, Neel stares the spectator directly in the eyes as if to state that she, with her sagging breasts and flabby belly, has every right to be the subject of a work of art. The artist not only claims the right of subject, it is she who also controls the image. She grips her paintbrush in hand as a conductor holds his wand and unquestionably decides what the viewer will see. These artists, taking their cues from Kollwitz's pioneering efforts, refuse to be invisible or to represent the usual negative stereotypes of older women as ugly or obscene, hags, grannies or witches.

Kollwitz's coming to terms with the sadness and aggression she felt toward her own "dead mother" resulted in the processes of growth, maturation, and aging that take place over a lifetime. These processes become apparent when one views her self-portraits as parts of a greater whole rather than as single units. Kollwitz effectively demonstrated in her art the ways in which a woman's mind and body are not static, but ever changing.

Notes

1 Sigmund Freud, "Screen memories," 1899. *SE*: 301-322.

2 Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1957).

3 Danielle Knafo, *Egon Schiele/A Self in Creation: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Artist's Self-Portraits.* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993).

4 See Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) on the healing function in modern art.

5 Martha Kearns, *Käthe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist* (New York: Feminist Press, 1976) 137.

6 Russian-born Werefkin was financially wealthy and supported her protegé, Alexej Jawlensky, and even gave up painting for a period of ten years in order to avoid competing with him. Her writings on color, abstraction, and spirituality are certain to have substantially influenced Kandinsky's well-known aesthetic theories. Münter, who was Kandinsky's lover, has often been dismissed as a second-rate artist whose work is merely derivative. Jane Kallir, personal communication.

7 Kearns, 1976, 81

8 Quoted in Alessandra Comini, "Kollwitz in Context," in *Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 100.

9 Käthe Kollwitz. *The Diary and Letters* (Evanston, Il: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 72.

10 Comini, 96.

11 Kollwitz, 439.

12 Estelle Weldon, *Mother, Madonna Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* (New York: Guilford, 1988).

13 Elizabeth Prelinger, "Kollwitz Reconsidered," In *Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven: Yale, 1992) 40.

14 Kollwitz, 1988, 20.

15 Ibid., 17.

16 Ibid., 20.

17 Ibid., 18.

18 Ibid., 21.

19 Ibid., 23.

20 Ibid., 125.

21 Ibid., 71.

22 André Green, "The Dead Mother," in *On Private Madness* (Madison, CT.: International Universities Press, Inc., 1986) 142-173.

23 Kollwitz, 99.

24 Otto Nagel. *Käthe Kollwitz* (Old Greenwhich, CT: NY Graphic Society, 1971) 80.

25 Melanie Klein. In Hanna Segal. *The Work of Melanie Klein* (New York: Basic Books, 1964) 37.

26 Kollwitz, 59.

27 Hans Kollwitz, Introduction to *The Diaries and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz,* 2.

28 André Green describes the psychical consequences of maternal depression on a child: "An imago which has been constituted in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate." *On Private Madness,* 142.

29 Survivor guilt with regard to the death of significant others creates a fear of one's own death as well as a feeling that life has been purchased at the cost of others.

30 Kearns, 217.

Guilt in Painting

STEPHEN J. NEWTON

The modern painter Philip Guston, like Dostoevsky and Kafka before him, saw that within the drama of the artwork, he was the prosecution, defence, judge and jury. What does this really mean? Well, it would certainly point to the fact that one of the key functions of painting is to mediate guilt.

This century some anthropologists have encountered primitive societies which functioned without guilt, where members were incapable of comprehending the offers of salvation and redemption made by missionaries. It was also recognised that such societies lacked the vital stimulus for creativity. It has further been considered that the rich creative life of Western culture, particularly in the twentieth century, has to a large degree been induced by anxiety and guilt.[1] Munch's painting of *The Scream* (1893) depicts the scream of modern neurotic man.

Guilt is a powerful, perhaps indispensable factor in the creative process. The early, primitive stages of a painting can provoke intolerable feelings of persecutory anxiety and guilt in the painter. The painterly creative process is very much about strengthening toleration to anxiety, both for the painter and for the receptive beholder. The reasons why mere marks on canvas can induce such powerful emotional reactions in the individual sensitive to the painterly language are complex. Psychoanalytic theory shows that it is anxiety in infancy which provokes our initial attempts at symbolisation, in order to displace and transfer that anxiety and guilt.[2]

The seeds of adult schizophrenia and psychosis can be sewn in the infant who suffers too much persecutory anxiety, and is immobilised in fear and unable to initiate the first tentative steps towards a personal process of symbolisation. Similarly, in the parallel universe of painting, the over-anxious student painter who is unable to tolerate the raw and fragmented nature of the early creative stages, might be too constrained to make even the most rudimentary of marks. At any stage in personal development, and at any age, painting can always function to work through such anxieties. The painter who can ultimately tackle anxiety in the creative process may be rewarded with an ecstatic experience of omnipotence and a redemptive eradication of all guilt.

The fact that painting has historically attracted an aura of spirituality is connected to this potential to mediate guilt—religion is basically about the alleviation of guilt. The spiritual nature of painting has not only been recognised by modern painters, but also by earlier religious and icon painters. It derives from the abstract essence at the heart of the painterly creative process, which offers a transfigurative psychic experience. This fundamental, ecstatic transformation, essentially involves what might be described as a psychic 'death' to be followed by a *resurrection.*

At the root of ecstasy is the Greek word *ekstasis*, which means "to stand outside of or transcend oneself." It is the foundation for all religious and mystic experience. E.H.Gombrich has claimed that such experience involves the "highest mode of knowledge" normally denied to us, and has related how Plato considered that "we can only hope to achieve this true knowledge in the rare moments when the soul leaves the body in a state of *ekstasis.*"[3]

I have contentiously argued that this inner painterly creative process, in the implicit potential it offers for *ekstasis* and a regeneration through psychic *resurrection*, is in fact the authentic prototype for religions. It also forms the foundation for the clinical procedure of psychoanalysis, the twentieth century's secular religion. It is here that the idea of painting's spirituality is rooted. In 1908, Wilhelm Worringer drew attention to the fact that the transcendental and spiritual characteristics of abstraction in art have exactly the same disposition as the transcendental and spiritual connotations of religion.[4]

The ecstatic creative experience can be detected in various guises throughout history, most notably in religions. There were many religions prior to Christianity which were centred on the death of a saviour to relieve us of our guilt, and his subsequent resurrection. It is now perhaps more widely recognized that such religious parables are really only metaphors for individual psychic development and transition in the human lifespan. The experience has been well documented. Adrian Stokes, throughout his writings on art, tries to come to terms with the ecstatic oceanic *envelopment* possible at the heart of the abstract painterly creative process.[5] Similarly, Anton Ehrenzweig significantly furthered this analysis of a universal creative essence, recognising the intrinsic healing and regenerative potential of painting.[6]

If religious saviours died for our sins—to alleviate our guilt—and if such a metaphor is really based on the authentic painterly creative process, then how is the mediation of guilt effected in painting? It can be said that within painting's own intrinsic formal language within its own materiality and painterly *facture,* there is the propensity to deal with the deepest psychic levels of guilt. Herein lies a key problem, for the essential unconscious dimension of painting is located in this formal material structure, and not as it is usually supposed, in its figurative imagery.

The problem is that today the unconscious has become just another cliché. From Hieronymous Bosch, with his demons and hobgoblins of the

'hell' of the unconscious so beloved of psychoanalysts, to the cliché-ridden symbolism of the psychoanalytic unconscious with its well-worn dream condensations and ubiquitous imagery of manacles, chains, winged devils, snakes and serpents to be found throughout the world of "art therapy," to the melting clocks and bowler-hatted apples of the hackneyed, so-called "unconscious" imagery of surrealism, it doesn't take much to see that the twentieth century has lost sight of something that archaic cultures clearly understood: that is, the *true* nature of unconsciousness. In earliest Greek Tragedy, it was the wild, inchoate, improvised, unconscious Dionysian chorus that determined and created the appropriate narrative structures of the play needed to embody such emotion.

Similarly, the unconscious spiritual dimension of painting can only be engaged through its own unique form and materiality. Surface figurative symbols only serve to describe what is happening in this deeper psychic dimension. The alleviation of guilt and a potential redemption is achieved here, at the heart of the painterly creative dynamic, in a negotiation, or dialectic, carried out exclusively in formal terms between two opposing types of form. On the one hand there are those formal elements in the painterly language which are representatives of order, refinement or cohesion. They would include obvious shapes and clear lines, those definite, clearly perceptible organisations, which are basically the products of a deliberate engagement, and are recognised as being consciously determined and perceptible.

On the other hand, there are those contrasting aspects which might be termed the *informal* elements of the painterly language and which are representatives of disorder, dislocation and transgression. They would be the fragmented, dissociated, uncontrollable elements of form, which for complex reasons can often appear threatening. Such elements are the inchoate scratches, scores, scribbles and striations within the painterly structure, remnants of skin and undulations in impasto, textural anomalies, impurities and discolorations which cannot be ordered, predetermined or controlled in any normal sense. They escape deliberate conscious perception and organisation in the creative process, being only intuitively or subliminally detected. However, the painter can find ways to *procure* the presence of such unconscious elements, which Anton Ehrenzweig designated as *inarticulate form.*[7]

It is in the dialectical core of the relationship between these two types of form that guilt is determined. The consciously organised formal aspects of deliberate engagement that I have described, are also employed by agencies in the mind which act to ensure that conscious rational order and perception maintain dominance, an objective which in part is biologically adaptive. Psychoanalytic theory might describe such agencies as "repressive," and perhaps as being a residue in the mind of early parental discipline and social controls. In order to assert the supremacy of conscious organisation, they enlist the assistance of guilt feelings. That is to say, feelings of guilt are induced in the mind

if the surface cohesive organisation is threatened in any way by the disruptive and transgressive forces of unconscious inarticulate form. Inarticulate form in its own basic characteristics as the language of the archaic unconscious psyche, also carries a loading of guilt and anxiety associated with the savage earlier stages of infancy, and embryonic symbolisation.

Now it is possible to enter a central phase in the creative process, where the dialectic between these two different types of form in the painterly structure is mediated or resolved. In this phase, those formal elements of definite cohesion, representing conscious deliberate determination and perception, can be painted out, obliterated, dissolved and subsumed within the unconscious painterly matrix. At one and the same time, elements of fragmented inarticulate form and their compounds with more definite configurations, will be joined and integrated within the whole. Now the removal from the scene of those representatives of conscious rational order and perception, also means that they can no longer fulfil their function to keep order by arousing guilt and anxiety often through enlisting feelings of disgust. Simultaneously, inarticulate fragmented forms along with their associated guilt and anxiety, are integrated and become an acceptable part of the whole.

In effect, therefore, the repressive psychic forces are neutralized, their agencies in organised forms are dissolved, and guilt is completely vanquished. The painter can fleetingly experience a feeling of total omnipotence and unchallenged control of all forms and what they represent in the mind. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it is the painted portrait image which takes upon itself the anxiety and guilt of a dissolute lifestyle, whilst the subject, as a metaphor for the artist, acquires an omnipotent, guilt-free lifestyle and the ability to forever resurrect a new psychic self.

So this is basically how guilt can be handled within painting's own language. In painting's parallel universe, a judicial psychodrama *is* played out, where the painter is indeed judge and jury. However, the clear and definite shapes of deliberate conscious engagement in a painting, are not exclusively employed to keep order by threatening guilt and anxiety if they are disrupted. They have far greater significance for the conscious organising mind. They are also in fact symbolic of the very physiological and psychological means through which we actually "see," and which we use to locate and lock our entities within what we believe to be our reality, although it is in actuality altogether an illusory construction.

Furthermore, just as the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan perceived that we are born into the context of a language, or discourse, at a particular historical moment, are a function of it and become a fragmented product of that discourse at that time, similarly, the painter is born into a conventional set of forms, which in essence represent our conscious mode of constructing our reality. So these forms in painting are symbolic not only of our psychological processes of perception, but also of our processes of con-

cept-formation, symbolisation and of our whole human developmental phases. This is why the painter can experience a momentary trance and psychic 'death', as these forms, and all that they represent, are annihilated within the creative process. As these surface forms disappear, so to does the very embodiment of all that symbolises our very sense of self. In the definitive example of the abstract expressionist painting, the painter's whole lifelong constructed self is deconstructed and dispersed into infinity. The contemporary trendy notion of deconstruction is itself only a mannerism for this authentic creative dissolution.

I have claimed that as the psyche of the painter is mirrored in this deep intuitive and subliminal engagement with the materiality of the paint medium, the unconscious psychic structure is actually externalized and embedded within the painterly structure, in a *communion*. I have also said, provocatively, that this in effect is what constitutes the religious idea of *transubstantiation*, as the painter's psyche is physically and materially reincarnated in the substance of paint, as in a mould. As the psychic structure of the painter is externalized in a reflected imprint, not only issues of guilt and innocence can be objectively determined, but in effect, the painter's psyche is fragmented and then restructured in a psychic "rebirth." It's as if the mind of the painter is removed from the brain, re-programmed, and then returned in its regenerated configuration. As the unconscious psychic structure is externalised and embodied in the "flesh" of the paint, in effect the painter's mind is temporarily vacated and the painter can experience a momentary trance or "death" of mental faculty as the soul appears to float free in what religion terms an *ascension.* This is the authentic "standing outside of and transcending oneself" which defines *ekstasis*. This is also how the painter mediates guilt, and recreates a regenerated self in the reflective "mirror" of the painting which induces a reciprocal restructuring in its real counterpart in the painter's mind.

It can be shown that religious and icon painters were well aware of such issues. The art historian Georges Didi-Huberman in his work on Fra Angelico compares the thrown, splashed and dripped paint on early Renaissance religious panels to abstract expressionism. He also draws a direct comparison between an 11th century portable altar, wholly abstract with multicoloured splattering, and a Jackson Pollock.[8] In effect the altar is a portable work of abstract expressionism for personal spiritual usage. To the early religious painter, the abstract, wildly painted panel, which might be juxtaposed alongside, or incorporated within figurative narratives and iconography, embodied the psychic experiences which were then symbolised in the figurative parables of the Passion. As in Greek tragedy, it was the unconscious painterly process that predetermined the religious narratives.

In a recent article entitled *Psychoanalysis and Iconoclasm*, I put the case that it was in fact this materiality of the paint medium which "enfleshes" unconscious creative experience, that the iconoclast was really attacking, and

not as is usually assumed, the surface figurative symbol of a deity.[9] It is the access to another psychic dimension in painting, with its implicit potential for a psychic "death" and "resurrection," which the iconoclast, as a repressive instrument of religious dogma, was compelled to smash. For this access through painting to an a-temporal, supernatural and spiritual dimension, threatened religious control of such access.

This whole scenario is symptomatic of the innate human compulsion to externalize guilt feelings and reapportion blame, whether it be through the vehicle of painting, or in religious parables, or in other forms. In primitive societies, natural disasters were divine retribution for our guilt, and sacrifices had to be made. We all need to project guilt outwards—the other person is the guilty party, we are innocent. It has been argued that this powerful and irresistible psychic force to project and externalise guilt affects other key areas of human endeavour—most notably science. The scientific imperative to interpret the whole of nature according to the law of causality—of cause and effect—has been interpreted as a psychic obsession to always search for the causation, the stimulus, and in effect, the proof. The effect follows the cause, as punishment follows on from the crime. The etymylogical root of the words "cause" and "guilt" betrays them as being identical.[10]

Recent tensions in the philosophy of science and questions about the nature of "realism" in the natural sciences, have exposed the fallacy of proofs of causality carried out in experimental laboratory "closed systems" which cannot represent the complexity of real nature. In the real natural context, the laws of nature prevail, but are never presented in such neat exemplifications of causality and proof as in the metaphor of the laboratory experiment. That is to say, there is natural causality and response to stimulii, but science is constrained to isolate the immutable law.

So what is the relevance of all this in relation to the role of painting in today's cultural context? The reference to science and causality that I have made is not just an idle diversion but connects with the whole archaic function of painting. It is surely not just a coincidence that during periods of fanatical puritanical iconoclastic zeal, where painting is all but eliminated, the projection and externalization of guilt takes on far more extreme forms. As the force of iconoclasm gathers momentum in the late Middle Ages, so does the obsessional compulsion to find causation through guilt in the witch-hunt. It has been recognised that the procedure of witch-hunting, with its meticulous and elaborate tests and experiment to detect causation, is in fact the authentic prototype for modern scientific laboratory experiment based on the law of causality. The connection of the word "science" with the word "conscience" reveals the common bond through guilt. The inexhaustive search for the devil's marks prefigures the search for the cause of effect.[11]

I have contentiously claimed that it is within the authentic painterly creative process that the ideas of resurrection and transubstantiation originate

and that they have been subsequently symbolized in the ritual of the Eucharist and in religious parable. It has been recorded how reformers such as John Wycliffe and puritanical zealots such as John Calvin clearly acknowledged the implicit connection between painting and transubstantiation.[12] Painting is perhaps one of the oldest vehicles for the externalization and mediation of guilt. The important point about painting in this context, however, is that it cannot impose itself upon an unwilling participant. That is to say the spectator may of a free volition engage vicariously in the creative transformative process and redemption through the transfer of sin and guilt, or completely ignore it.

However, such a luxury was not extended to the witch in the ducking stool or being burned at the stake, nor in a present day context to the victim of so-called "recovered memory therapy" and "false memory syndrome" where patients are supposed to recall episodes of childhood sexual abuse whilst under psychiatric treatment. A damning report, commissioned by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, accuses its own members of destroying families by using dubious techniques, including those of suggestive hypnosis, to delve back into childhood events. The report further explains that the inability to recall abuse is taken as a sign that abuse has occurred but is being denied, much in the same way as the witch was proved innocent if she drowned in the ducking stool. Moreover, the techniques used in "recovered memory therapy" are almost identical with the methods employed by Puritan clergymen during America's Salem witchcraft trials in the 1690s to get children to accuse innocent adults of ritual satanism and sorcery.

The fundamental motivation for such obsessions is the irresistible search for causation and guilt which demands that someone must be held accountable. Whilst child sexual abuse has undoubtedly always existed, the real but covert ambition of "recovered memory therapy" is ideological, to gain power over others and to destroy existing social structures. I have said that during periods of zealous iconoclasm where the painted image is practically eradicated, the search for guilt takes on more severe and literalized forms. This is true today where there is often an urgency to proclaim the demise of painting, or at least of authentic painting which involves a deep cohesive psychic integration and engages with a healing or transformative spiritual dimension. As a result, as I have indicated, more puritanical vehicles to root out guilt are established. Psychoanalysis and its offshoot psychotherapy, are fundamentally invidious, repressive and unspiritual procedures. Where once the artist-shaman was guardian of the ethics and spirituality of society, now it is in the dangerous hands of the ubiquitous therapist and spurious techniques such as recovered memory therapy.

It has been claimed recently that the whole foundation of psychoanalysis was built on a false premise, that psychoanalysis took a totally wrong path when Freud dispensed with his early use of hypnosis. It has further been shown that Freud in fact broke with hypnosis as a therapeutic technique when

his "seduction theory" collapsed. That is to say he acknowledged that his patients' tales of seduction, or what we would call "sexual abuse," were in fact the result of his own suggestion in the hypnotic procedure, just as today psychoanalysts have been forced to recognise that "recovered memories" are in reality planted by the dubious techniques of the therapist. To salvage his claims of theoretical originality, Freud was forced to reformulate his whole theory in terms of the Oedipus Complex and an unconscious *desire* to be seduced. Instead of trying to understand how hypnotic trance can effect change, Freud decided to "cover his tracks" in order to maintain his reputation.[13]

In its infancy, psychoanalysis began with the investigation of trance-like states, and it is now being proposed by some that this is how psychoanalytic theory and practice should be reformulated. What Freud dispensed with was only the openly suggestive technique of hypnosis, but with it he also fatefully dismissed the transformative potential of the trance phenomenon, which is still at the heart of the painterly creative structure.

This trance phenomenon basically eliminates any conscious interference and enables the painter to fully engage with the deepest psychic levels of unconscious form in painting, and involves an omnipotent trance which extinguishes all guilt as conscious representatives of repression are subsumed, and which can be experienced as an ecstatic control and divine power. Painting is the authentic vehicle for this ecstatic trance of *ekstasis*. But it can only be engaged where the unconscious *really* resides in painting, that is, in its own unique material structures which can provide the malleable and transformative substance within which the unconscious psyche can become *embodied.* It is in this material reflection that a hypnotic mimetic trance can be effected along with a transformed and newly regenerated psychic configuration, which is crucially a: *trance-formation.*

Finally, there is a whole cultural function served here. In another context I have related that initiation rites and ritual cures in ancient tribal cultures worldwide entailed trance states at their core.[14] Again, it is significant that the ecstatic trance-state at the nucleus of the painterly creative process serves to neutralize the power of psychic agencies to induce guilt, whilst the actual purpose of the initiation rite is to effect the transition into adulthood, with its implicit overthrow of parental authority, maintained to a significant degree, by guilt.

For many millenia prior to the Renaissance, art throughout Africa, ancient Egypt and elsewhere, served a strictly functional role, to effect access to the purely psychic integrative communion of *ekstasis*, and to transport a participant on to a higher psychic plane. It has been said that "to deprive a people of their inner motivation for producing works of art is to subject them to the severest psychological trauma."[15] This is exactly what colonial missionaries did in trying to transplant a Christian dogma, which had lost all connection with its original motivation, on to cultures which in a supreme irony still re-

tained their intrinsic connection to real spiritual roots.

In Western culture, the breakdown of traditional and institutional provision for such transformative spiritual experience, resulted in its attempted preservation and dissemination by the solitary modern artist, now virtually extinct. Today, it is not surprising that our violent, cynical and decadent culture coincides with an institutionalized collusion to deprive people of their inner motivation for producing art. Such a denial is reflected in attempts by today's youth culture to reconnect with this essential human transformative and developmental state through the use of the manic, ritualized, rhythmical dance, allied with the aptly named drug "ecstasy" at so-called "rave parties." Whether this can fill the void is doubtful; *Bacchus* and *Dionysius* were, contrary to popular belief, Gods of a liberating creative ecstasy, totally devoid of alcohol or drugs.

Painting is the original prototype for the analogies of transformation and healing. To a large degree, the intrinsic art of painting has been lost. Today, no matter how gifted the painter may be in terms of technique, craftsmanship, irony, parody, and ingenious, provocative and subversive ideas, if the painting is devoid of the unconscious creative processes I have discussed, then inevitably, it will be barren of painting's essential spiritual dimension.

Notes

1 See Anton Ehrenzweig's *The Psycho-Analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), postscript, 256.
2 This refers in particular to the work of Melanie Klein in such papers as *Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in The Creative Impulse* (1929), *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States* (1935), and *Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States* (1940).
3 E.H.Gombrich, *Symbolic Images, Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, (London: Phaidon, 1972) 157.
4 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy - a Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1953) 101 &132.
5 See *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) in particular vol.111, *Painting and the Inner World.*
6 See *The Hidden Order of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967).
7 See chapter 11 *Gestalt-free Art Form* in 1953, as above.
8 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico - Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 30.
9 This article will be published in *Free Associations,* Process Press, late in 1998.
10 See Ehrenzweig, 250.
11 See Ehrenzweig, Chapter XV1, "The Scientific Truth Feeling and the Externality Illusions of Art" and his paper "The Origin of the Scientific and Heroic Urge (The Guilt of Prometheus)" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1949, nos.30,32.
12 See Margaret Aston's *England's Iconoclasts—Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 7.
13 See interview between Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Chris Oakley in *Free Associations* 5, part 4 no.36 (1995): 423-52.
14 S.J. Newton, *The Politics and Psychoanalysis of Primitivism*, (London: Ziggurat, 1996), 101-106.
15 Boris de Rachewiltz, *Introduction to African Art* (London, John Murray, 1966), xx.

Uprootedness and Reception in the Photographs of Josef Koudelka

KATHERINE CARL

> Perhaps this is the final realism, this urge to make contact with the human predicament as we glimpse it metaphorically in art...I refer to a self-interest that can accept uncertainty and make peace with the psychologically alien.[1]
>
> —Max Kozloff

> If you just pay attention to your own backyard, you'd realize that scandal is everywhere...Nobody has a boring life when you get down to it. Isn't your own existence much more interesting than anyone else's? Look in the mirror and see yourself in a whole different light. It will all happen to you eventually: divorce, complicated operations, addictions of one sort or another, even death.[2]
>
> —John Waters

Max Kozloff's Intentionalism and the Critical Dialectic

In 1965 critic Max Kozloff presented his theory of intentionalist criticism. Nearly half a century after Duchamp's readymades, in the midst of the currents of Pop Art and Minimalism and on the cusp of Conceptual Art, Kozloff shaped a critical stance aimed to combat what he saw as the antihumanism of the art of the time. Artists were "suppressing moral values inherent in objects and sensations"[3] and were not commenting critically on the often offensive mass culture they employed in their artworks. Not merely lacking in commentary on their "vulgar motifs," in some cases artists were aggressively foisting this

imagery on their viewers simply for effect. Kozloff felt that this occurred not only in Pop Art but also in abstract and minimalist work. Faced with the blurred "categories of good and bad, the indifferent and the committed,"[4] Kozloff found it necessary to examine the intention of the artist.

Kozloff quickly casts aside the major critique of this notion—that the artist's intention only illuminates part of the meaning of a work. He focuses instead on the viewer's role in assessing the artist's intention. "Essentially...what one does is to examine...perennial oppositions within works of art."[5]

For Kozloff, uncovering the intention of the artist is not the final goal of the critical act. Rather the dialectic between the critic and the art object is at the core. In analyzing the intention, Kozloff sought to understand the "nature of the object" and "the terms of the dialogue between myself and that object."[6] Kozloff further emphasized this interchange in "Psychological Dynamics of Art Criticism in the Sixties" in 1967. Kozloff builds on the basic dialectical notion of the subject-object relationship to form the basis of his concept of the critical dialectic. Kozloff does not examine this relationship specifically from a psychological point of view, which asserts that in order to have the makings of a mature self, a person must understand that her self is not continuous with all other objects in the world but that instead an "other" exists outside of her. He simply proposes that the dialectical nature of criticism is the "perception of the self through the medium of the work of art and perception of the work of art through the medium of the self."[7]

Kozloff's call for this mutual shaping of subject and object holds immense potential as a framework for an engaged criticism. A much fuller understanding and deeper relationship with the art object will result from the viewer's investment of herself—her time, mental energy and intellectual curiosity. This direct relationship between object and viewer does not rely on prior knowledge or mediating influences so the dialogue is open to novices and the result of the dialogue will be unique for each person. However, this is all too pure and uncomplicated. Kozloff does not acknowledge that the artist's intention is not a unified, unchanging position. Yet he posits that it is through this intention that the critic fathoms the nature of the art object and her relation to it. How can an intention be so easily pinned down? The viewer has the bulk of the responsibility for investing herself in the object and wending her way through the slippery morass of "artist's intention," but Kozloff envisions an unchanging viewer. He does not acknowledge that the art object and the viewer are not simple static bipolar entities. Thus he severely oversimplifies the critical dialogue and hinders its potential.

Photography and Kozloff's Static Viewer

This impediment is exacerbated when he applies the critical dialectic to photography in "Photography and Fascination." Kozloff's approach to the temporal issues in photography constructs an odd position for the viewer. Strangely,

although Kozloff attends to the temporal issues that photography raises, he always posits a static viewer. Kozloff's generalized viewer has privilege over the photograph because she is conscious of the present moment as well as the past history surrounding the photograph.[8] This does not create a unified parcel of wisdom. Historical knowlege and current moral values that the viewer brings to bear on the object may be multifaceted or lacking in areas. Kozloff does not take into account shifts or conflicts within the viewer's own identity that occur over time. While Kozloff privileges the viewer's historical position, he describes the act of viewing photographs as "a fantasy of escape from time, flattering the vagrant will of the onlooker, who exists in a privileged moment erased from history."[9] Kozloff's viewer is caught in an impossible paradox—supposedly conscious of history yet peculiarly deleted from it. Simultaneously ahistorical and pan-historical, she is not subject to the complexities of occupying a specific place in history.

Though Kozloff's conception of the viewer is simplistic and one-dimensional, he holds in high esteem photographs that are not static. He stifles the complexity of the viewer's human experience in order to make photographs that have temporal aspirations seem praiseworthy. These photographs rely on long exposures to produce the effects of fragmentation, collage, narrative progression, even transformation. Kozloff is seduced by photographer Duane Michals' use of these effects. Michals' blurred, figurative sequential images self-consciously aim to collapse the gap between object and viewer by eliciting the viewer's engagement in the fake experience of the image. This endeavor is, of course, destined to fail. Even time-based technology, which is perhaps more convincing in this respect, can not fully bridge this temporal and spatial gap between subject and object. The image can only stir memories of the viewer's past experience, raise questions or hopes for the future. It cannot be a substitute for real experience. Kozloff revels in the despondence of the works' necessary failure, stating, "the photographic image brings us close to these feeling states but because close, still achingly removed from them."[10] The distinct poles of viewer and art object are dabbled with but ultimately retained.

In this respect, Kozloff remains consistent with his belief that in order to pursue the critical dialectic, it is crucial for viewers to see "the 'otherness' of the work—that is, its distinctness as a product separate from their own systems or ideologies."[11] Ultimately, photography's titillating coupling of enticement and obstacles promotes the viewer's awareness of her own situation. Kozloff states,

> photographs insinuate a continuous, mild sense of dislocation in our lives, for we perceive the true remoteness of the image at the same time as we are seduced by a feeling that its space includes us.[12]

The viewer rationally understands that she does not participate in the realm of the photograph, but she inevitably wonders about her connection to the photograph in terms of its subject, its function, its meaning. The sensation of dislocation stirred up in the viewer runs much deeper than her relationship with the photograph. This dislocation is within the viewer from the start; the photograph merely touches on it and brings it, perhaps, to conscious attention.

Kozloff writes about Duane Michals' literal embodiment of this human dislocation. Michals' blurred human protagonists allude to motion, change, the immateriality of thought and the indecisiveness of existence.[13] Kozloff conceives of a simplistic relationship between the photograph and the viewer by supposing that the literal depiction of the double image of a figure captures the enigmatic and variegated forces of human existence. He asserts that through the use of blurring, "Michals wants to *transfer* (my emphasis) that dualism of consciousness to viewers, as they, too, confront the uncertainty of being."[14] The notion that the human viewer's consciousness is not inherently multilayered exposes once again Kozloff's neglect of the viewer's complex, evolving identity. Kozloff bestows Michals and his inanimate photographs with this element of humanity. Furthermore, he invests them with the power to elevate the viewer's consciousness *not through critical dialogue* but by *transferring* this "dualism of consciousness" to the viewer. Instead of an engaged viewer, Kozloff's interpretation posits a passive receiver. Michals' works are stories that aim to bring viewers to consciousness by acting *on* them, not by stirring large questions that already exist in the viewer. These photographs are didactic not cathartic.

Although Max Kozloff promotes critical dialogue as a way to combat the antihumanism of modern art, ironically his view of the human agent in this dialogue is uncomplicated and narrow. He does not explore the potential that art holds for evoking reflection and insight into the human predicament. Kozloff points out that, "with every picture, we both deny and accept an illusion..."[15] We are simultaneously connected and distanced from events in works of art. This concurrent identification and detachment recalls the inherent dislocation of the human condition.

Josef Koudelka and Exile

"Dispossession and disenfranchisement, [Josef] Koudelka's photographs insist, are states in the natural order of life..."[16] Camus would add estrangement. But Kozloff adds, "...life lived beneath the notice of the social majority," thereby drastically limiting the scope of the statement and missing the point of Koudelka's work. In fact Koudelka's photographs insist that these states affect everyone—not just the materially disenfranchised. Koudelka documents the literal state of displaced persons as an extreme manifestation of the wider dilemma of humanity. Kozloff glosses over the deep human impact of Koudelka's

work. Instead he praises Koudelka's photographs for capturing the nostalgia of the gypsies' culture through dramatic chiaroscuro and theatrical narrative. Kozloff calls the series a "gallant effort" to "bear witness" to a minority culture that may not survive.[17] Kozloff erects a strict boundary in time and experience between himself and Koudelka's subjects in *Exiles* and *Gypsies*. Thus he fails to recognize the universal circumstance of dislocation that Koudelka's images point to.

Josef Koudelka (born 1938) began photographing in 1961 in his native Czechoslovakia. His early experience photographing onstage during theater productions prepared him for his intimate photographic interactions later in the decade.[18] Primarily a documentary photographer, he is best known for his major photography projects on the gypsies of Eastern Slovakia from 1962 to 1968 and the Warsaw Pact armies' invasion of Prague in 1968. In 1970 he left Czechoslovakia and was granted asylum in England, where he lived until 1979. During this time his book *Gypsies* was published (1975) and his work became internationally known. He was made a full member of Magnum in 1974. He has had several one-man exhibitions, most notably at the Hayward in London in 1984 and at the International Center for Photography in 1988, which was accompanied by the publication of his book *Exiles*. He resided in France from 1980 to 1989 and was granted French citizenship in 1987.[19] He published a notebook of landscape photographs with the Center for Cultural Development and the Regional Center of Photography in Calais in 1989. He now splits his time between Western Europe and the Czech Republic.[20]

Faces often confront the viewer in Koudelka's work—whether the Romani (gypsies) in their makeshift living rooms or anonymous Europeans engulfed by their native surroundings. In his later photographs the landscape takes over and is the main character. The great depth of field and grainy texture of his shots convey a typical documentary feel that "you are there." Instead of neatly gathering up the intimate details of the subjects' world, Koudelka's 25mm wide angle lens spreads the scene out wide in front of the viewer.

Stretching along the outline of the road that emanates from the distance in *England 1976*, two excruciatingly long, repetitive, drab rows of brick backyards open out in the foreground. The old man at the mouth of this great barren procession of brick shows the camera only his profile in cap and scarf. But his mouth is straight, his face decidedly unemotive. He is completely alone amidst the looming houses. The old man may get swallowed up by these stark dwellings, but he will never be comfortably part of them.

A very different old man in front of a bombarded building in *Czechoslovakia 1968* looks to the camera with his drooping wrinkles and quiet despondence. The whiteness of his hair is pronounced against the black smoke scars on the facade of the building. The vacant windows and pock-marked walls attest to the force with which this man has been wrenched from his personal place in the world. These images both very plainly document not only

dispossession but a deeper human estrangement.

Displacement or Freedom?

Koudelka states that the act of looking at his photographs is like walking into a room for the first time: it may be exciting, or it may feel wrong and uncomfortable. Over time, the meaning and impact of the photograph is clarified, or the viewer may become indifferent.[21] Viewing a photograph is like visiting foreign territory. The photograph stems from a particular time and place of its own outside the viewer's present experience. It possesses a history, though it is only a fragment of a larger visual field and tells just a slice of the story of its time. Another layer of meaning is added at the moment when the viewer comes in contact with the image and makes something of it for herself. In terms of Kozloff's critical dialectic, just as the photograph's context and meaning changes as it is shaped by the viewer, so the viewer also takes in new information from the art object. This experience of mutual shaping may be heightened when a person is a visitor or a newcomer. In this situation people become more perceptive about their surroundings and about their role in these surroundings. Devoid of their natural context, they may be more receptive to new ideas. Perhaps they feel like an outsider; on the other hand, they may observe something that strikes a note of familiarity. A similar feeling arises when one is confronted with a photograph.

In his essay for Koudelka's book *Exiles*, Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz touches on the experience of encountering an unfamiliar space. Routines and rhythms are created in the space of everyday activity, but when confronted with the experience of relocating to a new place, these directed patterns are lost. Stories of the life of the place are unknown; the visitor is not part of this place's history, as she is at home. However, alienation is inherent not only to the strange unexplored land but can also be experienced in the empty habits of the familiar city.[22] Koudelka's photographs raise a multitude of questions: Does the nomadic lifestyle of the gypsies give them freedom from the banalities of stasis? Or are they constantly strangers, outsiders? When does the motion of uprooting and relocating become a habit? How do people at home in their own community come to feel dislocated? What is the difference between a pioneer and a refugee? Koudelka's photographs revel in these quagmires. What are the relationships of dislocation and freedom, stability and drudging routine, home and alienation? Not necessarily oppositional, or synonymous or causal, they coexist as part of a continuing cycle of life.

Uprootedness and Growth

In *Svinia 1966*, from the *Gypsies* series, a strange little battered stone building lies just a few feet ahead against the open, barren background of scrubby grass and rocks. The tilted roof and exposed stones frame the white shirt of a man's back, the oval of his hat and the pudgy face of the black-haired girl he

carries. She imperiously, skeptically, defensively studies the viewer as she clings to the white faceless back. They take up so little space in the white and gray wasteland of the grainy photograph. They need only each other and their little abode.

The gypsy is the ultimate dislocated wanderer. Constantly on the move or establishing tentative communities with ever-changing members, they never become rooted to one place. The gypsies that Koudelka photographs in Eastern Slovakia are separated from their native India by such vast distances, meandering journeys and stretches of time that it is impossible to locate their authentic roots. The gypsies as a social and cultural group are defined by their lack of a home. They have wandered over centuries throughout Turkey, North Africa, Italy, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Spain...their music and culture mixing with indigenous traditions. Nevertheless they always remain on the outside, shunned by their host society. They set up enclaves in the hills outside Florence, the caves of Granada, abandoned city housing or the open countryside. For decades the Czechoslovakian government wavered between ghettoization, assimilation and criminalization of the gypsies. After attempting to assimilate the gypsies into the workforce earlier in the decade, in the late 1960's the government drove the gypsy community out of the cities to fend for themselves on the desolate barren land.[23]

To explore the gypsies' relation to their physical location, Koudelka photographs their surroundings—fields, alleys, roads—and also the interiors of their dwellings. His grainiest photographs depict small rooms with a bed or two heaped with swarms of children. They jostle and play while the parents smile at the chaos, hold conversations or look at the camera. In other instances, the viewer is on the floor with the grinning grimy children, looking up to the bed where the parents are seated. These close, fuzzy, dark images place the viewer in the midst. In the lighter and more spacious *Kadan 1963*, a man standing in the front room swivels to face the camera. His body is facing another room beyond where, through the doorway, a whole stack of kneeling, crouching children and grandchildren are assembled. The filthy walls and ripped covered couch do not detract from their raucous delight.

These comfortable (though rough around the edges) depictions of community are punctuated by ambiguous, haunting, slightly sinister shots. In *Kadan 1962* three men inhabit an indistinct grainy blackness viewed through a doorway. Their intense, defiant gazes emerge against the sunlight blazing through a white curtain at the back of the room. Arranged as a triumvirate (as the men in Koudelka's images often are), the front man sits in a chair turned backwards while a second stands a bit behind. Their strong posture, cropped hair and suits exude slickness and confidence. The third man slumps in a chair in the shadow. Swindlers? Hustlers? Not to be trusted, these macho men are trying to make their way any way they can.

Several pictures of young gypsy boys at play foreshadows this sol-

emn triple portrait. Pumped up with almost violent glee, boys in shirtsleeves and dogs roughhouse and slide on the winter mud and ice outside their run-down house. In another image a boy holding a gun runs into the road towards several younger children and a woman who shields her face. A different image shows a little boy with a plastic gun strapped to his back running from one shack to the neighboring one only a few feet away. A graceful older woman watches him run away as a girl in a floral dress demurely looks at the camera as she awaits his arrival. One last image shows three boys standing bare-chested in a field. They suck in their breath and flex their muscles as a few young girls look on from the distance. Their decrepit shack looms behind on the hill. The children are represented in relation to the fields, dwellings, and the inevitable road that are their homes. These boys are doubly uprooted: in addition to the impoverished dislocation of their culture, their lives are changing as they make that uncertain journey to adulthood.

Koudelka not only capures the present vigor of the young and the questionable potential for their future, he continues along the journey of life to render mournful scenes of death. In *Czechoslovakia 1963* the light from a window deep at the back illuminates the episode. With a soft glow, the rows of faces are huddled along the sides of a casket that recedes in strict Early Renaissance-like perspective. Out of the darkness, the young children near the front gaze into the camera. The other figures look down gently at the woman in the wooden coffin surrounded by gauzy white. The camera's view floats from the bottoms of her feet, along the faces, up to her head and out the window above her.

It may be tempting to view some of Koudelka's photographs with an anthropological nostalgia. He stirs up intense sympathy with both his sorrowful and his joyful images. Kozloff calls Koudelka's imagery a "world of minority cultures, whose religious and funerary rituals it intimately discloses."[24] However Koudelka reminds the viewer to be aware of the subtle artifice he is creating. One should not seek superficial engagement or easy distancing from these strangers. *Czechoslovakia 1967* portrays a doleful old woman in a babushka extending her arms down to touch the temples of a young dead girl. The image is not only sad, it is strikingly odd at the same time. The girl's reclining head peeps through an oval slice in a translucent sheet, as if she were floating under the surface of water. A gold coin is placed in her right eye—payment to Charon for the girl's travels through the afterlife. The old babushka's head also forms a dark oval against the bright whiteness of the curtained window. The echoing continues—no longer eery, now artfully and subtly designed: three egg-shaped framed pictures hang on the back wall; the inner elbow of the old woman's wrinkled sweater inexplicably bears a quarter-shaped hole.

Koudelka does not let the viewer come too close. He maintains not only his subjects' dignity but also their ambiguity. They are neither pure nor defiled, sweet nor evil, normal nor strange, here nor there. With this distance

the viewer is acutely aware of her own conflicted feeling in relation to the subjects: sometimes enjoying an emotional connection, at other times wanting to disassociate and identify instead in opposition. As the viewer's identity is constantly reformulated, what is seen and valued in the photographs and how the viewer defines herself in relation to the images will always shift.

It is natural to feel a human engagement with a figure in an image. This effect is heightened when the image is a photograph. Immediately the viewer wonders, "who is this person?" A mother? a criminal? A personality is formed in the viewer's mind; then questions about the character's situation further build a narrative. Is the person happy? in danger? depressed? Sympathy, respect, hatred, fear, distrust for the characters come readily. The viewer will also speculate about herself in relation to the character, pondering whether she has ever been in a similar situation or remembering other times she felt such emotions. When a person appears in an image the viewer has a ready starting point for making a human connection, for reflecting on her own condition, for considering existential issues.

Although Koudelka's figural documentary photographs stir up intense emotional responses and personal reflection, the engagement is not solely based on the viewer's relationship to the figures. The landscape, the dwellings, the roads, the interiors and the bright windows that lead beyond, all arouse feelings and questions for the viewer. The identities of the gypsies and exiles are made in relation to these elements. Stable triangles play against the wide angle lens' slightly tilted distortion of the photographs. The subjects' rootedness or movement is played out in these spaces. Like the figures in the image, the formation of the viewer's identity also depends on periods of uprootedness and stability that these spaces represent.

The space in *Okres Spisska Nova ves 1966.* is very square. A table in the background appears, at first glance, to be the focal point. It is solidly placed on the floor, chair stationed with its back facing the camera. Flowers are firmly planted in the center. The tablecloth forms another square as it drapes over the front side of the table. It becomes apparent that the photograph has a second or alternate focal point in the large expanse of the middle ground. This area, the lightest in the room, is covered with a smooth square fiber rug. A neatly arranged patchwork of smaller frayed rugs occupy the foreground. These are severely worn by the footsteps that are so noticeably absent at the moment of the photograph. Overall, the room displays an attempt at normal domestic life—the floor coverings and tablecloth are smoothed, the flowers perched—amidst unavoidable poverty of threadbare rugs. Furthermore because of the absence of figures, the setting becomes more intimate as a space for the viewer alone. Where should the viewer focus? On the table, so solid and stable, or on the rugs that are battered and torn by the constant motion of travel. This is up to the viewer, a metaphor for the vacillations of identity, shifting between dislocated movement and stability.

Koudelka's photographs not only give a peek at the life of the gypsies, so obviously equated with nomadic life on the fringe. He also makes the point with his book *Exiles* that the term applies not only to those who have left their native land. Being dislocated is part of the human predicament whether or not this exile is physical. A person can feel like an outsider even in her native land and within herself. Dislocation and the quest for rootedness, continuity, and wholeness is a part of universal human nature.

The Cycle of Estrangement and Recognition

Psychologist Erik Erikson discusses the condition of dislocation in his essay "Identity and Uprootedness in Our Time." At each stage of development of identity, people feel a sense of estrangement within themselves.[25] Change is crucial to the continuation of growth, and so humans must encounter disruptions as they move from one stage in life to the next. When moving to a new stage, the world outside looks different and the person sees herself in relation to the world in a new way. The developmental stages of youth span the most diversity of all stages but are good examples of the kind of identity-building processes that occur throughout life:

> Like a trapeze artist, the young person in the middle of vigorous motion must let go of his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood, depending for a breathless interval on a relatedness between the past and the future, and on the reliability of those he must let go of, and those who will "receive" him...[26]

Progressively building up a whole identity requires not only changes, disruptions and leaps to new levels of development but also a sense of continuity with old parts of one's identity.

> The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than the sum of, all the successive identifications of those earlier years...[27]

A crucial element that will form this continuity between stages is relationships with other people. One must be able to "recognize himself and feel recognized."[28]

> True identity...depends on the support which the young individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to him: his class, his nation, his culture.[29]

The gypsies are physically and culturally distinct—ethnically unique—and thus identifiable, but at the same time the roots of their identity are not precisely locatable. The faces of a trio of gypsy musicians dominate an image taken in Czechoslovakia in 1966. The man closest to the camera on the right can easily be identified as a gypsy. As he tucks his violin under his chin he gazes pleasantly but disconcertingly out at the viewer and simultaneously off to the side. The attractive man at the center looks directly into the camera, seductively tilting his head back while playing his bass. The older balding violinist on the end is clearly absorbed by an event off-camera. At first glance, the crowd of Czech faces assembled in the background appear to be the musicians' audience. However, they are obviously watching something out of the frame—with no apparent notice of the musicians who dominate the camera's view. The dominating presence and recognizability of the gypsies' faces set against the accompanying disregard from the native Czech faces hints at the paradoxical state of gypsy identity.

Although the gypsies may be eternally dislocated, their identities are strongly rooted in communities. Their unique music and traditions bind them together as a culture in spite of their constant dispossession and nationlessness. They occupy seemingly contradictory situations: visually identifiable as a distinct group, the gypsies are also uncategorizable and mysterious because their roots are untraceable. Ultimately, they become symbols of the complexities of identity.

As Erikson discusses, identity is given initially through "the eyes and the face which first 'recognize' you."[30] Consequently, the phrase "to lose face" is to lose esteem in someone else's eyes; to be defined by them differently than you wish to be defined. For the ultimate human goal is "to know even also as I am known." However life is filled with "many moments when man feels that he neither knows nor is known, neither has a face nor recognizes one: his first uprootedness, regularly re-experienced in migration..."[31] This is the moment when one enters a new place and does not recognize himself in relation to it because there is no continuity of identity and nobody in these new surroundings recognizes him.

Natural State of Disclocation

The viewer's visit to the new territory of the photograph further complicates these paradoxes surrounding the gypsies' identity. The viewer cannot identify with the gypsy's closed community yet she is confronted with the realization that she shares a connection with these people. They share the human predicament of dislocation; the gypsies just wear it on their sleeves. The ongoing cycles of stability and change and the sporadic feeling of unsettledness affects everyone.

In the natural course of life, people also experience moments of self-

doubt and shame when they are exposed and alone. At these junctures "man become an outsider to himself," a second type of uprootedness. "From here on he is never fully himself and never fully 'them.'"[32] As part of the superego formation, the development of a conscience will clarify identity. This inner, unconscious judge causes inhibitions and repressions that "could be expressed in terms of alienation, for they can turn man's most intimate wishes and memories into alien territory."[33] So, the human predicament comprises risk-taking alterations as our identity changes and grows and also the estrangement which simmers beneath the surface in our own conscience.

> These, then, are some of the inescapable, inner divisions which come about as man, freed of his biological navel cord, finds his place in the social and moral universe.[34]

At this point it is necessary to think back to Kozloff's critical dialectic for a moment. Kozloff does not acknowledge these complexities brewing within the viewer and so he shortchanges the potential for in-depth engagement between the viewer and the art object. The divisions and cohesions with which the viewer is constantly grappling are not sufficiently engaged by Kozloff's conception of the critical dialectic. Certainly they are not engaged by the dualism of consciousness that Kozloff believed Michals' work to possess.

Koudelka straightforwardly but gracefully poses the question: who is an exile? or rather who is not an exile? We are all dislocated in new places, in our natural surroundings, in human relationships, even from ourselves at times. The clean narrow alleyway of *England 1969* from the *Exiles* series holds the proverbial small baby in a basket. The rectangular shape of the carrier is held in place by the closely framed square patterns of concrete pavement that lead out to the street beyond. The baby sleeps undisturbed in the calm scene. This is not a space filled with foreboding danger, rather the basket is firmly tucked into the frame. (More disturbing are Koudelka's other photos of a group of disgruntled Irish women sitting together at a coffeehouse or of a turtle overturned on its back in the middle of nowhere.) But where is this empty path wedged outside between two homes? This scene holds the contradictions of the natural state: a stable entity situated on the outside, in an unsure in-between space. Even in stable familiar surroundings, a person may be dispossessed of themselves.

In scenes such as *Scotland 1982* the viewer is confronted with spaces emptied of figures and action. Only the heel of a person striding out of the top of the frame is captured here. The viewer stands several feet behind at the top of a few steps, looking down at the diagonals of a handrail and its shadow on the pavement. About to step into the unknown, stripped of surroundings, the viewer realizes she is the exile. The image may evoke the feeling of embarking on a pioneering journey of discovery or it may refer to being a transplanted

refugee in flight. Creative, spiritually restless people are the pioneers, or "agents of rejuvenation," in Erikson's terms. They constantly desire to recreate themselves, forging new territories in their identities and so constantly uprooting. They choose to live as a philosophical "stranger."[35] A refugee, one exiled from her land by force or threat of persecution, has no such philosophical luxury. She must disconnect from her natural surroundings for survival purposes, making an abrupt separation from a past part of her identity. The identity of the refugee may also incorporate the formation of what Erikson terms "negative identities"—the vagrant, the shiftless, the gypsies.[36]

Overall Koudelka seems to be more interested in this latter journey of the refugee, one of inevitable dislocation. However, whether his subjects in *Exiles* are pioneers or refugees is left ambiguous. His non-figural photographs are the most open-ended. They especially entice the viewer to participate and reflect on the human journey through life. In *Greece 1981* delicate sheer squares of cloth hang from criss-crossed bars. They demarcate the space, but to what end? Are they hiding something or serving as a backdrop? Does the area have depth? Is the camera capturing the front or the back of the space? Like the image of the empty room with the chair and table in *Gypsies*, the focus and interpretation is ambiguous and may vary with every examination by the viewer. However, the predominance of squares in both of these photographs lend a stability that combats impressions of total uprootedness.

War and Dissipation of Identity

Although dislocation and dischord are natural to human identity, radical change that tears at the basic values of the community in which the individual is grounded can cause severe damage to the development of identity.[37] Such is the nature of war. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague in 1968 threatened the identity—the collective values—of the nation. The scenes that Koudelka chooses do not depict the bodily destruction, the blood and horror of war. He photographs the resistance that individuals and communities posed to the invading forces. In one image Warsaw Pact soldiers flee their paint-splattered tank that has been set on fire by the people. In the smoke, a soldier stands on top of the ruin to aim an automatic rifle at one Czech man who faces him head on from the ground. The viewer does not see this man's face but feels the tension of anger mixed with fear in his back, elbows, fingers. Risking death is not too high a price to pay when faced with the destruction of his national and cultural identity. Dissolution of identity is, after all, death.

In another image two young men brashly walk amidst the smoking rubble of Wenceslas Square waving the Czech flag. Their stride and upstretched arms are forceful and determined; their faces are pained, searching. Adrenaline rushes to the urgency of their cause; they must reinforce their identity with the flag. Their gesture is not just symbolic. More important than destroying an opponent, they are preserving their psychological grounding and wholeness.

Invasion in war attacks the physical/geographical boundary of a country. It also violates the psychological boundary that maintains the wholeness of self, culture, and nation. The boundary between self and other must be secure in order to define one's identity and maintain totality. When outside forces break down this boundary, wholeness becomes fragmented and identity is scattered. A radical shift in identity can occur when the boundary between self and other, or outside, is broken abruptly. Koudelka's images display the fight to overcome thanatos, the death instinct. Whether in images of the gypsies, exiles or victims of invasion, the viewer can engage with the psychological impact of these conflicts and the subjects' drive towards the unity of identity, a form of eros. The growth of a whole identity is nurtured by its roots. This organic metaphor can be applied to historical rootedness to a particular location that provides continuity and stability in which to cultivate a collective identity.[38]

Rootedness and Change in Landscape

In the late 1980's, just as *Exiles* was exhibited at the International Center for Photography in New York city, Koudelka was granted French citizenship. A short time later in 1989 he created a series of photographs at various sites around Calais, France, that are truly "of the land." These are not just scenic panoramas; these landscapes allude to the ambiguous relationship that humans have with the land. As a person's identity becomes bound up unconsciously to the locale she occupies, relationships are formed and evolve. Alternately, as discussed earlier, when a person encounters foreign territory she must formulate her identity in relationship to that space in a new way. This is an arduous undertaking fraught with uncertainties. The viewer is not dealing with herself and an image of a figural "other." Instead the viewer is presented with enigmatic environments that she must ask questions of and negotiate.

Koudelka's landscapes of Calais are vast empty spaces of indeterminate location. The wide angle lens that produced an intimate quality with the subjects of Koudelka's figural photographs now create a lonely, desolate environment. In *Coquelles* the earth has been raked clean of several feet of soil and any identifiable markings. In the middle of the scene only a circular stump of earth remains with a tuft of grass on top. This mound is like a decapitated tree that has roots, but no growth. This site itself is being destroyed to make way for a new identity. Simply, it depicts change. Why has the mound of dirt been isolated and retained? Why does the camera place the viewer directly in front of it? This is the only spot of continuity with the past, just a turn of the head would obliterate this remnant completely. The viewer is no longer witness to exile, or sympathetic with exile through images of humans. She is thrust into reflection on the dilemma of navigating a new undefined, limitless environment without any points of reference. *Sangatte-Fond Pignon* is a smooth tilting panorama being bulldozed. The dozer that anchors the image on the left is

solid, with heavy wheels and the back full of dirt. A second bulldozer tilts as it mows the soil on the other face of the hill. A third machine exactly marks the perspective point on the horizon where the paths of the first two will converge at some future moment. The wide angle lens magnifies the raking angles and upends the solid perspectival diagonals. The right half of the image is clean tilled land, open for speculation as to what will be sown there. The chiaroscuro of Koudelka's earlier images is downplayed in these vistas. Even though fine texture remains important, a grey smoothness pervades. There is nothing to grab onto, to hold, to identify with, to ground oneself in.

Another image of *Coquelles* is a huge precisely framed open arena. Its smooth expanse spreads out flat for miles, then gently slopes up out to the sky. The whole area is lined with a tarpaulin waiting to collect the next rainfall. This empty reservoir waits to be filled metaphorically with meaning and given distinguishing characteristics that make it a particular locale, not just an unidentifiable vessel. These landscapes could be viewed solely as desolate barren lands altered by humans and machines, but their open, simple surfaces project a calmness. These organic spaces are not decaying. They are slowly undergoing change, and they hold promise for regeneration.

Calais-Dunes Shaken by Explosions is a close-cropped graphic image of three orderly triangular sand dunes. They cling to each other, protected by their spiky grass coverings that look dense against the motionless, unmarked sky. *Boulogne sur Mer-Digue* was photographed far out on a jetty. Only a small portion of the image (where the camera is set) is on solid rocks. The surrounding image is filled with choppy frothing ocean waves running unceasingly in diagonal rows. It is difficult to discern where they are headed; no shore or goal is marked. Whereas the currents of change in *Gypsies*, *Exiles* and Prague in 1968, dealt with human identity and a strong-spirited journey towards a destination (at the end, death) these landscapes embody the stability of the constant motion of nature's cycles.

Recuperation or Continuation of Identity?

Kozloff writes that Koudelka's work is "recuperative,"[39] implying that Koudelka restores life to something that is ill. Contrary to Kozloff's estimation, the dislocated subjects of Koudelka's work pursue life vigorously. Though they may be uprooted outsiders they are not on the verge of extinction. Kozloff praises Koudelka for the humanism of his aim and motifs, stating that the emotion in his work seems old-fashioned at the end of the ultra-antihumanistic 1980's.[40] Instead of labelling him ahead of his time, Kozloff relegates Koudelka along with his fellow exile subjects to the nostalgia of the past.

Ironically, Kozloff searches so diligently for moral intentions that he misses the impact of Koudelka's humanism. His photographs speak broadly of the natural state of human dislocation. Koudelka's subjects' ambiguous relationship to their surroundings on their journey through life becomes a symbol

of the change and dispossession that must occur during the growth of identity. This is the ongoing sustenance of life. Koudelka's images are not recuperative, they merely document a continuing evolution of risk and growth that is at the core of everyone's existence.

Despite his emphasis on the critical dialectic, Kozloff overlooks the incredible potential in Koudelka's work for engagement with the viewer. Koudelka's photographs are not just about displaying dislocation. Their impact is not just the content of the images. But through the viewer's negotiation of her reaction to the subjects that appear to be "other" to her, the viewer also encounters a feeling of connection. The viewer realistically understands that she is not in a continuous space and time with the image, but is dislocated from it. This negotiation in relation to the photograph points to the larger shifts that occur throughout the process of building identity in life experiences.

This reflection occurs most dramatically in Koudelka's landscapes that do not involve human subjects. Without any points of reference, the viewer is uprooted. She must make sense of these places by first reflecting on her own situation and determining her approach to these images. With ongoing change in the viewer's identity, this reaction will change over time.

Kozloff states in the quote at the beginning of this paper that through art one may find peace with the psychologically alien. However I imagine that filmmaker John Waters might retort, "It's lonely at the bottom as well as the top."[41] Koudelka's photographs find the humanity that makes us realize the psychologically alien may be in our own imagination.

Notes

1 Max Kozloff, "Psychological Dynamics of Art Criticism of the Sixties," *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 320.
2 John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 144.
3 Max Kozloff, "Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method," *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 307.
4 Ibid., 308.
5 Ibid., 309.
6 Ibid., 310.
7 Kozloff, "Psychological Dynamics of Art Criticism of the Sixties," 316.
8 Max Kozloff, *Photography and Fascination* (Danbury, NH: Addison House, 1979), 26.
9 Ibid., 26.
10 Max Kozloff, "The Etherealized Figure and the Dream of Wisdom," *Lone Visions Crowded Frames: Essays on Photography* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 280.

11 Kozloff, "Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method," 304.
12 Kozloff, *Photography and Fascination*, 42.
13 Kozloff, "The Etherealized Figure and the Dream of Wisdom," 277.
14 Ibid., 277.
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29 Ibid., 93.
30 Ibid., 95.
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33 Ibid., 103.
34 Ibid., 103.
35 Ibid., 99.
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American Art around 1960 and the Loss of Self

MATTHEW BAIGELL

Everybody knows that an incredible amount of activity took place in the New York art world in the years just before and just after 1960. New movements included Assemblage, Happenings, Minimal Art, Pop Art and Op Art. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that in the works and statements of some artists, there appears to be what I would like to call a loss of self or a negation of self, an absence of a centered self, a personal sense of dislocation. There is no single term to cover what I have in mind, but I feel its presence is indisputable.

These artists, or the selves they presented, would seem to be the opposite of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poet who "stands among particular men for the complete man...," and who "perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form," or of Emerson's ideal individual who "is its [the world's] head and heart, and finds something of himself in every great and small thing, in every mountain stratum, in every new law of color, fact of astronomy, or atmospheric influence which observation or analysis lay open."[1] That is, the artists I want to consider—Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Andy Warhol—do not at all project the kind of self assurance and unlimited confidence of Emerson's poet and singular individual both of whom seem ready to colonize the universe and to encompass within their own beings all that is not themselves. (I am not saying that they should, but that I am using Emersonian notions as points of contrast.)

In Emersonian terms, Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman did try to reach beyond themselves. In fact, Newman's famous statement, published in 1948, "instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are now making [them] out of ourselves, out of our feelings," is probably the most impassioned Emersonian statement ever deliv-

ered by an American artist. His statement also suggests that in a post-war, hostile world, he would make his own values. As Wylie Sypher suggested in his important book, *Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art*, paraphrasing remarks Bertrand Russell made as early as 1918 in the aftermath of World War I, "We must go on from this despair to a tragic confidence in ideals we must erect unaided."[2] But by the middle 1950s, Newman's imperial self, his centered, yet searching self concerned with values, morals, ideals, and purpose had become lost to the younger artists.

Take Rauschenberg, for example. In his Combines of the middle 1950s, he did not want to provide illustrations of his will, but to document what he had observed. He said, in regard to finding objects to include in his work, "I felt as though I were collaborating with the neighborhood."[3]

The usual explanations for Rauschenberg's art at that time revolve around his presumed reactions to the autobiographical excesses of the Abstract Expressionists and to the general loss of a societal value structure after World War II. The art of the early 1960s has also been explained in similar terms. Speaking about Minimalism, Maurice Berger has suggested that there was a "desire for pure experience independent of memory or logic [which] recalls the New Left's demand for liberation from society's oppressive conventions and standards." And Robert Morris more precisely pointed out that perhaps due to a lessened concern for absolutes, an acknowledgement of the exhaustion of modernist forms, an awareness of emotional weariness, or global threats, of life in a nuclear society, of environmental distress, and industrial pollution, "that sense of doom has gathered on the horizon of our perceptions and grows larger everyday." In any case, the future can hardly be said to exist and "a numbness in the face of gigantic failure of imagination has set in."[4]

But Rauschenberg's friendship with the composer John Cage is certainly equally important to consider. Cage, a student of eastern philosophies, began to study with Gita Sarabhai and Daisetz T. Suzuki at Columbia University in 1945. He met a worked with Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College during the summer of 1952, and a few years later Rauschenberg created sets for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company of which Cage was musical director. In 1956, Cage taught occasional classes at the New School for Social Research in New York City which were attended by several younger artists, and by the early 1960s his ideas were well known to the dancers, musicians, and artists (Robert Morris among them) who were part of the Judson Dance Theater.[5] Because of Cage's activities as well as the publication of books on Zen by Suzuki and the more popular Alan Watts, one can speak of a Zen presence in New York City at the time.[6]

In any event, Rauschenberg's comments apropos his Combines recall one of Cage's observations written before 1961. In regard to the use of random noise in a composition, Cage wrote "One may give up the desire to

control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."[7] This is a very Zen statement. As Suzuki and Watts often reiterated, Zen was not about sinking into an abyss or losing one's personality, but rather of subsuming one's individuality by connecting "with Being and Life which animates all things." The idea was not to fall into the "blankness of unconscious," but to gain, through intuition, immediate knowledge (certainly, an open-ended proposition).[8] Like Emerson, Suzuki was opposed to "blind acceptance of an outside authority and a weak submission to authority," but unlike Emerson, who called for concerted efforts at understanding more and more about nature, Suzuki explained that in Zen there might then be "perfect freedom to the self-unfolding of the Mind within one's self."[9]

Cage's interest in "non-intention," then, is a Zen concept, and Rauschenberg's willingness to interact with his neighborhood when making Combines also reflects Zen thought. With this in mind, one understands Cage's observation that Rauschenberg's work allowed him to walk without disgust through Times Square. "Our intention," he said, "is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos or to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord (1961)."[10] And with this also in mind, it is Rauschenberg's Zen self that allows for collaboration with various materials. The artist is, as he said, "part of the density of an uncensored continuum that neither begins nor ends with any decision of action of his."[11] Implicit and explicit here is the loss of a domineering self, a frank willingness to allow the self to be a co-author of its creations, and a paradoxically conscious willing of the self into a lack of conscious identity and dominance.

Ad Reinhardt, a popular artist of the time and well known to the younger figures (Stella owned a painting by Reinhardt), was also a student of eastern mysticism, but clearly understood it differently from Rauschenberg. He had attended Suzuki's seminars at Columbia University in the early 1950s, and later that decade and into the next wrote what were in effect explanations and manifestos concerning his "black paintings" as these reflected his beliefs. It is my belief, however, that he misunderstood Zen and perhaps misinformed his younger friends. Zen ways of thinking and modes of action betray normal western concepts of human agency, rationality, and direct action. It is not easy, perhaps ultimately impossible, for a western person raised in a culture whose precepts are so antithetical to Zen philosophy to adapt to a Zen way of life. And so Reinhardt provided instruction and was quite directive rather then allow his readers to find their own way. In his most famous essay, for example, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy (1957)," he insisted that a painting have no texture, no forms, no design, no colors, no space, no time, and no subject, among other features. And in one of his journal entries, he wrote that an artist

"has always nothing to say,/And he must say this over and over again." The very word "must," of course, defies Zen tenets, and whatever Reinhardt passed on to the younger artists was less a sense of Zen emptiness than of personal emptiness.[12] This might help explain, for instance, Robert Morris' quasi-Zen statement when reminiscing about his work of the early 1960s.

> At 30, I had my alienation, my Skilsaw and my plywood. I was out to rip out the metaphors, especially those that had to do with "pep," as well as every other whiff of transcendence. When I sliced into the plywood with my Skilsaw, I could hear...a stark and refreshing 'no' reverberate off the four walls; no transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artifact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience.[13]

Regardless, the sense of emptying out, of taking oneself out of the work in question, whether Zen inspired or not, whether understood in a Zen context or not, whether societally induced or not, seems to have been present around 1960. Zen might even have been nothing more than a symptom of larger social issues. Whatever the case, at the very end of the 1950s, barely a decade after Barnett Newman wrote about building cathedrals to ourselves, Frank Stella began to exhibit his notched canvases, according to which the shapes of the canvases and the widths of the stretchers (the framing edges) determined the internal patterns of the paintings. Of these works, Stella said that the act of painting was,

> like handwriting. And I found out that I just didn't have anything to say in those terms. I didn't want to make variations; I didn't want to record a path.... I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting—the humanistic values that they always find on their canvases.... My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there.... What you see is what you see.[14]

Stella and Newman seem hardly to be talking about the same thing, namely, the act of painting. Let me insert here a passage from Emerson's essay, "Circles," because it helps explain something about Stella and also to distinguish Stella from Rauschenberg. Emerson wrote,

> The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second, and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end... Every action admits to being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning, that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.[15]

That is, there is a self, a centered, aggressive self in constant motion, in constant process of aspiring toward some higher level of understanding, of comprehension, believing that every boundary can be broken. Rauschenberg's self is no longer an imperial self, but it does keep moving, opening itself to, as the artist said, "an uncensored continuum." By contrast, Stella, in the notched paintings, works from the depicted shapes, from the boundaries, inward. Limits have been set and established. It is as if he has hunkered down behind the perimeters or barricades of the framing edges. There are no confrontations with the infinite, no heroics because, it would seem, the sense of self is enfeebled. It lacks strength to push out beyond the horizon of the edges.

Even if one wanted to argue that each band represented a horizon, I would counter that each band is the same size and therefore possesses the same value. It does not matter which way the eye moves or if it moves at all. Movement, in the Emersonian sense, is of no consequence except for the sake of movement. This implies that the viewer is reduced to a nullity in that he or she need not take responsibility for reading a work in any particular order. The work is prescribed by the external power of the framing edge rather than by one's own experiences or, for that matter, the artist's. The self does not dictate, but is dictated to.

The question of the edge and the interaction between the edge and the center was also taken up by Robert Smithson in his writings of the mid-1960s and in his Site/Non-Sites. Perimeters for Smithson were fraught with peril. For example, he ended one of his essays, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art (1968)," with an analysis of the dot in Buckminster Fuller's World Energy Map. Smithson reported that each dot was supposed to represent one percent of the world's harnessed energy in terms of human equivalents. What that might mean remains moot, but Smithson did say something important about the dot. It "evades our capacity to find its center. Where is the central point, exit, dominant interest, fixed position, absolute structure, or decided goal? The mind is always being hurled towards the outer edge into intractable trajectories that lead to vertigo."[16] Rather than exult in whatever the self might discover on the outer edge, as in Emerson's horizons, here it leads to vertigo. The edge, then, is not necessarily a good place to be. There is uneasiness at the thought of the unknown.

This idea becomes clearer when Smithson explained the relationship between the center and the edge in the Site-Non-Sites. In a Site-Non-Site, the non-site is the central focal point wherever it might be—in a designated area in New Jersey or California. "The site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place. The interesting thing about the site is that, unlike the nonsite, it throws you out to the fringes." Speaking specifically about a Non-Site on Mono Lake in a desolate part of California, he stated, "There's nothing to grasp onto except the cinders and there's no way of focus-

ing on a particular place. One might even say that the place has been absconded or been lost. This is a map that will take you somewhere, but when you get there you wont really know where you are." And then he repeats, "in a sense, the non-site is the centre of the system, and the site itself is the fringe or the edge."[17]

On other occasions, Smithson expressed concern for the interaction between the center and the edge probably as a way to articulate his own ambivalent position in any particular environment. What was at the fringe or beyond was problematic. For as he once noted, "No matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin. You are confronted with an extending horizon; it can extend onward and onward, but then you suddenly find the horizon is closing in all around you.... In other words, thee is no escape from limits."[18] The unknown, then, marks the negative limits of knowledge. To say the least, this is not Emerson's very puncturable horizon, but rather an admission of the impossibility of pushing back the boundaries of the future. It suggests to me a kind of living death of the self.

On another occasion, writing in his most famous essay, "Entropy and the New Monuments (1966)," Smithson mentioned the works of certain artists—Dan Flavin, Don Judd, Sol LeWitt—by using the phrase "beyond the barriers, there are only more barriers." Smithson said that their works are for perception only—a sort of what you see is what you see—which he believed to be a "deprivation of action and reaction." Of Dan Flavin's pieces, Smithson said that prolonged viewing is impossible because ultimately there is nothing to see, and Judd's works "hid nothing but the wall they hang on."[19] These descriptions follow a discussion of the null and void of entropy, which Smithson sees as our future condition. He mentions a book by Wylie Sypher, which must be *Loss of Self*, published in 1962, in which Sypher defines entropy as the "tendency for an ordered universe to go over into a state of disorder..., the behavior of things tends to become increasingly random; and in any system tending toward the random there is a loss of direction. Entropy is drift, then, toward an unstructured state of equilibrium that is total. Entropy is evolution in reverse."[20] Evidently, the artist cannot fight it. It overwhelms. For as Smithson said, "Everyone who invents a system and then swears by it, that system will eventually turn on the person and wipe him out."[21] The self, apparently, cannot hope to triumph, but rather remain passive in the face of things coming loose.

Gary Shapiro's analysis of the film of the making of *The Spiral Jetty* (1970) comes to a similar conclusion. He describes a shot of Smithson running on the jetty, but photographed in such a way as if to seem running in place. Shapiro also observes that "we do not see [Smithson]—or any other human being—involved in shaping, moving, or applying materials," and that in the film "language and action never coincide in a single figure.... When [Smithson] is shown running counterclockwise to the center of the spiral, we can imagine

that he is trapped in the maze or labyrinth." Finally, questioning the lack of human agency, Shapiro notices that the "the loss of the center induces vertigo, like the historical vertigo consequent upon the proliferation of multiple temporalities and the disappearance of expected narrative."[22] Putting together Smithson's comments about vertigo at the edges and Shapiro's concern for vertigo at the center, the individual self does not have much room for maneuver.

The labyrinth to which Shapiro metaphorically referred was in fact built by Robert Morris in 1974. In the context of the present discussion, Morris' "Labyrinth" is an object one enters, gains minimal information in order to get out of it and does not reach any further level of understanding. There might also be a certain amount of aimless wandering around as at a Site-Non-Site, even the abandonment of knowing where one is. The voyage into the unknown, which, by comparison, was a voyage of personal revelation for Abstract Expressionists is here a physical journey. No insights are gained along the way. No growth. It is a doing activity, a reduction of process to its most basic physical level.[23]

Obviously, the idea of process in recent art and of Process Art itself has received much positive attention, but Wylie Sypher offered a critique as early as 1962 when he wrote in *Loss of Self* that concern for process is really a statement about ignoring what lies outside of the self, of denying cognizance of anything else. Cultivating the self in this way means cultivating a self without culture, and since "culture means criticism, and criticism is only the capacity for dissatisfaction and self scrutiny," then those lacking this capacity lack authenticity. Such a person, and, by extension, such an artist involved virtually exclusively with process "remains a creature limited by his self-satisfaction."[24] Morris perhaps tried to put a favorable spin on this issue when he stated the "the only authenticity is one which has refused every identity conferred by an institution, a discourse, an image or a style, as well as every delight and oppression offered by that gulag called the autobiographical."[25] But how favorable is it, really? To invoke Emerson again, his notion of freeing oneself, or to quote a line from his essay "Circles," "no facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker, with no Past at my back," becomes a means to find one's authenticity, not to reduce it to physical movement or to submerge it and drown it as Morris would have it.[26]

To make my point clearer here, I want to compare Morris' statement with two passages by Georgia O'Keeffe that are pure Emerson. On one occasion, she wrote, "The unexplainable thing in nature that makes me feel the world is big beyond my understanding—to understand maybe by trying to put it into form. To find the feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill." And in a letter she wrote to Sherwood Anderson, probably in 1923. "Making your unknown known is the important thing—and keeping the unknown always beyond you—catching and crystallizing your simplest clearer

vision of life—only to see it turn stale compared to what you vaguely feel ahead—that you must always keep working to grasp."[27]

This is not to say that Morris should be more like O'Keeffe (or vice-versa), but rather to point out the extent to which the self had been emptied out by the 1960s. So it is not surprising to find this observation made by dancer Yvonne Ranier, one of Morris' colleagues at the Judson Dance Theater. "The artifice of performance has been reevaluated in that action, or what one does, is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude, and that action can best be focused on through submerging of the personality; so ideally one is not even oneself, one is a neutral doer."[28]

Morris, like Stella, also worked within perimeters in the early 1960s. One piece, called *Passageways* (1961), contained ever-narrowing walls which grew more confining until the individual who entered it could only back out. The horizon here had completely shut down. During these same years, Morris also created his *Portal* series, works which were usually in the shape of door frames. These, too, if like boxes opened on only one side, were quite confining. A work in this series, *Untitled—Pine Portal with Mirrors* (1961), contains mirrors on its inner sides. Passing through this portal, as Kimberly Paice pointed out, "involves a decentering of the body vis-a-vis the frame—as though to pass through the doorway is to leave a dispersed and doubled image of one-self as a kind of deposit or trace."[29]

The word "trace" probably refers to Jacques Derrida's use of the word. In brief, Derrida suggests that any object or "substance" includes so many allusions that it cannot refer only to itself, "that no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present... There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences."[30] In the context of the mirrored portal, I would go even further than Paice by saying that to pass through the doorway is to leave a trace which is then erased immediately after passing through. There is no residue except the work itself. The self here would seem not to have a center strong enough to contain itself within the peripheries of the portal, but rather is leached out by the mirrors. In Smithson's trope of the Site-Non-Site, the self at the center is the non-site and the edges absorb all of its energies. The portals, then, which can be confining might also be agents of dispersion and loss.

Morris is, however, very present in his *I-Box* of 1962. But in what ways? When the *I-Box* is closed, we see the letter "I." When it is opened, we see a photograph of the naked Morris with a slightly erect penis. Maurice Berger suggests that the work "recalls Beckett's drained vision of the world, where 'I' is often little more than a vacant word, a coffin that enshrouds its subject in claustrophobic isolation."[31] I would add that there is no sense of an inner being, but instead a self that thinks of itself as a letter in the alphabet and knows itself only through public display. *That* is a decentered self. The "I" is the self literally revealed, totally, but only externally. What we see here is the

desire for pure experience unmediated by meaning or logic, a self that probably responds only to the ways other perceive it. It is a self involved with the most minimal kind of self-identification. It seems to lack the energy to react except in a physical way and unable to assert itself other than by its actual presence. Morris' body becomes his unique signature, a substitute for a unique style or a unique self. In the *I Box*, Morris implies that self-definition comes not from interactions with reality, but from language and physical immediacy. His naked body is incapable of making history, of moving to another level of being, since there is no sense of potentiality, only presence without a future.

The superficial self that Andy Warhol projected reveals surprising parallels to the selves expressed by Stella, Smithson, and Morris. In an odd way, Warhol's self had some of the same character that described Rauschenberg's at the time, although, I would not push the comparison too far. Nevertheless, as Rauschenberg felt as if he were interacting with the neighborhood when making a Combine, so Warhol was "never embarrassed about asking someone, literally, "What should I paint?"[32] But while Rauschenberg seems to have been responding to a Zen idea, Warhol seem rather to have been exhibiting a characteristic typical of the "other-directed" person described by David Reisman in his *The Lonely Crowd*, a popular book in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Reisman,

> What is common to all other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the sources of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted through friends and through the mass media... The other-directed person is, in a sense, at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone.[33]

Reisman was probably describing the post-modern mentality before the term was invented, for, as sociologist Kenneth J. Gergen has suggested, in that mentality, "the self vanishes fully into a stage of relatedness. One ceases to believe in a self independent of the relations in which he or she is embedded...," and, paradoxically, "Life is rendered more fully expressive and enriched by suspending the demands for personal coherence, self-recognition, or determinant placement, and simply *being* within the ongoing process of relating."[34]

And although nothing in the literature even hints at Warhol's involvement with Zen, his statement, "I'm sure I'm going to look in the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?" somewhat parallels the concept of *wu-wei* which is about the non-grasping of things in order to let them go their own way in one's mind. As one ancient master is reported to have said, "The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror. If it grasps nothing, it refuses nothing. It receives, but does not keep."[35] But looking for connections is less valid than realizing

the condition of the self in American art during the 1960s.

It is more to the oint, however, to think of Warhol in terms of Baudrillard's simulacrum, as if he, Warhol, were acting as a sign for the real instead of the real itself. In this regard, we might view Warhol, as Baudrillard describes the contemporary person, as one who has "not even his own body to protect him anymore." For such a person,

> The end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparance of the world...traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.[36]

Warhol almost forces us to think about him in this way when we consider some of the remarks he made over the years. "I'd love to be able to know everything about a person from watching them on television." "Good performers, I think, are all-inclusive recorders because they can mimic emotions as well as speech and looks and atmosphere." "I have no memory. Everyday is a new day because I don't remember the day before. Every minute is like the first of my life. I try to remember, but I can't." "If you want to know about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface. There's nothing behind it." "Before I was shot, I always thought that I was more half there than all there. I always suspected that I was watching TV instead of living life."[37] These are not the statements of a person concerned with projecting a powerful sense of self.

In their differing ways, then, these artists assaulted the concept of the primacy of the self during the 1960s, questioned its centrality both in life and in art, and left it very vulnerable as an agent of order, control, and authority. Only Warhol seems to have remained in thrall of this sensibility for the remainder of his career. Stella moved on to make works in which the designing mind of the artist is clearly evident. The others, in one way or another, became involved variously in projects based on environmental, cultural, and political factors. In other words, these artists once again valorized intentionality, the assertion of self, and a concern for values aesthetic or otherwise. Perhaps they responded, in part, to pressures brought to bear on the mainstream avant-garde by formerly marginalized groups such as feminist artists or African-American artists who had an agenda and a purpose, and whose work was certainly charged with human agency. By 1970, the desire to break

Notes

1 The first two citations are from "The Poet," *Essays: The Second Series* (1844), and the third is from *Nature* (1836), reprinted in Joel Porte, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 448, 456, and 44.

2 For Newman, see "The Sublime is Now," reprinted in John P. O'Neill, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 173; For Russell, the gloss is from his essay, "A Free Man's Worship," and is cited in Wylie Sypher, *Loss of Self In Modern Literature and Art* (New York: Vintage, 1962) 160. See my "The Emersonian Presence in Abstract Expressionism," *Prospects 15* (1990): 91-108.

3 Douglas Davis, *Art and the Future* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 37.

4 Maurice Berger *Labyrinths: Robert Morris. Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 12; and Robert Morris, "American Quartet," *Art in America*, 69 (December 1981): 104.

5 For Cage's chronology, see Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 37-39. For the Judson Dance Theater, see Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), *passim*.

6 See for example, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Studies in Zen,* ed. by Christmas Humphreys (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1955), and Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957).

7 John Cage, "Experimental Music" in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 10.

8 Suzuki, *Zen*, 28.

9 Suzuki, *Zen*, 24.

10 Kostelanetz, *Cage*, 33, 118.

11 Robert Rauschenberg, "Oyvind Fahlstrom," *Art and Literature*, 3 (Autumn-Winter, 1964): 219.

12 Barbara Rose, ed., *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 205-206, 142.

13 Morris, "Three Folds in the Fabric and Four Autobiographical Asides As Allegories (or Interruptions), *Art in America* 77 (November 1989): 144.

14 Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd (1964)," in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 157, 158.

15 "Circles," from *First Series* (1841), in Porte, *Emerson*, 403.

16 Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 78.

17 From "Discussions with Heizer, Oppenheim, Smithson (1970)," in *Smithson*, 177.

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

19 "Entropy and the New Monuments," in Holt, *Smithson*, 13.

20 Sypher, *Loss of Self*, 73-74.

21 "Four Conversations," in Eugenie Tsai, *Robert Smithson Unearthed: Drawings, Collages, Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 105.

22 Gary Shapiro, *Earthwords: Robert Smithson and Art After Babel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 17, 19-20, 15.

23 Berger, *Labyrinths*, 129-133.

24 Sypher, *Loss of Self*, 35.

25 Morris, "Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is that a Mouse in My *Paragone*?)," in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert*

Morris (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 313.

26 Emerson, "Circles (1841)", in Porte, *Emerson*, 412.

27 *Georgia O'Keeffe*, (New York: Viking, 1976), opposite plate 100; and, Katherine Hoffman, *An Enduring Spirit: The Art of Georgia O'Keeffe* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 13.

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Reinventing the Avant-Garde
A Stylistic Analysis of Selected Essays of Jacques Derrida

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Although much has been written about Jacques Derrida's obscure, frustrating essays, most commentary has as its general goal the de-coding of his texts to find the theory behind the words. What, after all, does Derrida *mean*?

Little has been said about the formal properties of his style—its similarities to and borrowings from other written work, particularly literature loosely regarded as avant-garde. Patterns of exposition, verbal ticks and tricks, hybrid terms and reflexive sentence structure have come to identify the Derridean text, as surely as a thumb print. What are the origins of this language and structure? Is the avant-garde literary character of Derrida's text the innovation of a creative mind exploring a new way to present critical theory? Is the language a clever way of mirroring and illustrating the author's philosophy? Or does the Derridean text hide from analysis behind a wall of mystification? Is it simply a pastiche of borrowed ideas from the experimental literature of the past century?

In addressing the various hierarchies of language—for example, between the written and spoken language, and between philosophy and literature—Derrida has brought into question the traditional view of critical writing as a purified language, that is, an unobtrusive language that offers no formal barriers to truth. For Derrida, philosophy and literature are simply different species of writing. Nonetheless, the traditional literary text seems to be more engaging and basic:

> A task is prescribed: to study the philosophic text in its formal structure, in its rhetorical organization, the specificity and diversity of its textual types, its models of exposition and production—beyond what were once called genres...in short to consider phi-

> losophy as a 'particular *literary* genre' which draws upon the reserves of a linguistic system, organizing, forcing or diverting a set of topological possibilities that are older than philosophy.[1]

By superimposing the techniques of literature, particularly avant-garde literature, onto theory, Derrida has developed a powerful strategy for erasing the boundaries between literature and theory. Even as he questions critical theory's status as the text of truth, he reaffirms the traditional privilege of the literary, fusing it with his own philosophical texts. He is in search of that elusive "originality" that has been literature's provenance alone. What other philosopher has written like this?

As Jonathan Culler notes, Derrida realizes that the literary text has practical advantages over the critical text when it comes to forcing the reader to pay attention:

> There is nothing that might not be put into a literary work; there is no pattern or mode of determination that might not be found there. To read a text as philosophy is to ignore some of its aspects in favor of particular sorts of argument; to read it as literature is to remain attentive even to its apparently trivial features. A literary analysis is one that does not foreclose possibilities of structure and meaning in the name of the rules of some limited discursive practice. [2]

In this paper, I will examine Jacques Derrida's essays *Plus R/Into the Bargain* and *Mes Chances*, together with the work of two avant-garde masters, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and two contemporary avant-garde authors, Ronald Sukenick and Bruce D. Price. Each author's writing parallels a literary characteristic of Derrida's prose style. I do not think that Derrida studied and consciously borrowed the techniques of these particular authors. Nonetheless, reading them together with Derrida—as he reads authors together—it appears clear that he has adapted avant-garde innovations. In doing so, he has created an aura of creativity and literary mastery that compensates for a missing substance and authenticity.

I will also suggest that Derrida ultimately fails to align his ideas with the avant-garde by way of his writing style. Although his language and rhetoric resemble that of such early literary innovators as Joyce and Beckett, and resembles contemporary avant-garde stylists such as Sukenick and Price, Derrida's work is at odds with the core spirit of the avant-garde—engagement with society with the hope of mediation. In his metaphysical world, where there are no first causes or originating voices, Derrida wants only the last word.

The Derridean Formula

Derrida uses certain patterns, virtually formulas, that characterize fiction rather

than theory.

(1) The first person. Many of his short essays and most of his longer works use an emphatic first person. Derrida's voice is typically false speaking, a strategy that disguises the textness of the text. For example, *Mes Chances* is a lecture Derrida delivered before an audience, reading from a text he intended for publication, yet written to mimic extemporaneous speech. Subversion of modes of literary articulation is a common practice in contemporary fiction. It is employed for the sake of textual self-reflection and to develop "presence." Derrida follows this by now conventional subversive route. By using the first person he brings into question the traditional distinction between speaking and writing, thus unmasking the fiction of authorial presence and delegating the site of meaning to an ever-receding horizon.

(2) An intimate tone that includes and excludes simultaneously. Derrida's tone is typically one of informal musing, involving hypothetical "what ifs" and "imagine thats." Seduced by the vocative, the reader is invited to examine ideas in embryo, thus becoming conspirators in meaning-making and playing voyeur to the free associations. At the same time, the obscurity of Derrida's meaning and his eccentric manner of presentation exclude the reader from participation in his intimate, completely one-sided conversation.

(3) The point of departure. Derrida always selects the text of another author or philosopher, or the work of an artist, as a point of departure: he writes about writers writing. In *Plus R/Into the Bargain*, Derrida discusses the serigraph of the painter Valerio Adami and the writings of Walter Benjamin. In *De la Grammatologie*, he discusses Rousseau's work; in *Mes Chances*, he incorporates the stories of Edgar Allan Poe in the context of a discussion of Freud's theories of accidents, chance happenings, and verbal lapses.

These three overtly subjective characteristics—the use of the first person, the intimate tone, and the point of departure—are at odds with the conventions of critical writing, however familiar in other kinds of literature. These unusual techniques of theoretical exposition, in and of themselves, are not the cause of Derrida's obscurity and lapses into apparent nonsense. They are simply tools he uses in such a way that the Derridean "I" utterly erases the reader's "Thou" in a stunning exercise of narcissism. For Derrida, the universal, unspoken contract between author and audience, based on a mutuality that moves inexorably toward negotiated meaning and shared understanding, simply does not exist. There is no "assumed reader," no audience to whom this text is addressed or to whom the author feels the responsibility of making himself clear. There is only Derrida in all his (quasi) literary glory. The hapless reader, hooked by the expectation that Derrida's unique style may reveal meaning in the making, endures—like a long-suffering therapist—a rambling stream of free associations moving with frustrating imprecision toward some never-reached "point."

Is there something more than perversity in Derrida's calculated ob-

fuscations? According to his own strategy of deconstruction, there is only one possibility. Having created a semantic theory in which the receiver/reader plays a key role in creating meaning—a theory in which the author is "dead" (Barthes)—Derrida seems driven to subvert this subversion. He undermines, indeed erases, the reader's new-found power of meaning-making—a power Derrida ostensibly promotes—by erecting insurmountable barriers of obscurity and meaninglessness.

Derrida's abstruse language has been a perennial target of detractors. Yet it is a primary feature of his work, and of much avant-garde literature. Consider this Derridean passage, alluding to the text's ability to gather meaning beyond the moment of writing:

> Each œuvre being absolutely singular in some respect, must have and admit the proper name. This is the condition of iterability as such. From whence comes, perhaps, the general form of the privilege that it retains for us in our experience inasmuch as it is the locus of luck and chance. The œuvre provokes us to think of the event. This in turn challenges our attempts to understand luck and chance, to envisage them, to take them in hand, or to inscribe them within an anticipatory horizon. It is at least because of this that they are œuvres and that they create an event, thereby challenging any program of reception. Œuvres befall us. They speak about or unveil that which befalls in its befalling upon us. They overpower in as much as they explain themselves with that which falls from above. The œuvre is vertical and slightly leaning.[3]

What can "the œuvre is vertical and slightly leaning" possibly mean? What is the purpose of such incomprehensability? For contemporary readers, familiar with the canon of the experimental—the work of Joyce, Beckett, Burroughs, Pynchon and others—obscurity has become synonymous with "exceptional," the "non-traditional," the "innovative," and as such the entirely expected sign of possible greatness. All experimental masters of the past century have created works characterized by obscurity, by withholding immediately graspable meaning and definitions. But what at first seemed incomprehensible in Joyce and Beckett, for example, gradually revealed itself as an integral part of an authentic whole—as a literary tactic that is at once aesthetically expansive and socially corrective. Such authors fulfill the modernist edict to make the familiar new again. On the other hand, Derrida's prose style seems that of a trickster—deft, dazzling, and even entertaining in its reversals, associations and disorderings. But it lacks an aesthetic and moral center. Like many of his ideas, Derrida's literary intentions remain hidden in a veil of his own mystification. Nonetheless, many critics argue that his literary style deserves unqualified praise. In their introduction to *Mes Chances*, William Kerrigan and Joseph Smith describe Derrida's self-referential, inconclusive texts as a delib-

erate and brilliantly conceived assault on the "western bias of logic and science." Defending Derrida's literary originality, they assert:

> As theme, method and source of wonder, reflexivity dominates the great philosophies of consciousness. This doubling back of fixed mind in the presence of itself, for reasons that Derrida explores, the security of autoaffection, has been rendered in great chains of preferential metaphors extending from and toward the speaking voice. Derrida is a philosopher of writing. He intends to demonstrate that the traits that can be recognized in the classical, narrowly defined concept of writing (iterability beyond the presence of the writer, the force writing carries to break with its context, and the spacing that constitutes the written sign) are generalizable. They are valid not only for all orders of signs, and for all languages in general, but moreover, beyond semi-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience.[4]

But what does it mean to say Derrida is a "philosopher of writing"? Comparing his writing with that of Joyce, Beckett, Sukenick and Price—each in his own way considered difficult and original—will give us an answer.

James Joyce and the Creative Language of the Unconscious

James Joyce has been regarded as the greatest literary craftsman of modern times. His work cannot be placed in any particular literary genre; it seems to implicate all of them. Using intricate strategies of analogy, verbal association, mythic reference, and synchronicity, Joyce created a language for the express purpose of portraying the drama of the mind, particularly the workings of the unconscious.

Joyce invented literary parallels for Freud's "free association." Joyce was fascinated and seduced by words and the way they worked and resonated—"traversed" the subconscious. It seems unlikely that such a wordsmith would have escaped Derrida's interest.

Consider this passage from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, in which Finnegan/HCE hears the mixed sounds of the night in the Dublin streets, from the Metro train to garbled songs:

> To the Trhummings of a creweth fiddle which, cremoaning and cronauning, levey, grevy, witting and wevey, appy, leppy and playable, caressed the ears of the subjects of King Saint Finnerty the Festive who, in brick homes of their own and in their flavory fraiseberry beds, heeding hardly cry of hoeyman, soed lavender or foyneboyne salmon alive, with their prigish mouths all open for the larger appraisition of this long awaited Messaigh of rorotorios.[5]

In this typical passage, Joyce attempts to re-create the exact texture of a dream

state in which the world outside (the somewhere else) is present as a dim, half-realized lull of sounds, rhythms, movement, and sensuality. Where *Ulysses* describes the mental life of Dublin figures in minute detail while they go through their daily activities, *Finnegans Wake* paints a picture of a time at night when the protagonist, H. C. Earwicker, experiences below the threshold of particularized language. Language does not proceed in linear fashion, but expands in multiple directions around various references, dragging with it the history of the human race. Unlike conscious language, dream words are in constant play, teasing at and moving toward meaning.

When *Finnegans Wake* was first published, the critic Edmund Wilson described in 1931 (the year after Derrida was born) the sheer originality of its language:

> In *Finnegans Wake*, images or words which were once in the conscious mind will suddenly acquire an ominous significance which has nothing to do with their ordinary functions...Images which in the waking mind would keep distinct from one another incongruously mix in sleep with an effect of perfect congruity. A single one of Joyce's sentences therefore will combine two or three different meanings, two or three different sets of symbols; a single word may combine with two or three. Joyce in inventing his dream language has profited from Freud's researches into the principals which govern language actually spoken in dreams: portmanteau words, puns, parapraxis, ellipses and reversals.[6]

The opening sentence of Derrida's essay *Plus R/Into the Bargain* refers to this same Freudian panoply of linguistic transformations:

> And what if, resonance in this other language still leading you astray, I liked words *in order to be-tray* (to treat, triturate, trice, intrigue, trace, track). For example, *in order to betray* Adami, to be a traitor to his travail, I would let myself be framed.[7]

Though the passage is only several sentences, it illustrates the core motifs and constructions of Derridean language which is astonishingly similar to Joyce's. Drawn directly into Derridean argument with the initial three-word statement "and what if," the reader recalls Joyce's use of first person narratives in *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*. Derrida seems to borrow Joyce's stream-of-consciousness literary technique (modelled on Freud's therapeutic strategies). He strings words together the way Joyce does, using sound similarities, historical and literary associations, alliteration, opposition, puns, and chance. Like the words in Joyce's novels, Derrida's language shimmers with a nimbus of uncertainty.

But there is a crucial difference. Where Derrida confines his analysis—words in play—to logic, looking to reason for the source of the sign's

behavior, Joyce finds the site of meaning in the sensual. The rich poetics and sonorous harmonies of Joyce's prose, rooted in his uncanny sensitivity to sound, make for a much less one-dimensional language than Derrida's semiotic, scientific play with signifiers. Although Derrida's techniques seem aesthetic, and certainly aspire to be aesthetic, his texts are not allowed to transcend the analytic demands of the *critical.* Joyce writes poetry that obliquely refers to meaning, while Derrida writes meaning that obliquely refers to poetry. Thus, as indicated by the *Plus R* passage, Derrida's style, although derived from the Joycean alliterative, associative tradition, becomes on close analysis, nothing more than an exercise in naming.

Samuel Beckett, the Theater of the Absurd, and the Circle as a Metaphor of Meaninglessness

Where Joyce seems to be a model for Derrida's word usage, Beckett's plays seem to be a model for the structure of many of Derrida's texts. In particular, Beckett's and Derrida's use of circular forms and themes to suggest content, correlate.

Staged in 1953, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* gave birth to the concept "Theater of the Absurd." Its theme is meaninglessness—the general meaninglessness of human activity, especially speech. Beckett's language is contradictory and disjointed, often conveying an improvised dream state. At one point Estragon challenges Vladimir to "keep the ball in play," suggesting that dialogue and communication are improvised games, nothing more. They can never lead to meaning. Estragon and Vladimir, the couple in play, are poles apart. The former represents action, the latter passivity; the former hope, the latter despair; the former reason, the latter emotion. Interacting among themselves and occasional visitors, they are trapped in a prison of oppositions. They await an elusive Godot to give their life purpose. S/he may or may or may not arrive in the constantly deferred future, but until then the two pass time in a number of futile, banal activities.

No conclusion occurs because the play's action is circular and repetitive. It is structured by a series of scenes in which Vladimir and Estragon appear by themselves. These are followed by scenes in which various characters arrive and depart, leaving Vladimir and Estragon alone again. An infinite circle of meaningless relationships and communication is suggested, and more deeply, the absurdity of existence.

Beckett's core metaphysical and linguistic interests—the reluctance and perhaps inability to fix any definite meaning, the absence of an external point of reference that could give meaning, the eternal deferral of meaning—are the same as Derrida's. Both use the same formal devices to express their "content," their "meaning." Derrida's texts, like Beckett's, rely on repetitive, contradictory dialogue, interruptions and disruptions of logic, and circular narrative. But where Beckett's circular structure is an endlessly expansive

metaphor for the human condition, Derrida's circle is a reductive metaphor for the non-existence of meaning. The circle is sometimes concretely presented in Derrida. References to circles—as geometric configurations, and as frames and fixed centers, as well as patterns of motion—abound in Derrida's work:

> I write four time here *around* painting. The first time I am occupied with folding the great philosophical question of the tradition...on to the insistent atopics of the parergon....These prolegomena of *The Truth in Painting*, themselves the parergon of this book, are ringed together by a circle.[8]

In *Plus R/Into the Bargain*, Derrida uses a vocabulary of circles ("A tergo, letting you think that one could turn around it, go on a tour of the property, circle around") to construct a transparently circular essay. Themes stated at the beginning of the essay appear and reappear—like Vladimir and Estragon—joined by other ideas, "meaning" continuously reworked. For both authors, then, the circle serves as an organizational pattern, in opposition to the traditional linear narrative of fiction and theory. In Beckett's hands, to the eternal circle, conceived as simultaneously form and content, accrue all the levels of meaning associated with numerous seemingly contradictory endeavors—religion, science, philosophy, literature, history, psychology. In Derrida's work, this basic approach disrupts the meaning generated by them until they seem meaningless.

Both authors are fundamentally concerned with the limits of language. In his own way, each attempts to "describe"—depict? perform?—them through the formal elements of their writing style, which becomes a kind of content in its own right. But the results are very different. Beckett's plays examine, in despair, the character of language as a communication tool. In *Endgame*, he extends the reduction of language he began in *Waiting for Godot*. The dialogue becomes sparse, mystifying, pointless, yet weaves a dense fabric of multiple, resonant meaning. Like Joyce, Beckett sprinkles his text with references to Shakespeare and myth , and with multi-lingual puns evoking contradictory interpretations and associations. Unlike the circular *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* has no beginning and middle.

In *Act Without Words I,* Beckett almost annihilates language. An exploration of silence—of a non-textual world—the play relies entirely on mime. The only sound is a whistle. Nonetheless, in this state of "pure reality," contradictions, ambiguities, ironies and absurdities—all the failures inherent in the coupling of signifier and signified—remain. They are an essential feature of the human condition.

Where Beckett deals with the effect of language's failure to communicate, Derrida deals with the semantic process of the failure. His language resembles that of Beckett in its repetitive patterns, disjointed and fragmented quality, and abrupt transitions. In *Plus R/Into the Bargain*, Derrida introduces

the topic of phonomes and their transformations, as they attach to various words. The "tr" theme that begins the essay is discontinued, and reintroduced at various points; then—as occurred at the end of Godot—summarily and inconclusively dropped. "Tr" becomes a dangling non-sequitur, as absurd as any line in Beckett:

> You could analyze this +r effect, like the +l effect in *Glas*, analyze it coldly and practically. You could also orchestrate it, for if we were here producing a discourse, he and I, it would be rather, on music.[9]

Did Derrida, who was 23 when *Waiting for Godot* was produced at the Theatre de Babylon in Paris, see the play? Probably, and also the equally absurd theatre of Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet.

Disruption, Improvisation, and Chance in Ronald Sukenick's Work

Derrida's style with its free-associations and circumlocutions is surly indebted to the experimental work of Joyce and Beckett. But while still a work in progress, this style may even now be affected by the literary innovations of contemporary authors. Let us briefly examine the work of Ronald Sukenick and Bruce D. Price, two writers who stretch the boundaries of literature by using formal strategies of disruption, improvisation and chance to illustrate the particular conditions of the post-modern era. Because they are younger than Derrida, writing contemporaneously with him, it may be argued that the style of each has been affected in some way by Derrida's theories, even as Derrida's style may have been impacted by the experimental literary tactics of the new avant-garde.

An essential feature of all of Derrida's work is its fragmented exposition. Ideas begin suddenly and end abruptly, return again to loop around and through other themes and partial theories. Characterized by a state of flux, the Derridean text insists on mirroring its own transformations, toying with instability, as it moves toward its unannounced goal. Derrida's method of fragmenting and restructuring is a technique fully developed in the work of Ronald Sukenick. A contemporary of Brautigan and Barthe, and near-contemporary of Derrida, Sukenick's work shares the concern of more recent writers with the unreliability of language, social structures and identity. In the last half century, Sukenick composed a series of books which have been openly rooted in Derridean semiotic theory, often questioning the binary constructs which Derrida's theoretical work also attempts to undermine. With titles deliberately naming one half a binary pair—titles including *Up* and *Out*—Sukenick illustrates a world without a physical or metaphysical center.

In Sukenick's world, both external reality and personal identity are entirely fictions—texts—constantly shifting and subject to reinterpretation.

As described by Charles Russell in *Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde*:

> Sukenick's characters live in a world of complex and ill-defined connections, able to synthesize alternate visions of themselves out of their dreams, memories, subconscious desires, social roles and fantasies.[10]

Determined by biology and chance, not by fixed points of origin, the characters in the novel *98.6,* for instance, are governed only by The Mosaic Law—a way of dealing with parts in the absence of wholes. According to Sukenick, improvisation—which exactly parallels Derrida's notion of disruption—is the only effective strategy for preserving identity in contemporary society.

Sukenick mirrors his critical concerns through a style that resembles the universe he describes, taking the Derridean theory upon which his fictions are based to formalistic extremes. Entire narratives are presented as fragments, interrupted or discontinued at random. Characters are introduced, some to be developed, others to appear only for a brief paragraph or two. Key to Sukenick's novels is the invitation to readers to enter the text at any point, to disrupt and disregard the traditional linear narrative. All points of entry are valid, none able to yield more meaning than another.

In essays like those in *The Truth in Painting,* published 14 years after Sukenick's *Out*, Derrida also seems to toy with experimental devices such as narrative disruption and non-sequential presentation of critical content. But where Sukenick's stylistic technique, with its jumbled narrative and multiple points of entry, adds to the message of the novels (a description of the position of mankind in the universe at the end of the Twentieth Century), Derrida's efforts often undermine his texts. This failure may be due to what Norman Bryson in *Image, Discourse and Power* describes as the self-censoring aspect of texts: even as Derrida insists that the difference between literature and theory may be erased, the reader refuses to abandon those useful categories in which emotion is expressed through fiction, intellect through criticism. Thus, formal innovations like Sukenick's, which are designed to encourage the reader to "feel" the primordial experience of fictional characters—and by extension, our own existence—expand and enrich the literary text. But these same techniques applied to theory, which in essence ask the reader to "feel" logic, are simply experienced as oxymoron and cancellation.

In his essay *Mes Chances* Derrida discusses the role of chance—the falling from meaning—so inherent in linguistic production that the author refers to it as the "law of destabilization." In this essay, the author interprets the word "chance" in all its resonances in order to deconstruct Freud's analysis of the phenomenon of mistakes. For Freud, mistakes are not possible; for Derrida, chance is a continual process of "falling away" from certainty:

> Iterability is thus that which allows a mark to be used more than

> once. It is more than one. It multiplies and divides itself internally. This imprints the capacity for diversion within its very movement. In the destination (Destimmung) there is this: a principle of indetermination, chance, luck, or telemetering. There is no assured destination. [11]

The words "mes chance" and "meschance" begin the essay—the first implying "opportunity," the second a "fall from" meaning. Derrida says:

> Language is only one among the systems of marks which have this curious tendency as their property: they simultaneously incline toward increasing the reserves of random indetermination, as well as the capacity for coding and overcoding or, in other words, for control and self-regulation. [12]

While the "increasing reserves of indetermination" fascinates Derrida, randomness's capacity for self-regulation concerns Bruce D. Price.

In his experimental novel *American Dreams*, Price creates a work in which the text is generated entirely by chance. With parallels in Schoenbergian musical theory, Price developed a strict method of text production in which series of words are selected at random from a dictionary, and are used in orders also dictated by random selection. For Price and Derrida, chance is that which ceases to exist once it becomes—to use Derrida's word—"production." Subverting traditional notions of the author-as-first-cause of text, Price writes *after* chance, creates with tools chance alone has provided. The book, for which chance is the entire impetus, is in other respects a traditional narrative, deliberately displaying no evidence of its unusual origin. Can meaning and understanding of the text rest with the text alone, as Derrida insists, when a key component of that meaning remains so explicitly outside the text? This is the question Price asks and explores through experimental literary strategies.

In *American Dreams*, dozens of characters move across the country in soap opera fashion, all ignorant of their mutual connections. Some have been at the same location at the same time; others have had lovers in common; several share inadvertent roles in disasters. Price questions Derrida's core premise, and his message is clear and simple: pattern and meaning can only be generated and understood, quite sensibly, from points both inside and outside the text. Coming full circle in contemporary theory, Price implies that though God may play dice with the world, it is the author who deals the cards.

The Nature of Experimental Writing

Even as Derrida's theories of deconstruction come under attack and are replaced by alternatives and modifications, the language of his texts—his literary style—still generates debate. In the final analysis, Derrida has expanded discourse on semantic theory and breathed life into the discipline of philoso-

phy through his own hotly-debated self-promotion. No contemporary philosopher has generated more texts about his texts—all trying to "fix" his meaning—a phenomenon whose delicious irony must surely delight him. Derrida also must be given credit for innovation: his fusion of literary and critical technique will undoubtedly generate further experiments in theoretical practice and presentation. But the question remains as to whether Derrida's fusion of form and content can be seen as continuation of the avant-garde. To make this judgment, a brief definition of the term is necessary.

Filled as it is with military, political and aesthetic connotation, the term "avant-garde" is frustratingly imprecise. Yet diverse usage through the ages centers in agreement around notions of progress, innovation and challenge. Central to the avant-garde as it intersects with literature and the visual arts, and by extension the work of Derrida, is the core belief that artists can change society through the creation of new forms of expression. Although these forms of expression can be widely divergent, and often conflicting, artists and writers who fall into the broad category of the "avant-garde" have several things in common. According to Charles Russell in *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries*, those who make up the avant-garde in the Twentieth Century share four basic assumption about their life, their culture, work and aesthetic:

> 1)The avant-garde perceives itself to be part of a self-consciously modern culture subject to constant socio-historic change.
>
> 2) The avant-garde adopts an explicitly critical attitude toward, and asserts distance from, the dominant values of culture.
>
> 3) Each avant-garde movement reflects the writers' and artists' desires that art and artists may find or create new roles within society, and may ally themselves with other existing progressive or revolutionary forces to transform society.
>
> 4) The avant-garde explores through aesthetic disruption and innovation the possibilities of creating new art forms and languages that will bring forth new modes of perceiving, expressing and acting...that will, in effect, proclaim the avant-garde writer(s) and/or artist(s) as poet, prophet and revolutionary.[13]

And as Donald Kuspit points out in *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, works which can be considered avant-garde must be more substance than style, must refer to genuine and primordial experience. Without a deep base of moral commitment, the avant-garde loses its unique power to mediate and heal.

Can Derrida's work be seen as an extension of the idealism of the avant-garde, as part of a long and noble cycle of critical disruption of social order in an attempt to correct and improve? With theoretical aims that are

reductive to the point of nihilism, a positive conclusion is dubious. While perhaps advancing philosophy, Derrida has done little but analyze and describe, stripping language of all healing aesthetic, of all poetry, even as he seeks to cloak his own writing in the aesthetic aura of past innovation. By adopting avant-garde techniques instead of the critical norm, Derrida positions himself as an innovator without innovating, as "anti" establishment without commitment. He derives all the benefits of stylistic association with the avant-garde, including undeserved membership. Certainly an unearned dimension of creative genius, seriousness and authority has accrued to his work in the past decade based on literary style alone, a style which stands as strategy rather than innovation.

One must ask in Derridean fashion why this theoretician of semantics has chosen literary tools to undermine and disrupt traditional criticism. In Freudian terms, the answer can only be a longing for literature. Even as he dismantles the privilege of text and the unity of meaning, we recognize a disguised wish for the magic and power of art.

Derrida's essays, transcribed lectures and books must be viewed as literary text as well as criticism—and, in fact, may stand up better as literature than theory. However, measured against the vision and integrity of both its literary antecedents and contemporaries, this "literature" falls short, neither expanding the possible modes of exposition for critical theory, nor the stylistic possibilities of creative writing. Instead, Derrida may be seen in circular fashion as a re-inventor of the avant-garde, a summarizer of all that has been done before, ultimately conveying—as Derrida himself might express it—the avant-garde subverted and subsumed by the derriere garde.

Notes

1 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 181-82. (Quoting Jacques Derrida's *Marges*, 346-49.)
2 Ibid., 183.
3 Jacques Derrida, *Mes Chances*, from *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, eds. J. Smith and W. Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 16.
4 Ibid., 5.
5 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 41.
6 Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1931), 228-92.
7 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 151.
8 Ibid., 9.
9 Ibid., 174.
10 Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 207.
11 Derrida, *Mes Chances*, 11.
12 Ibid., 24.

"*Le Coq*, C'est Moi!" Brancusi's *Pasarea Maiastra*: Nationalistic Self-Portrait?[1]

EDWARD A. SHANKEN

"*Le Coq*, c'est moi!" declared Constantin Brancusi.[2] This stunning pronouncement by the sculptor provides evidence for an interpretation of the *Pasarea Maiastra* (1908-1912) as a nationalistic self-portrait of the émigré Romanian artist perched atop the pillars of western civilization. Indeed, over and above precedents in the artist's own work, insights from psychoanalysis, parallels with Romanian folk traditions, and synchronous developments in Romanian political and intellectual history, some of the most interesting endorsements for this claim come from the artist's own mouth. But when Brancusi speaks, as when he makes art, his meanings are often ambiguous. By interpreting the *Pasarea Maiastra* as a nationalistic self-portrait, I intend to explore some of the ambivalences in the sculptor's personal, artistic, and cultural identity.

Brancusi's ironic comment contains a multitude of possible readings. In addition to proclaiming his self-identification with birds in general, and more specifically with a particular series of sculptures abstracted from the shape of a rooster, the artist's pun on the English colloquialism (cock = penis)[3] and the notoriety he had gained for sexually suggestive sculpture, also implies an (auto)erotic self-reference to the phallus. It has been noted, for example, that the artist's *Princess X* (1916) has a double meaning: "Prince's sex." Eric Shanes writes of *Princess X*, "...either Picasso or Matisse drew attention to it by by saying, 'Voila, le phallus!'"[4]

Especially significant to my hypothesis is the fact that Brancusi explicitly stated his self-identification with works such as *Gallic Coq* (1922) and *Coq* (1924). By exclaiming, "*Le Coq*, c'est moi!" the artist implies masculine nationalistic overtones, for the virile rooster is a national symbol of France, the émigré's adopted home. Following a similar logic, the self-portrayal that I

interpret in the artist's abstract sculpture of the magical female bird of Romanian folklore, the *Pasarea Maiastra*, invokes a feminine nationalistic resonance.[5] These intriguing elements form the interpretive matrix of this essay. From these varied and paradoxical sources, I have concluded that Brancusi's self-representation of his hybrid identity shifts ambiguously over issues of sexuality, gender, and nationality.

There is much to recommend framing Brancusi in a particular historic moment, that of modernism, constrained ideologically by certain intellectual traditions, such as the belief in a unified subject. In this regard, his work is a Herculean effort to fuse what I shall propose were the diverse and sometimes ambivalent aspects of his identity: male/female, Romanian peasant/international avant-garde, dream/reality, among other tropes. At the same time, however, the amorphous identity that I note in the *Pasarea Maiastra* resists such a stable, modernist interpretation. Despite his own dream of unity, the sculptor has been refered to as "... an equivocating mischief maker who at once invites and thwarts our yearning for coherence."[6] Brancusi himself said that "Works of art are mirrors in which everyone sees what he looks like."[7] By interpreting the *Pasarea Maiastra* as a self-portrait of the artist, I hope to offer a first-person perspective on the complexly ambiguous psychodynamics with which Brancusi embued his magical bird as a reflection of his own hybrid and conflicted personality.

Pasarea Maiastra

As has been well-documented in the Brancusi literature, and corroborated by my own field research in Romania, the Pasarea Maiastra ("maiastra" may be translated as majestic or miraculous; while "pasarea" means bird) is a mythical figure of Romanian folklore. Sometimes refered to as the Golden Bird,[8] there are many versions of the fable, which is closely related to the Russian folktale of the Firebird, as well as to the Egyptian legend of the Phoenix. Just as Picasso's self-reference to the bull has sources in addition to the Spanish corrida tradition, but remains symbolically related to the artist's national identity, so the *Pasarea Maiastra* may be derived in part from non-Romanian sources while nonetheless retaining significance as a nationalistic symbol for Brancusi. Indeed, the sculptor was clearly fascinated with the art of Africa and Asia, but he did, after all, name the work "Maiastra" and not "Phoenix." That Romania lies at the cross-roads between East and West (as Spain lies at an intersection between Christianity and Islam) suggests, moreover, that an almalgam of influences is part of Brancusi's national cultural heritage.

Common to all these mythical birds is their solar radiance, their beautiful song, and their ability to give life. According to legend, the Maiastra, as it called for short, had golden feathers which "shone like a mirror in the sun."[9] In the various accounts of the Maiastra legend, the bird is endowed with many magical and creative qualities. The Maiastra restores the blind king's sight; it

rejuvenates the aging king, and has the ability to resurrect the dead; it makes possible the completion of a magnificent tower, and in another version, becomes its crowning ornament. According to one legend of the Maiastra's origin, a princess was transformed into the miraculous bird because she fell in love with her brother. Eventually she was liberated and returned to her human form. Of the Maiastra tale, Brancusi himself explained that "Prince Charming was in search of Ileana Cosinzene [the maiden who is the object of the hero's odyssey]. The master bird is the bird that spoke and showed the way to Prince Charming."[10]

Contemporary Romanian scholar Constantin Crisan claims that the power of flight is commonly commanded by the many manifestations of Prince Charming in Romanian folklore. However, the prince is never alone in his benevolent struggle: "The magic...bird...is, we might say, the alteromorphs (or heteromorphs) of the hero, of the Champion of Good fighting the Evil forces." Human intelligence takes on the soaring quality of flight, and in this way, the hero and the magical companion are merged in a manner that credits a man with miraculous powers, while at the same time idealizing and preserving the distinctly human power of thought.[11]

The qualities and accomplishments ascribed to the Maiastra make it an enticing allegory for artistic reinvention and incarnation, especially if the artist happens to be Romanian. Like a work of art, the Maiastra is a form of visual splendor, precious materiality and striking beauty; like the artist, it possesses the ability to restore sight and to give life, to build monuments, and to transform human life into ideal symbol. The relationship of the fabled Romanian Prince Charming/Brancusi to the divine bird of legend suggests a merging of earthly and supernatural powers, a symbiotic union of man and Maiastra in the name of love, bound to promote the ongoing cycles of life and regeneration.

Gender Ambiguity

The study of Brancusi's self-representation demands careful attention to the ambiguity of gender and sexuality as well. As Marcel Duchamp's alter ego Rrose Selavy (1920) permitted the artist to alternate between male and female identity, so I think the *Pasarea Maiastra*, as Brancusi's alter ego, permitted its maker to pursue artistic inquiries into sexuality and gender. Evidence for such an assertion lies in childhood experiences. According to Brancusi's own testimony, his father was angry about bearing male progeny, and treated his son cruelly because of his gender. About his father, Brancusi reminisced, "He used to drink and beat me and put horse dung under my nose. He wanted a daughter."[12]

Could such an abusive childhood not but affect the emerging personality and gender orientation of the young Brancusi? Unable to satisfy the

father's desire for a daughter, and emasculated by his humiliating and violent attacks, the bachelor artist's later admission of this problematic paternal relationship reinforces my interpretation that, in an effort to resolve this conflict, Brancusi's work blends contrasting gender characteristics and sexual orientations.[13] Such suppositions are not only substantiated by the artist's own statements but in his formal resolution of his subject. For example, in the case of the *Pasarea Maiastra,* Brancusi combines an erect, masculine verticality, the union of two human figures, and a full-figured, avian icon. Similarly, in *Princess X* (1916) the sculptor represents a woman, but with remarkable sexual multifariousness: the smoothly feminine curvilinear contours contrast with the strikingly phallic compositional imagery.[14] In his 1945 psychoanalytical analysis of such works as *Narcissus Fountain* and *Princess X,* Otto Fenichel claims that:

> These particular sculptures can be related to the psychoanalytic "phallic character," of which "phallic narcissism" is the most prominent feature. This has been explained theoretically as a narcissistic confusion of self and body with phallus...[15]

Laurie Schneider Adams notes that although Brancusi was probably not a "phallic narcissist" his... "repeated iconography of the woman-as-phallus reveals his ambivalent relation to women."[16] These examples suggest ways in which the sculptor's self-portrayal in the *Pasarea Maiastra* combines male and female aspects, uniting these conflicted elements of his ambiguous sexual and gender identity in a phallic female bird that functions simultaneously as self and as lover.

Brancusi stated that *Princess X* was derived from *Woman Looking into a Mirror* (1909).[17] The plaster *Model for Narcissus Fountain* (c. 1910-1913) is also closely related. As art historian Anna C. Chave rightly points out, these works share not only a gender-merging synthesis of male and female aspects, but thematically are all concerned with the encounter of one's own image.[18] Indeed, the titles speak for (and to) themselves. Moreover, in the bronze *Princess X,* the reputedly vain subject admires her own phallic reflection in the highly polished surface of her testicular bosom. The obvious self-reflective visual theme of all these works is closely allied with the notion of self-portraiture. One can even imagine the artist observing his own reflection simultaneously creating and looking at an erotically charged and indeterminately gendered sculpture that is gazing at itself. Perhaps in this hall of mirrors Brancusi performs what Lacan calls a "homeomorphic identification," a search for "the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic."[19]

Because *Woman Looking in a Mirror* and *Model for Narcissus Fountain* were created prior to, or synchronous with, carving the majestic marble bird, they provide antecedents for sexual ambiguity and self-reflection that

converge in the *Pasarea Maiastra.* In these precursors, the resemblance between the subject and its manifestation as sculpture is aligned with the western representational tradition. In contrast, the artist's idealized self-portrayal of his hybrid identity - the uneasy unification of apparently discrete and incongruous elements - is manifested *metaphorically* in the mythical form of the Pasarea Maiastra. The myth of the artist who falls in love with his own creation is legendary, and perhaps a narcissistic version of the tale of Pygmalion can help account for the way Brancusi obsessively polished his mirror-like, monolithic sculptures, his hand lovingly rubbing up and down his phallic birds, exciting them to an ecstatic radiance. Indeed, in several photographs Brancusi made of his birds, such as *Bird* (1940), brilliant white light appears to explode from the highly-polished surface, supporting the ejaculatory image evoked above.

Of Birds and Wives

Brancusi's fixation with birds, the pervasiveness of avian imagery in Romanian folk culture, and the artist's reverence for, and recollections of, childhood all offer provocative evidence for this interpretation of Brancusi's personal identification with the *Pasarea Maiastra.* Magical birds are ubiquitous in Romania, including carved wooden birds perched atop Oltenian death poles, a motif often found in traditional Romanian rugs and pottery as well. The reputedly 4th century (now believed to be Gothic) *Brood Hen and Chicks* was the most famous 19th century archaeological find in Romania.[20] Still more interesting are the brass door knobs in the shape of birds that I photographed in a pilgrimage to Tirgu-Jiu at the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, located on the route between the *Gate of the Kiss* and the *Endless Column.*[21] These are just a few examples of bird images that could be avian sources for, or close relatives to, Brancusi's *Pasarea Maiastra.*

Brancusi's own recollection of childhood dreams and the role of the Maiastra as a source for imaginative revelry strengthen the argument for the artist's self-portrayal in the *Pasarea Maiastra.* For Romanian children, the Maiastra has been an emblem of hope and luck that dissolves the "boundary between dream and reality..."[22] While for children the Maiastra represents hope, and bridges the realm of fantasy and reality, for adults it remains, "... the capacity to dream... which we protect as the most valuable possession across the years, because the sources of the world's mystery and beauty are drained if we lose it."[23] According to art historian Edith Balas, "As a child, Brancusi certainly dreamt of this fabulous bird."[24] The artist himself said,

> as a child, I always dreamed that I was flying in the trees and in the sky. I have retained this nostalgic dream and for 45 years, I have made birds.[25]

Here Brancusi clearly states that he dreamt of himself as endowed with the bird-like power of flight and these dreams were so compelling that they were a constant source of inspiration for nearly half a century of his art! While the artist may not have been aware of the psycho-creative dimension I identify in his work, his own statement suggests that he portrayed himself not only in the *Pasarea Maiastra*, but in his entire corpus of bird sculptures as well. Brancusi also said, "When we stop being children we are already dead." I think that the Maiastra is the materialization of sublimated memories of childhood, of Romania, of his dreams of flight. It is, for the artist, a source of life, identity, hope, and beauty.

Children, of course, go hand-in-hand with marriage, and despite the supreme importance of marriage and procreation in traditional Romanian culture, Brancusi never wed. In Transylvania, as elsewhere in Romania, marriage and raising children are traditionally valued above all else, and again, birds possess symbolic significance. As part of a wedding ceremony, the godmothers of the betrothed bargain over the price of the bride, who is referred to as a hen. Ironically, Brancusi's only published work of fiction is an autobiographical fable about a hen who is so busy explaining procreation that her neglected eggs spoil.[26]

It is extremely rare for someone to remain unmarried by choice in Romania. The unwed state is, in fact, so deeply troublesome and threatening to the social fabric that should someone meet with an untimely demise before consummating the sacred union of marriage, a complex ritual, known as the Death Wedding, is performed. The ritual has been perpetrated in order to appease the culture's need for the deceased to have the satisfaction of matrimony. As American anthropologist and political scientist Gail Kligman notes:

> To die unmarried is to die perilously because the most important aspect of life has not been fulfilled... unless a symbolic wedding is performed during the funeral, then it is believed that this "person" will return in search of a mate to fulfill his or her social destiny as well as frustrated sexual desires. Until the soul is satisfied, it cannot rest and remains a menace to society... [The Death Wedding] quiets the turbulence caused by the paradoxical coupling of sexuality and mortality.[27]

In the Death Wedding, the deceased is symbolically wed to a living partner. This union provides continuity and peace between the quick and the dead, while at the same time providing assurance that the frustrated spirit of the deceased does not return to haunt the living in search of a mate. It should be noted that the Transylvanian customs studied by Kligman in the 1970s and 1980s may be different from the Oltenian traditions of Brancusi's roots. In a telephone conversation with Kligman, she expressed no knowledge of similar customs in turn-of-the-century Oltenia, but did not rule out the possibility of

such rituals there at that time. Nicolae Harsanyi doubts that the death wedding ritual would have been known to Brancusi, but Romanian artist Lia Perjovschi (who is from Transylvania) believes that similar rituals may have taken place in Oltenia, in which case Brancusi could have been familiar with them. Brancusi's awareness of the Death Wedding ritual must remain speculative until more conclusive evidence emerges.

Let it be supposed that the bachelor artist's relationship with the *Pasarea Maiastra* may be connected to the Death Wedding ritual. In this context, the ovicidal hen of the sculptor's autobiographical fable can be interpreted as marrying the magical hen of his childhood dreams, whose visual beauty and abundant fertility placated his conflicted phallic-narcissistic desire. As the Death Wedding paradoxically unites the living and the dead, so Brancusi's complex autoerotic and gender-ambiguous relationship with the Maiastra conjoins metaphors of procreation in life and creation in art: a single, mortal man with a symbolic, fantasy spouse, an expatriate son with the mythical nest of his motherland. One might say that as virginal, life-partner, as simulation and integration of self and spouse, the Maiastra led the artist on a ideal path towards an immaculate conception of essential form, absolute beauty and pure joy expressed in their progeny of highly refined bird in flight bronzes, as well as towards the principle of unity basic to Romanian folk tradition. This description is but one way in which the artist's conflicted sexual identity and uncertain relationship with the gender ambiguous Maiastra may have shifted paradoxically between unification and stability.

Unity

My discussion thus far has focused almost exclusively on the white marble *Maiastra* begun in 1910 that crowns the sculpture. Except at the outset, where I noted the artist perched atop "the pillars of western civilization," I have not mentioned the so-called *Double Caryatid* of 1908, which functions as the physical support for the *Maiastra*, and, I suggest, metaphorically refers to those ancient pillars. An analysis of the relationship between these two independently conceived sculptural elements might offer a more holistic interpretation of self-portraiture in the *Pasarea Maiastra*, which reached its combined state in 1912.

The primitively carved figures of the *Double Caryatid* contrast sharply with the gently sculpted and smoothly polished *Maiastra,* an allegorical contrast between mundane, earthly existence that supports the transcendental paragon represented by the mythical bird above it. Art historian Eric Shanes compares *The Kiss* (1909) with the *Double Caryatid*, and claims that

> Brancusi may originally have intended to contrast human pairing here on earth with some higher ideal, as in *Maiastra*... [T]he kissing couple [c]ould also have been caryatid figures, as are the similarly

roughly-hewn figures in the *Maiastra*.[28]

I agree that the *Double Caryatid* does share these important similarities with various versions of *The Kiss*. Moreover, akin to the physical geography of the Gorg region of Oltenia, Brancusi's birthplace (which, as its name suggests, is distinguished by its dramatically sheer gorges) in both these works a strong vertical element demarcates two figures. In this light, Brancusi's *Endless Columns* can be interpreted as negative space—as the gorge-like gap between two solids, as a tribute to his region and as the reverse of *Trajan's Column* (c. 106-113 AD).

But while *The Kiss* may represent the union of two archetypal lovers, and moreover, the cycle of life and regeneration so important to Romanian peasant tradition, the relationship between the two individuals in the *Double Caryatid* resists such an interpretation. For it appears that one bearded man is whispering into the ear of another man. If the theme of "human pairing" is common to both *The Kiss* and the *Double Caryatid*, the latter embodies not only heterosexual love but male conjugality. In terms of self-portrayal then, one must consider the possibility that the *Double Caryatid* unites homosexual and heterosexual aspects of the artist's identity, under the aegis of the *Maiastra* (itself of blended gender.) The artist, Brancusi, as self-represented in the form of the Maiastra, represents a magical creative force that, though itself cannot experience the union of marriage, expresses the ideal of unity that ensures the harmonious continuity of culture.

Attempts to understand the *Pasarea Maiastra* in terms of unity and transcendence, however, result in an insistent resistance to just such a reduction. For indeed, how can Brancusi be man, woman, and mythical figure watching over a male couple that itself represents the artist's own shifting gender and sexual orientation? How can the Maiastra consistently embody both male and female qualities? Moreover, how can the magic bird function as the artist's self, mate, and idol? The answer is at once simple and complex. All of these interpretations can be accomplished and simultaneously maintained in the imagination of the artist and in the imagination of the viewer.[29] In order to do so, however, it is necessary to conceive of Brancusi's self-portrayal in a way that brings enough order to make it legible, but which at the same time enables the artist's self-portrayed identity to ebb and flow freely amongst its various representations.

From Caryatid to Maiastra: A Romanian Odyssey

Brancusi selected a classical theme, coarsely treated in gray stone, as the support upon which to rest his highly stylized, white marble representation of the mythological bird from Romanian folklore. This distinctive juxtaposition suggests a sympathy with Dacian nationalism. It implies a cultural allegiance, on the artist's part, with the ethnic Romanians who inhabited the region prior

to Trajan's conquest in 105-6 AD and the influx of Roman colonists and customs. As such, the smoothly polished and gracefully contoured *Pasarea Maiastra* may be seen as a nationalistic self-portrait of the contemporary but indigenous Romanian (i.e. Dacian) artist rising up from the dilapidated, Latinate pillars of Roman empire-building. An account of Romanian cultural and intellectual history will help map out the nationalistic undercurrents of Brancusi's aesthetic odyssey from caryatid to Maiastra.

The name *Double Caryatid,* which has been used to refer to the mid-section of the *Pasarea Maiastra,* apparently was not sanctioned by Brancusi. The mid-section of the *Pasarea Maiastra* is, nonetheless, connected both functionally and thematically to the caryatids of Greek architecture, the stone female figures in flowing robes that serve as support columns in such well-known structures as the Erechtheum *Porch of the Maidens* in Athens (c. 415 BC). Had Brancusi not been classically trained as a sculptor, and not seen the treasures of the Louvre, he would surely have been familiar with this columnar convention from 19th century Romanian architecture.

Moreover, because of his artistic training, Brancusi would have been aware of the *Double Caryatid*' *s* debt to classical antiquity. This is a crucial point. For while the upheavals of 1848 (that led to the founding of an independent Romanian state) were bolstered by rhetoric appealing to Latin roots, the Dacian heritage of ethnic Romanians would play an increasingly important role as a determinant of cultural identity as the century progressed. Whereas Latinism implied a colonial relationship with Western Europe, Dacianism meant independence. Summoning Dacian roots represented, "a spirited opposition to imperial expansion, a fight-to-the-death for liberty against external conquest (the Dacian ruler, Decebal, being believed to have drunk poison rather than fall into Trajan's hands alive)."[30] Such ideas were promulgated by B.P. Hasdeu, the founder of scientific folklore in Romania, and by Mihai Eminescu, Romania's most famous poet, who in 1881 wrote:

> The true civilization of a people consists...in *the natural, organic development* of its own powers and faculties. If there is ever to be a true civilization on this soil, it will be one that arises from the elements of the ancient [Dacian] civilization. From its own roots, in its own depths, arises the true civilization of a barbarian people; not from the aping of foreign customs, foreign languages, foreign institutions.[31]

Brancusi's own antipathy towards classical excesses and Latin influences is, perhaps, inversely related to the aesthetic inspiration and pride he drew from an ethnically pure Dacian ideal. The decadence of Hellenistic sculpture exemplified for the artist, the "moral and spiritual sickness of the West." And with regard to the "abominable sense of strain" produced by "that famous conductor of an orchestra I was dragged off to hear the other night," Brancusi claimed

that "To me, one of our gypsies sawing away on his fiddle means much more..."[32]

Brancusi, however, was no simple Romanian peasant "sawing away on his fiddle." His identity was, rather, like that many Romanians, the result of a complex amalgam of cultural influences and political alliances. American anthropologist and political scientist KatherineVerdery describes how the residents of what is now Romania alternately adopted one identity or another depending on particular political exigencies. For example, 17th century Moldavians provided early Latinist arguments against the heavy tribute extracted by the Ottoman rulers. On the other hand, Habsburg attempts to catholicize Transylvania in the 18th century were resisted by appeals to support from political powers in the East: the Czar, the Serbian Orthodoxy, as well as from their Orthodox brethren in the two other Romanian principalities.[33] This complex pattern of shuffling political allegiances appears to be an ongoing trait of Romanian identity, which reached a certain critical point in the late 19th century at the dawn of an autonomous Romanian state. Brancusi's own personal identity, formed during this great period of flux, and exacerbated by his own immigrant status in France, shifted in a manner of similar complexity over issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation.

Romania was a colony of one or another imperial power for nearly two millennia. In the ongoing search for national identity, intensified by the formation of the independent Romanian Kingdom in 1881,[34] there emerged a glorification of the Dacian cultural heritage that prevailed prior to Roman colonization. Certainly the struggle to (re)claim control of lands under the dominion of its neighbors was of primary importance to the leaders of the would-be Romanian state, and the insistence on an ethnically pure Dacian people predating Roman colonization offered a rationalization for returning disputed lands to the indigenous people, now represented by the Romanian nation. The (re)construction of the Dacian was also heralded as a tactic to solve the problems that developed as a result of influences external to the indigenous culture. Consistent with the prevailing European artistic impulse of Romanticism, which advocated originality, copying the arts of other cultures was rejected in Romania in favor of the (re)discovery of a distinctive "national essence."

For example, in 1906, the first issue of the populist journal *Viata Romanesca* expressed concern that Romanian culture was being overrun by outside influences: "...[F]oreign culture, instead of *being absorbed by* us, *absorbs* us, *assimilates* us."[35] It is noteworthy that this quotation refers to originality strictly reserved for expression in literature. What is known of Brancusi's artistic training in Romania suggests that such progressive attitudes had not yet been assimilated into the art academies, and certainly not into the medium of sculpture. Nonetheless, an artistic avant-garde, the Tinerimea Artistica (Artistic Youth), held their first exhibition in Bucharest in 1902. In 1906, when *Viata Romanesca* began propounding an indigenous literary ideal,

Brancusi became a member of the Tinerimea Artistica, and participated in their exhibitions from 1907-1914.[36] The journal promoted ethnic themes in art as a means to forge a uniquely Romanian cultural identity that would be strong enough to assimilate positive elements from the west without being overwhelmed by it. "Instead of *imitating* western culture, [said] these cultural populists, we must *create our own.*"[37]

These nationalistic sentiments later found an uncertain, but nonetheless influential spokesman in the contemporary Romanian philosopher and writer Constantin Noica. Several of Noica's titles are in themselves telling: *Romanian Ways of Speaking Philosophically,* and *The Romanian Sentiment of Being,* for example. According to Verdery, one of Noica's objectives was to resolve: "How the particular relates to the general (universal), or how small cultures can participate meaningfully in a global order dominated by others...to construct for both Romania and the world a harmonic theory of the ontological relation between tradition and modernity."[38] Furthermore, contemporary Romanian scholar Arthur Silvestri compares Noica's project with that of Brancusi in their mutual approach to tackling universal problems through the traditional forms of expression particular to Romania: "The meaning of Noica's work is to offer the world a Romanian solution."[39] While the political motives underlying Silvestri's comparison of Noica and Brancusi must be carefully considered, Romanian intellectual currents leading up to, contemporaneous with, and following Brancusi's artistic achievement, are consistent with a reading of the *Pasarea Maiastra* as Brancusi's particular contribution to a new cosmopolitan order embodied in the art capital of Paris.

Within a Romanian political context, however, the vertically upright *Pasarea Maiastra* can be interpreted as a representation of the fully-determined and powerful male component of the nation and its identity, the potent erection of the genetically indigenous people, rising from the flaccid remains of its conquerors to reimpregnate the culture with its true and rightful physical and spiritual inheritance. While Geist's insight that the *Bird in Space* "may be considered a self-image of the artist, stand[ing] up to his father," is persuasive, it does not go far enough. I believe that not only is this object a representation of the Oedipal struggle, but an Oedipal struggle that doubles as a national struggle between Brancusi's Dacian *Pasarea Maiastra* and the Roman Empire's *Trajan's Column.*[40] Moreover, the symbolic density of the *Pasarea Maiastra* must also include an interpretation of the object as Brancusi's female mate (derived from a childhood fairy tale) that represents the lack of that potent phallus. Together, this highly compacted, metaphorical, visual language offers a poignant self-portrait of a modernist artist who defies modernist categories. By creating a work that demonstrates the untenability of an essential, underlying, unifying identity, and the impossibility of constructing one in such phallocentric terms, Brancusi reveals the failure of these terms to acknowledge the plurality and transience of identity, nation, sexuality, and gender.

Conclusion

As I have tried to point out, any single interpretation runs the risk of ignoring the complexity of Brancusi's identity. Even as I have proposed these interpretative frames, I have simultaneously questioned the logic of reducing and locating Brancusi and his work within them. For after 1800 years, it would appear that the so-called "Dacian" aspects and "Latin" aspects of Romanian culture are inextricably bound and unrecoverable in any essential form—if they ever existed. Thus, while the *Pasarea Maiastra* may symbolize Brancusi's hopeful re-emergence of indigenous culture from the worn-out, classical foundations of Latinizing influences, the sculpture's own hybrid form, combining primitive and modern qualities, perplexes the fixity inherent in such nostalgic (re)constructions of identity.

Incorporating a multiplicity of unresolved/unresolvable dualisms, Brancusi's *Pasarea Maiastra* is a heroically uninhibited and perceptive act of self-reflection on the nature of personal, national, and aesthetic identity. In it, Brancusi fashioned an alliance of his Romanian folk and intellectual heritage, nationalist politics and emigre status, ambiguous gender and sexual orientation, and the most advanced aesthetic concepts, to create a strikingly original sculptural form that contributed greatly to the international avant-garde. Ironically, the union of these ambiguous components of his identity in the *Pasarea Maiastra* results in a self-portrait of Brancusi which resists a stable interpretation of the artist.

Notes

1 I am extremely grateful to Kristine Stiles, Associate Professor of Art History, Duke University, without whose knowledge, dedication, patience, and editorial assistance my efforts would have amounted to substantially less. I would also like to thank the Romanian scholar Nicolae Harsayani, Associate Director of the Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies at UNC, and Anca Oroveanu, Professor of Art History at the Nicolae Grigorescu Academia de Arta in Bucharest. The comments of Duke professors of art history Annabel Wharton and Claude Cernuschi were also very helpful. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the *Exploding Eye/I* symposium at SUNY Binghamton, *(Re)Figuring the Frame* at Duke, the Middle Atlantic Art Conference at the National Gallery of Art, and at the *Critical Reflexivity* symposium at CUNY Graduate Center. I am grateful for the lively discourses that my work was priviledged to at these fora, which contributed to its current state. This essay is dedicated to Stephen Z. Levine, Leslie Clark Professor in the Humanities and Professor of the History of Art, Bryn Mawr College, who introduced me to the discipline of Art History and has been an ongoing source of support and inspiration.

2 Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (New York: Grossman, 1968), 137.

3 Anna C. Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven and

London: Yale University Press, 1993), 97.

4 Eric Shanes, *Constantin Brancusi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 55-56.

5 Chave notes that after 1915, Brancusi apparently referred to works he had entitled *Maiastra* by using the generic French word for bird, "oiseau." As mentioned, in 1920, he took the Gallic rooster as his new avian self-reference. As has often been noted, Chave claims that, "Brancusi did retain, however, an unshakable sense of his native identity throughout a half century in Paris..." See Chave's *Constantin Brancusi* 166, 169. It is also important to point out that it was not until 1950 that the artist requested French citizenship (a step necessary to ensure that his work would be preserved by the French government and displayed in the European art capital of Paris). Such tricky moves on the artist's part reveal the pressure during and in the wake of the war for the émigré to conform to French culture, adopt national themes, and propagate a patriotic persona, and suggest the complex modulations of his identity as he navigated his hybrid personality through the pressures of citizenship and his career.

6 Ibid., 183.

7 Pontus Hulten, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, *Brancusi.* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 56, and (New York: Harry Abrams, 1987), 56, 269. I have given a slightly different translation.

8 Constantin Prut, "The Light of the Golden Bird," *Romanian Review* 10:3 (1982), 40.

9 Athena T. Spear, *Brancusi's Birds* (New York: New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1969), 5.

10 Edith Balas, *Brancusi and Romanian Folk Traditions* (Boulder : East European Monographs, 1987), 40, 72. Also quoted in Geist, *Brancusi*, 38. The name "Ileana Cosinzene" is commonly invoked in Romanian folklore. See Constantin Crisan, "These High-Flying Princes Charming," *Romanian Review* 10:3 (1982), 53.

11 Ibid. As Crisan notes, "...the supernatural force is fused into the hero so as to achieve a profoundly human triumph, pervaded by the laws of mimesis despite the blending of fantastic with verisimilar elements."

12 See Sidney Geist, "Brancusi's *Bird in Space*: A Psychological Reading," *Source* (Spring, 1984), 25-26. Quote cited from Alexander Liberman, *The Artist in his Studio* (New York: Viking, 1960), 47. Geist makes a passing reference to self-portraiture with regard to *Bird in Space*. Grounded on his observation that the "tall form *standing* on a base...may be taken to have anthropomorphic character, suggesting the stance of an erect man..." Geist concludes that "...we have reason to think that the *Bird*, which may be considered a self-image of the artist, stands up to the father..." Geist uses his insight of symbolic self-representation as a means to register an oedipal interpretation, not, as in my work, as an end in itself. In a telephone conversation I had with Professor Geist in the fall of 1993, the eminent Brancusi scholar seemed to think that my claim for self-portrayal in the *Pasarea Maiastra* and the evidence supporting it were novel. Since that time, Laurie Schneider Adams has published some insightful arguments for self-portrayal in Brancusi's sculpture that complement my own research. See Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 311-323.

13 I want to emphasize that this interpretation is hypothetical and somewhat

oversimplified. One would be hard-pressed to prove that childhood abuse inevitably leads to confusion over sexuality and gender. Brancusi's sense of victimization may be further supported, however, by his choice of themes: tragic victims like Danaid (one of the 50 daughters of King Danaus commanded by their father to murder their grooms) and notably the child represented in *Torment*, which Adams notes "echoes Brancusi's damaged self-image, brought about...by his father's beatings," (312). Adams and Chave also note Leda, and Chave notes Narcissus, Prometheus, and Socrates.

14 Of the scandal related to the exhibition of *Princess X* at the Salon des Artistes Independents in 1920, Shanes suggests that "Apparently unaware of its phallic connotations [Brancusi] had been seeking a Platonic ideal in sculpture." See Eric Shanes, *Constantin Brancusi*, 55-56. As the result of police intervention and the commotion that ensued, Brancusi, much to his chagrin, was pressured to remove the work from the exhibition. He vowed never to show his work again in Paris, and until the end of his life he did not. See Ionel Jianou, *Brancusi* (Paris: Arted, 1963), 48-49. It is not completely believable that Brancusi was unaware of the phallic quality of his work. He was famous for feigning ignorance and innocence, when in fact it is known that in spite of his Romanian peasant facade he was a member of the artistic and intellectual elite of Paris.

15 Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), 495-96. See also Adams, 317.

16 Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*: 318. I am indebted to Shannon Miller for calling my attention to Adams' important but under-recognized text, absent from the bibliography of the recent and otherwise excellent retrospective catalogue, *Constantin Brancusi: 1876-1957.* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art) 1995.

17 Pontus Hulten, Natalia Dumitresco, and Alexandre Istrati, *Brancusi* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 290.

18 Anna C. Chave: 6-123. Chave claims that "When I see my image reflected in *Young Bird*...I [am] able to love others beside myself," (92). However, despite her claim, Chave's photographic self-portrait reflected in Brancusi's mirror-like bronze sculpture (68) suggests, rather, a concern with the viewer's encounter with his/her own image. My concern is with trying to theorize how one particular viewer, Brancusi himself, may have incorporated multiple and conflicted aspects of his own identity metaphorically in the marble and stone *Pasarea Maiastra.* The repetition of self-reflective themes, photographic self-portraits, and other evidence of narcissism in Brancusi's work (as suggested by Adams and Fenichel) reinforces my conclusion that the primary focus of the sculptor's reflection was himself, not his audience. For an extended study of narcissism and self-reflection in art, see Stephen Z. Levine, *Monet, Narcissus, and Self-Reflection: the Modernist Myth of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

19 Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I," *Ecrits* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 3.

20 In conversation with Nicolae Harsanyi, the Romanian scholar explained that the 19th century protochronists purposely misattributed the Gothic *Ibis Fibula* to the 4th century. Such a dating would strengthen Romanian claims on Transylvania, a territory over which Hungary was claiming dominion in the 19th

century. See also Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 35.

21 This moving and spiritual local parish is threatened by ill-conceived Romanian plans to restore Brancusi's public works with an unobstructed view.

22 Prut, 40.

23 Ibid., 42.

24 Balas, 72.

25 Ibid. Author's translation.

26 Chave, 136.

27 Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 216.

28 Eric Shanes, "Brancusi and the *Caryatid*: Raising ideals on to a pedestal," *Apollo* 136 (1992), 107.

29 As art historian Molly Nesbitt pointed out in response to an earlier version of this paper presented at the *Critical Reflexivity and Visual Culture* conference at CUNY Graduate Center, April 26, 1996, such slippage of gender and sexuality was not uncommon in the avant-garde circles of which Brancusi was a member in Paris. Chave locates this activity in the 1920s and claims further that "The dream of the child-bearing man who...could bypass women's wombs held a particular appeal in the drastically depopulated wartime and postwar France where Brancusi made his sexually dimorphic sculptures." See Chave, *Constantin Brancusi*, 106, 104. But because the *Pasarea Maiastra* predates World War I, my claims for Brancusi's complexly shuffled self-portrayal of ambiguous and conflicted sexuality and gender in that work demand other sources. The types of slippages of sexuality and gender in the Romanian folk legend of the Pasarea Maiastra and in the Death Wedding ritual, combined with the sculptor's abusive childhood suggest sources and influences that are, amongst artists of the international avant-garde, all but unique to Brancusi. Surely the Parisian context must be carefully considered, but one would be remiss to overemphasize that aspect at the expense of the more unique elements of the artist's personal history. Just as not all artists in Romania were making images of the Pasarea Maiastra, so not all artists in Paris were making sexually dimorphic, sculptural self-portraits.

30 Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 36.

31 Ovidia Babu-Buznea, *Dacii in constiinta romanticilor nostri: Schita la o istorie a dacismului*, (Bucharest: Ed. Minerva, 1979), 154, 155, original emphases. See Verdery, 36-39.

32 Chave, 165.

33 Verdery, 29-34.

34 In 1859, the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia united as a single political entity within the Ottoman Empire. In 1881, they achieved independent statehood as the Romanian Kingdom. Transylvania became part of the Romanian Kingdom after WWI, but shifted between German and Hungarian control into the 1940's. See Verderey, 34, 43, 124.

35 *Viata romaneasca* 1906, 5-6, original emphases. See Verdery, 59.

36 Ionel Jianou, *Brancusi*. (Paris: Arted, 1963), 25-29.
37 Verdery, 59, paraphrases *Viata romaneasca*, original emphases.
38 Ibid., 262.
39 Ibid., 264. Here Verdery quotes Arthur Silvestri's "A Study of the Ethnic," *Romanian News* 8 (June 21, 1985), 8. She implies that Silvestri does not understand Noica's subtlety, but rather has appropriated his ideas to further a particular Protochronist agenda. However, Verderey notes that Noica did little to resist such interpretations and political applications. Indeed, the philosopher appears to have supported both Protochronist and Antiprotochronist movements at different times during his life. Verderey offers no opinion on Silvestri's reference to Brancusi, which she paraphrases. While an interpretation of Brancusi's work strictly limited to that aspect would be susceptible to the same criticism she applies to Silvestri's reading of Noica, the consideration of this political aspect of Brancusi's project only adds to the richness of interpretive possibilities of his work.
40 Sidney Geist, "Brancusi's *Bird in Space*," 25-26.

Art History, Sartre and Identity in Rosenberg's America

BRIAN WINKENWEDER

> Urge and urge and urge,
> Always the procreant urge of the world.
> Out of the dimness opposite equals advance,
> always substance and increase, always sex,
> Always a knit of identity, always distinction,
> always a breed of life.[1]

I. Rosenberg's Interdisciplinary Range and the Vicissitudes of Art History

> There was a time, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when explainers of Abstract Expressionism valued Harold Rosenberg's writings and took them into account. After that, he was increasingly marginalised, overlooked or uncited.[2]

Harold Rosenberg was not an art historian.[3] He never studied art, formally. Indeed, Rosenberg's degree was in law and he taught as a member of the Committee on Social Thought, an interdisciplinary program at the University of Chicago. Nonetheless, he is best remembered as an art critic for *The New Yorker*, and as an essayist for *The Partisan Review* and numerous other left-wing publications. The bulk of his essays on art published in these forums were re-packaged in numerous, widely-read books, particularly *The Tradition of the New*, *The Anxious Object*, *Artworks and Packages*, *The De-definition of Art*, and *Art on the Edge*. But, *how* is he remembered? Twenty years after his death, what is his reputation?

No one disputes that he coined the term "Action Painting" and that his term enjoyed, briefly, greater cachet than Abstract Expressionism—the canonical term art historians use to categorize "*Modern* modern" painting executed in America immediately following World War Two.[4] Oddly, Rosenberg's

posthumous reputation seems to shrink with each subsequent publication analyzing the cause and impact of Abstract Expressionism. When Rosenberg's name does appear in print, invariably it follows that of Clement Greenberg. As art historians account for the visual arts during mid-century, Rosenberg, more often than not, is cast as a foil for Greenbergian formalism. His ceaseless interest in the emerging identities of artists provides a neat polarity to Greenberg's slavish adherence to the pure surfaces of Abstract Expressionist painting. And in this agonistic pairing, Rosenberg does not (and cannot) emerge favorably; instead, he is increasingly relegated to the sidelines, the margins, to the footnotes.[5] For instance, the text of Briony Fer's 1997 publication, *On Abstract Art*, includes thirty-one references to Clement Greenberg (based on the index). In contrast, she does not mention Rosenberg, even in passing, despite discussing both De Kooning and Pollock in her book.[6]

He is quickly becoming a historical anecdote, a brief, misguided tangent in the trajectory of American art history—a political, philosophical and psychological detour that need not be traversed. Although Fer does not include Rosenberg in her history of abstraction, Rosenberg's interest in the artist's identity would have contributed to the development of her thesis: "[M]y project is driven by the question of how it is that the works of art under discussion, even though the claims once made for them might be hard to sustain, still continue to hold our interest, always intractable, yet always compelling."[7] Rosenberg's writings appeal to both sides of this project—he made claims that "might be hard to sustain" and reveals, psychosocially speaking, why much abstract painting "continue[s] to hold our interest." This essay offers an explanation for this art historical oversight, typified by Fer's omission, by proposing that Rosenberg's interdisciplinarian scope remained untenable for traditional art historians. Thereafter, it examines Rosenberg's use of Sartrean existentialism and his deviations from this philosophy due to his psychosocial conception of identity formation. Given his constant referencing of identity in numerous contexts, Rosenberg's critical legacy merits renewed consideration during this era in which identity politics reigns as a dominant topic in all branches of the art world.

Art history, a relatively young discipline, is limited in scope, and therefore, long resistant to encroachment from other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities: "Art history was founded by Wöllflin and Riegl on the principle that formal analysis was key to the study."[8] Rosenberg's repeated references to the likes of Marx, Dostoyevsky, Mann, Whitman, Poe, Melville, and most importantly Sartre, in his writings about art undoubtedly estranged, if not confused, traditional art historians.[9] Elaine O'Brien suggests that Rosenberg suffers in academia, not just due to art history's limitations but due to a general trend of isolation between all academic disciplines: "[U]nderstanding of his criticism has suffered seriously from the increasing segregation of intellectual life into academic specializations after the 1950s."[10]

II. The Significance of Identity and Rosenberg's Anti-Formalism

> I should like to point out that in dealing with *new* things there is a question that precedes that of good or bad. I refer to the question, 'What is it?'—the question of identity.[11]

> The dramatic problem of the twentieth century is that of the relation between collective identities active on the stage of history and the self of the individual as a more or less willing component of a mass 'I.'[12]

It should come as no surprise that Rosenberg's status within the art world has diminished since his death. He strongly admonished the institutions of the art world for distorting (and, at times, ignoring) the crises—social, individual, and aesthetic—that Post-war artists encountered:

> This distortion is being practiced daily by all who have an interest in 'normalising' vanguard art, so that they may enjoy its fruits in comfort: these include dealers, collectors, educators, directors of government cultural programs, art historians, museum officials, critics, artists—in sum, the 'art world.' The root theory of the distortion is the academic concept of art as art: whatever the situation or state of the artist, the only thing that 'counts' is the painting and the painting itself only counts as line, color, form.[13]

Rosenberg could not acquiesce to the rigid, discursive dictates of the 'art world,' especially the conservative, academic wing of art history. He was not interested in works of art as ends unto themselves. For Rosenberg, art objects serve as conduits to artists' individual identities: "In art of our time, the identity of the artist is a paramount theme. The concept of art as creation brings the artist literally into the picture. The process by which the work comes into being often constitutes the content of the work; the artist's activities furnish its 'plot.'"[14] Herein, lies Rosenberg's primary concern—the art object as a repository of the artist's identity formation.

However, Rosenberg's interest in this form of artistic enterprise should not be seen as a promotion of aesthetic narcissism. For the creations of artists do bear relevance to various geo-political demarcations of society (neighborhood, city, state, nation, continent, world). The art Rosenberg wrote of was expressly relevant during the post-war era in the United States where displaced individuals and returning G.I.'s faced anxiety (together in anonymity) in regards to their future, both in terms of their employment and the threat of nuclear war:

> The change of art from picture-making to creation and self-cre-

> ation, into a means, that is, for each individual to define himself through his use of the materials of art, had coincided with the emergence of the big city, crowds, mass migrations, displaced persons, and a widespread anonymity—in a word, of that '*vie moderne*' which Baudelaire recommended as the subject matter of art.[15]

Modern life is inextricably interwoven with Rosenberg's conception of identity. The artist who discovers his identity through the act of painting, does not turn his back on society; rather, he works through the anxiety of his era, as a scout (coonskinner[16]) lighting out for a new, metaphysical territory, blazing a trail for all others to follow:

> Art cannnot cure cultural chaos, no matter how effective it may be in giving body to the metaphysical absolutes of individuals. . . .Its direction is toward a society in which the experiences of each will be the ground of a unique, inimitable form—in short, a society in which everyone will be an artist. Art in our time can have no other social aim...To exist, individuality must be *acted.* Art, from which emerges style, is the training ground of individual doing.[17]

To consider the art object as an "event" wherein the artist's identity may be discovered abrogates all of the methodological priorities of traditional art history and standardized art criticism. Inquiries concerning the identity of the artist are ancillary at best, and forbidden at worst, to anyone properly trained in discussing the arts. Reviewing *The Tradition of the New*, Paul Goodman understood Rosenberg's central preoccupation: "The plot of this book is then as follows: in the beginning, the author generously gives identity to the others; in the middle he ably discusses the problem of identity; in the end he speaks strongly for his own identity."[18] Inasmuch, Rosenberg's informal knowledge about art and prioritizing the artists themselves prohibits him from being taken seriously by art history.

Art historical formalism, and its literary twin, New Criticism, were far too formulaic, methodical and dependant upon internal criteria (i.e. line, color, and form or metaphor, irony and ambiguity) to satisfy Rosenberg. His "eye" did not dictate to his mind, rather Rosenberg's mind, flush with Marxist materialist dialectics, Platonic philosophy, and Sartrean existentialism, treated the art object (or any book he reviewed) as a catalyst to inquire what it means to be alive during the middle of the twentieth-century.[19] In such an investigation, Rosenberg insisted upon committing both the intentional and affective fallacies.[20] Keenly interested in the thoughts and attitudes of the artists, Rosenberg preferred to know the creator and regarded the creation as only a by-product of the artist's psychosocial anxieties.

He lived in Greenwich Village, summered in East Hampton, and drank

at the Cedar Tavern; he regularly visited De Koonings' studio, got into rows with Pollock, and went on late-night prowls with Newman. Rosenberg's finest essays on art respond directly to the ideas and values of the artists he knew intimately. He refused to approach art criticism with a personal and/or theoretical litmus test that could be consistently applied. In an interview conducted near the end of his life (January 10, 1978), the interviewer, Melvin Tumin, elicits Rosenberg's experiential approach to looking at art:

> **Tumin**: "You have an obsession with evading criteria. . ."
> **Rosenberg**: "I don't believe in them...whatever concepts you use when you're discussing a work of art arise out of your experience with that work of art, and not because you have certain criteria. If you have certain criteria you have to apply them in all cases...Suppose you had ten criteria, memorized them, and starting [sic] looking at a painting? You'd go nuts. It's not the way one thinks—to count off traits."[21]

In Rosenberg's mind, a painting (and by extension all art works) serve as aesthetic expressions of one's identity as articulated by the artist's (inter)action with pigment and canvas (or any other media). The manifest product of an artist's actions reveals a psychic imprimatur of the self. Therefore, criteria for judging works of art are contextually bound to the critic's familiarity with the intellectual and personal concerns of the artist himself; as a result, evaluative criteria are contingent with the art object and can not be universally or unilaterally applied. Rosenberg traded in the economy of ideas and spoke disdainfully of trumpeting specific works of art because they satisfy a set of fixed criteria. To examine paintings based on formal properties alone stymies a critic's reception of the political, philosophical and psychological resonances within the work. Rosenberg was opposed to the commodification of art; he did not want market forces, especially those in an era of rapid growth and prosperity, clouding his judgment.

Political, psychological and philosophical inquiries of "Why?" ascend over formal, technical and methodological investigations of "How?" These concerns, moreover, are not just the musings of an obstinate art critic in the twilight of his career, rather, these principles guided Rosenberg throughout his development as a cultural critic. They are the subtext of an 1932 essay "Character Change and the Drama" which derives from his background in law. Rosenberg utilizes legal definitions of "the individual not as an entity enduring in time but by what he has done in particular instances. A given sequence of acts provokes a judgment, and this judgment is an inseparable part of the recognition of the individual."[22] Applying this to 'the art world' Rosenberg does not judge works of art with *a priori* criteria; he must judge his experience of the art work itself on its own terms, and from there, psychologically engage the emerging identity of the artist himself. He claims: "I have no ground rules

because I'm not devoted to the idea of methodology. I like to talk to artists. I've spent most of my life talking to artists. My criticism is not really criticism very often, its simply a continuing dialog with artists."[23]

Granted, Rosenberg's criticism stems from the privilege of his insider status. And therefore, in retrospect, this advantage should be seen as a boon to art historians studying American art of the Cold War era. Yet, as recently as 1997, critiques of Rosenberg's anti-formalism continue to be used to dismiss him; Yve-Alain Bois's and Rosalind Krauss's recent publication, *Formless: A User's Guide*, marginalizes Rosenberg for never taking the time to describe a single work of art.[24] Essentially, art history dismisses Rosenberg for not behaving like an art historian. In fact, this backlash appears immediately; Hilton Kramer, reviewing *The Tradition of the New* in 1959, provides this oft-heard refrain "[H]e refuses to fuss with anything so tedious as a particular painting, for in his terms it can never be anything more than a historical prop."[25] These sentiments are echoed by Max Kozloff in 1965: "[O]ne never gets the impression that his fascination for personalities and philosophical schemes has ever led Rosenberg to examine individual pictures, or that they exist for any other purpose than to illustrate a rhetorical field theory. Far from being a call to engagement, his criticism removes him to that role of stranger which he once decried."[26]

III. Scholarly Oversight and the Theoretical Origins of 'Action Painting'

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.[27]

Dismissals of Rosenberg's discussion of art on formalist grounds persists in the 1980s and perpetuates the misbelief that Rosenberg developed his term "Action Painting" after seeing Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock at work in his studio in 1950. Annette Cox writes:

> Rosenberg ignored the images found in gesture painting and dealt instead with the frame of mind of the artist as he worked...Rosenberg's gift as a critic, then, did not rest on his eye or his knowledge of art history but on his sensitivity to the mood of his friends and associates. In fact, the term "Action Painting" may rest not on the canvases of the gesture painters but on the photographs...Here in Hans Namuth's stills were direct visual statements of the "gesture of liberation" that the critic defined as

> the essence of Action Painting. After the publication of these photographs, Rosenberg could then offer his interpretation of the mood in the studios of these painters. Rosenberg's reliance on photographs rather than paintings demonstrates the dilemma he faced during the postwar period.[28]

In point of fact, Rosenberg relied neither on photographs nor paintings to "demonstrate the dilemma he faced," but rather on the intellectual climate of his day, especially the crossing trajectories between the descending importance of Marxist political thought and the ascending popularity of Sartrean existentialism amongst the intellectuals of New York. Cox relies on inaccurate assertions made by Barbara Rose, Bryan Robertson and others that Rosenberg either developed the term "Action Painting" after seeing Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock as published in *Artnews* in May 1951 (19 months before his essay "American Action Painters" was published) or after a 1949 conversation with Pollock.[29] These art historians, critics and biographers overlook Rosenberg's initial formulations of his theory of "action" and its relationship to identity in his essay "Character Change and the Drama" of 1932:

> Individuals are conceived as identities in systems whose subject matter is action and the judgment of actions. In this realm the multiple incidents in the life of an individual may be synthesized, by the choice of the individual himself or by the decision of others, into a scheme that pivots on a single fact central to the individual's existence and which, controlling his behavior and deciding his fate, becomes his visual definition.[30]

Such a statement does not immediately lend itself to art history and reveals the shaky ground upon which Rosenberg's contributions to art criticism stand as they exit the vitality of contemporaneity and enter the relativity of history. Art history, based on its traditional methodological paradigms, has no interest in identities "whose subject matter is action" and the manner by which such identities become "visible definition[s]."

To fully understand the historical complexities concerning Rosenberg's theory of action, one should include Robert Motherwell's claim that Rosenberg's concept of "action" stems from Richard Huelsenback's "En Avant Dada" which was published in part in *Possibilities* and in full in Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*.[31] Huelsenback wrote: "The Dadaist should be a man who is entitled to have ideas only if one can transform them into life—the completely active type, who lives only through action, because it holds the possibility of achieving knowledge." While this statement certainly rang true to Rosenberg, to ascribe his theories of action to this brief excerpt is as misguided as Cox's and Rose's attribution of the theory's origins to photographs, or Robertson's attribution of the origins to a conver-

sation between Rosenberg and Pollock.[32] As "Character Change and the Drama" reveals, theories of action concerned Rosenberg twenty years prior to the publication of "The American Action Painters." Cox's insistence that "Rosenberg reli[ed] on photographs rather than paintings" perpetuates the short-sighted scholarship of traditional art history and reveals an institutional suspicion for that which makes claims beyond the paradigms of visual analysis.

As we have seen, time and again, scholars dismiss Rosenberg for not engaging in close careful descriptions of specific works of art. Many of the same scholars also lambast Rosenberg for incorporating Marxism and Existentialism into his criticism; they diminish the significance of Rosenberg's statements regarding American painting at mid-century for a perceived allegiance to vulgar Marxism and fashionable Existentialism without investigating as to whether his ideas develop independently of these schools of thought. I do not intend to suggest that Rosenberg's ideas evolved independently of these two intellectual trends, but that he is not solely a disciple of them. In this regard, I confess to following the precedent set by Elaine O'Brien whose "ambition is to open the puny packaged readings of Rosenberg's thought."[33] For indeed, Marx and Sartre figured prominently in Rosenberg's writings. Fred Orton admirably assesses the presence of Marx's ideas in the formulation of the critic's conception of 'action': "It should be clear...that Rosenberg's idea of 'action'—'American action'—came out of the very particular way he read Marx's writings."[34] But, to limit Rosenberg's conception of 'Action' to his reading of Marx is again too reductive and over-determined. Rosenberg was an intellectual barometer of his era — he was not only an active participant of the New York intellectuals associated with *The Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and *Commentary* (such as Dwight McDonald, Lionel Abel, Paul Goodman, William Phillips, Philip Rahv, Bernard Rosenberg, Irving Howe, Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg), but actively contributed to the flow of ideas and, more importantly, drew from this rapid circulation of ideas as well.[35] He was influenced, in my estimation, in part, by everything he could get his hands on. In other words, Namuth's photographs, conversations with Pollock, De Kooning, Motherwell, and Newman, quotes from Huelsenback's "En Avant Dada," and his reading of Marx all contributed, in varying degrees, to Rosenberg's initial formulation and subsequent permutations of his theory of 'Action Painting.'

I should like to add to this mix a quote from Sartre that Rosenberg was likely to have come across. In a 1947 English translation of *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, published as *Existentialism*, Rosenberg would have been intrigued by the following:

> [M]oral choice is to be compared to the making of a work of art...I ask whether anyone has ever accused an artist who has painted a picture of not having drawn his inspiration from rules set up *a*

> *priori*? Has anyone ever asked, "What painting ought he to make?" It is clearly understood that there is no definite painting to be made, that the artist is engaged in the making of his painting, and that the painting to be made is precisely the painting he will have made. It is clearly understood that there are no *a priori* aesthetic values, but that there are values which appear subsequently in the coherence of the painting, in the correspondence between what the artist intended and the result... We never say that a work of art is arbitrary. When we speak of a canvas of Picasso, we never say that it is arbitrary; we understand quite well that he was making himself what he is at the very time he was painting, that the ensemble of his work is embodied in his life.[36]

I do not claim that Rosenberg's concept of 'action painting' stems from this passage; rather, my assertion is that it belongs to the aforementioned constellation of ideas that Rosenberg had at his disposal.

IV. Rosenberg's Existentialism and His Departure from Sartrean Terminology

> In Action painting, the problem of beginning and ending, of entrance and exit—becomes the focal question. The fragmentary art of transformal Action painting engages itself within the fragmentary inner world of contemporary man and the fragmentary outer world of a civilization in which the cultures of all times and places are blended and destroyed.[37]

For both Sartre and Rosenberg, the act of creation determines one's values at any given moment. As Sartre posits: "The existentialist will never consider man as an end because he is always in the making."[38] One's values, be they political, aesthetic, or moral, do not exist *a priori* and in perpetuity; rather they are made manifest only through specific actions. All philosophical discussions of value are ineffective because they remain untested; only through the psychological actions of an individual ("choice" in Sartrean terminology) can value be determined. Rosenberg claims "The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value—political, esthetic, moral."[39] This freedom was not an excuse for amorality; rather, this "gesture of liberation" required the painter-actor to re-define, and thereby transform, his values based on a personal discovery of "the true image of his identity."[40] For Rosenberg, the action painter must assume a posture of diffidence toward society's values and forge his own values based on a metaphysical imago of himself. Inasmuch, Sartre's discussion of Picasso coheres with Rosenberg's (reluctant[41]) definition of the psychology of the action painter:

> [T]he psychology is the psychology of creation. Not that of the

> so-called psychological criticism that wants to 'read' a painting for clues to the artist's sexual preferences or debilities. The work, the act, translates the psychologically given into the intentional, into a 'world'—and thus transcends it...what gives the canvas its meaning is not psychological data but *rôle*, the way the artist organizes his emotional and intellectual energy as if he were in a living situation.[42]

Of course, textual parallels between Sartre and Rosenberg do not constitute innovative discoveries. The friendship between these two is well documented—Sartre published several of Rosenberg's essays in his journal *Le Temps Moderne* and stayed with him during trips to New York.[42] Prior to the two of them meeting, Simone de Beauvoire, in a letter to Sartre, writes of her first meeting with Rosenberg and describes him as "a very intelligent guy, an art critic and former Marxist, with whom I argued about politics and philosophy till I was half-dead from exhaustion and exasperation."[44] Certainly, Rosenberg enjoyed intimate familiarity with Sartre and his own particular brand of existentialism. And, contrary to Carter Ratcliff's portrayal of the intellectual fashions of New York—"existentialism became popular not as a philosophy but as an attitude, a manner, a cliched look"—Rosenberg understood the theoretical premises and repercussions of Sartrean existentialism.[45] Perhaps because of this, art historians and critics frequently deride Rosenberg's existentialist inclinations without attempting to assess whether or not his theories harbored any originality.

Hilton Kramer reductively claims Rosenberg's "own insights are inseparable from the culture of Marxism, Existentialism and French literary polemic, which have formed the content and style of his writing."[46] Following this rhetoric, Irving Sandler suggests "Rosenberg was less historical and more existential...Convinced that the artist's existential experience was the exclusive mainspring of action painting. Rosenberg dismissed tradition out of hand, considering it a barrier that blocked the artist's path to his authentic being."[47] Robert Hughes scoffs "It was on De Kooning's work that Harold Rosenberg based his idea of 'Action Painting,' whereby the work of art was an act rather than a configuration, a by-product of some existential face-off between Will and Fate; ordinary questions like the style, sources and syntax of his art had no place in this drama."[48] More recently, Michael Leja contends "Harold Rosenberg...swathed the art in obscure, melodramatic, existentialist rhetoric."[49] These writers, to varying degrees, rebuff Rosenberg for using in his analysis of painting a rhetoric of identity that is neither historical nor formal. But, this critique is not exactly valid—Rosenberg's sense of history, and his understanding of the surfaces of the canvas, does manifest itself in his criticism. However, these issues must be packaged alongside a larger bundle of concerns: "The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art

and life. It follows that anything is relevant to it. Anything that has to do with action—psychology, philosophy, history, mythology, hero-worship"[50] Rosenberg consistently operates as a dialectician. His existentialist tendencies, therefore, do not produce absolutes, but rather must be tempered by a sustained process of incorporating both positivist and negativist conceptualizations. For instance, Rosenberg's oxymoronic phrase "the tradition of the new" highlights his attempts to synthesize antinomies. The ironic tension between tradition and new produces an unresolvable paradox as well as an ideal for artists to achieve. The act of painting can produce an anxiety in the artist whereby he recognizes both his isolation from and inclusion in society. In this regard, Rosenberg critiques Sartre and produces a dialectical existentialism that prohibits absolutes and universals.

Both Rosenberg and Sartre agreed that the individual bore responsibility for his 'actions' and through this defined himself. However, the dynamics of self-definition is precisely where Rosenberg detaches his thought from Sartre's. For Sartre, the individual occludes society: "Identity is the ideal of 'one,' and 'one' comes into the world by human reality."[51] Yet, human reality, for Sartre, relates only to the self and does not involve metaphysical convulsions between individual identity and social identity. In short, there are only ontological beings; there are no collective beings: "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other...I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me."[52] In a sense, existentialist conceptions of identity remain locked in an infinite regress of reflecting Lacanian mirrors: we never know Others and instead, project our conceptions of ourselves onto them. For Sartre, we are all independent entities responsible to no one but ourselves; yet, since "existence precedes essence," man's responsibility for himself extends to a "responsib[ility] for all men."[53] However, this responsibility is directed expressly towards the self, and only through example is the rest of society implicated: "[I]f I want to marry...even if this marriage depends solely on my own circumstances or passion or wish, I am involving all humanity in monogamy...I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man."[54] Sartre's universalizing conception of "being-for-itself" and his insistence that there are no *a priori* values or essence distinguishes his theories from Rosenberg's own original form of existentialist aesthetics.

Rosenberg's conception of identity draws on a more equivocating conception of society in which group identities do involve the individual in a larger, *a priori*, social collectivity. This conception is most clearly articulated in two essays written in response to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1947; translated as *Anti-Semite and the Jew*, 1948)—"Is There a Jewish Art?" and "Sartre's Jewish Morality Play"—from these essays, the prime disparities between Sartre and Rosenberg can be extrapolated.[55] Rosenberg simultaneously

applauds Sartre for defending the Jew, and condemns him for urging the ultimate dissolution of Jews via acculturation into the Christian communities in which they reside. Sartre's dismissal of anything outside of the "being-for-itself" prohibits him from accepting and appreciating the value of group and cultural identities that differ from his own conception of "universality." Rosenberg writes:

> For in the end, he, too, wishes to dissolve the Jewish collective identity into its abstract particles, that is, into men made more human by ceasing to be Jews. He wants the French Jew to become a Frenchman...Though he comes out for socialism he does not say a word about dissolving the French identity. For Sartre it is enough that *the Jews* should be assimilated.[56]

Unlike Sartre, Rosenberg believes that the social collectivity does not derive from the acts of the individual but exists prior to his existence and will continue to exist after his death. Identity, in Rosenberg's scheme, is determined by the individual's relation to himself and his family as well as to his class, community, and nation.

Rosenberg disagrees with Sartre's conception of 'being-for-itself': "*Sartre has misunderstood fundamentally the problem of identity*" (Rosenberg's italics).[57] The artist, in his efforts to forge his personal identity via interactions with the canvas as arena, does not turn his back on society, but rather attempts to make sense of it—initially for himself as a means of discovering his identity, but ultimately for all who may see his work so that they may also recognize their own anxieties concerning identity.

> The most serious theme in Jewish life is the problem of identity. The Jew, of course, has no monopoly on this problem. But the Jewish artist has felt it in an especially deep and immediate way. It has been a tremendously passionate concern of his thought. It's not a Jewish problem; it is a situation of the twentieth century, century of displaced persons, of people moving from one class into another from one national context into another. In the chaos of the twentieth century, the metaphysical theme of identity has entered into art, and most strongly since the war...This work, inspired by the will to identity, has constituted a new art by Jews which, though not a Jewish art, is a profound Jewish expression, at the same time that it is loaded with meaning for all people of this era. To be engaged with the aesthetics of self has liberated the Jew as artist by eliminating his need to ask himself whether a Jewish art exists or can exist.[58]

Jewish art, at mid-century, need not be demonstrably different from the art of other cultures, because all ethnicities are invested in the increasing globaliza-

tion of the world, made most apparent by the global threat of nuclear war, from which no one is spared. More importantly, this trend in globalization is most relevant to the post-war American experience, where legions of individuals from various nationalities merged, particularly in the big cities, and had to re-determine their identities, both in regards to their personal history as well as in terms of their new, and continually changing, surroundings.

Sartrean existentialism posits that one's "situation" and "authenticity" does not bear on external relations but stems solely from within: "The fallacy in Sartre's notion of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic,' which results in such profound distortions, may be traced to his erroneous conception of a 'situation.'...Can one have a 'true and lucid consciousness' of his situation? Only if 'situation' is defined in terms of external relations. I can be conscious that I am an American, a Jew, a husband, a father. But to Sartre, one's self is part of the situation."[59] If one's self is simultaneously one's "situation," then the self would never be able to arrive at an "authentic" conception of identity because one can never have a "true and lucid consciousness" of the self, given the on-going dynamics of becoming. For Rosenberg, one can only know one's identity through one's fixed relationships to others — identity does not spring independently from within. For Sartre, identity is a choice; for Rosenberg, identity is both a choice and a discovery:

> The choice between being authentic or inauthentic has to do not with any specific historical or social condition in which one may find oneself, but with one's metaphysical situation, with the fact of being alive as a unique individual. In the particular situation we cannot *choose* ourselves, since our action in it is the means by which we *discover* ourselves.[60]

We can not choose our ethnicity or sex, but we can self-fabricate ourselves within the larger ontological framework of human existence. There is a modicum of choice for Rosenberg. Our ethnicity and sex do not determine our moral fortitude; rather, our morals are made manifest by the actions we take in a given context. Given Rosenberg's emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the rest of society, his existentialism deviates from Sartre and proceeds along psychosocial lines instead.

V. Psychosocial Identity in Rosenberg's America

> From the beginning, persons and institutions in America always have existed in a situation where present states of flux have made previous states of flux seem periods of stability. One might say that the American identity and its crisis have developed from this at least statistical norm of change. One might go further, perhaps, and wonder how much and how rapid a change people can experi-

ence without threat to their sense of identity.[61]

Rosenberg's discussions of the problems of identity in America bear many affinities with Erik Erikson, particularly as expressed in his book *Childhood and Society*. Both writers recognized the dissolution of tradition at the conclusion of the second world war, and pinpointed America as the nation where the loss of tradition was most pronounced. Furthermore, action played a central role in both of their conceptions of identity: "The size and rigor of the country and the importance of the means of migration and transportation helped to create and to develop the identity of autonomy and initiative, the identity of him who is 'going places and doing things.'"[62] As pre-Industrial, socially stabilizing systems eroded, notably the Church, agrarian communities, and, more recently, the family, the individual living in the modern world had become alienated from his own identity: "Among the grand metaphysical themes of the decade, the one that has proved perhaps most fascinating and persistent has been that of 'alienation' — the loss by the individual of *personal identity* through the operation of social processes" (Italics mine).[63] Rosenberg's recognition that the loss of traditions brings about a crises of identity corresponds with Erikson:

> And so it comes that we begin to conceptualize matters of identity at the very time in history when they become a problem. For we do so in a country [USA] which attempts to make a superidentity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants; and we do so at a time when rapidly increasing mechanizations threaten these essentially agrarian and patrician identities in their lands of origin as well.[64]

Rosenberg may not have been familiar with Erikson's ideas when he was writing the essays collected in *The Tradition of the New*, but he certainly had been exposed to them by the early 1960s, as he quotes him in his essay "Community, Values, Comedy."[65]

In this essay, Rosenberg critiques Erikson's epigenetic theory of the "life cycle" for relying too heavily on the community for providing the individual with his identity: "Developing my talents and courage puts the question of identity up to me, where it belongs; while if the community 'provides' my identity, it will, as in past societies, tend to be little more than a dog-tag in depth and belong more to my neighbors than to me."[66] In this sense, Rosenberg can be distinguished between both Sartre, whom he faults for minimizing outside influence on the identity formation of the individual, and Erikson, whom he chides for minimizing the agency of the individual to formulate his own identity. Rosenberg's conception of identity, therefore, must be located somewhere between these two poles. Furthermore, Erikson's "life cycle" was too methodical and programmatic for Rosenberg's mind. In a book review,

Rosenberg considers Erikson's "Schedule of Basic Virtues" to be the equivalent of such mass cultural pabulum as "the common output of sermons, women's magazines, TV panels."[67] Of course, we must remember that many of Rosenberg's essays can be read as sermons and that he contributed to women's magazines (*Vogue*) as well. Be this as it may, Rosenberg's conception of America at mid-century parallels Erikson's in many ways.

Since I can not fully examine their similarities within the scope of this essay, such a future study could produce beneficial results. For instance, Rosenberg's essay "The Orgamerican Phantasy" in which he discusses, among other publications, William Whyte's *The Organization Man* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, covers much of the same territory as the conclusion to Erikson's tour-de-force essay "Reflections on the American Identity." Rosenberg writes: "Evoking the sinister concept of man as a tool and as an object...[i]t would seem that among the 'groups', particularly the better-paid ones, that have replaced the classes in Orgamerica, the substitution of a corporate identity for one's own is not the unmixed deprivation it might have been for the twelve-hour-a-day factory hand or for the citizen of the slave state."[68] This concern for the replacement of individual identity with a corporate one is consistent with Erikson's own concerns:

> Consider our adolescent boy. In his early childhood he was faced with a training which tended to make him machinelike and clocklike. Thus standardized, he found chances, in his later childhood, to develop autonomy, initiative, and industry, with the implied promise that decency in human relations...would permit him freedom of choice in his pursuits, that the identity of free choice would balance his self-coercion. As an adolescent and man, however, he finds himself confronted with superior machines, complicated, incomprehensible, and impersonally dictatorial in their power to standardize his pursuits and tastes. These machines do their powerful best to convert him into a consumer idiot, a fun egotist, and an efficiency slave—and this by offering him what he seems to demand. [69]

My point in sketching these parallels is to emphasize Rosenberg's interdisciplinarian range of thought in regards to his examination of identity. This theme dominates Rosenberg's writings, beginning with his earliest essay "Character Change and the Drama." For Rosenberg, "the identity of the artist is the paramount theme"; his persistence in articulating this theme, to the exclusion of formally analyzing art works, has reduced his art historical relevance. However, in today's academic climate where issues of identity have emerged as a "paramount theme," and traditional art history competes with the interdisciplinarian enterprise of visual culture, perhaps Rosenberg's writings are ripe for re-appraisal.

Rosenberg described the Abstract Expressionists as revealing their identity through their interactions on a canvas. This identity was relevant to the viewer because it emerged via a metaphysical universality and provided lessons in how to act out one's individualty: "To exist, individuality must be *acted.* Art, from which emerges style, is the training ground of individual doing" (Rosenberg's italics).[70] Artists today who continue to investigate their identity, do so in the highly politicized (and academicized) arenas of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The act, for such artists, is no longer the immediacy of treating the canvas "as an arena," but rather their biography ("individual doing") in and of itself. Many of the "hottest" artists of the 1990s maintain vestiges of Rosenberg's theories within their artistic productions: consider the work of David Hammons, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Robert Gober and Mike Kelley; or Nan Goldin, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson and Adrian Piper; or Komar and Melamid, Ilya Kabakov, Sophie Calle and Mona Hatoum. While Rosenberg himself would have faulted these artists for failing to "avoid logical conclusions," his belief that "[t]he act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence" remains relevant to studies of such aforementioned artists precisely because their art explicitly deals with staged dramatizations of the discovery of identity.

Notes

I would like to thank Donald Kuspit, Elaine O'Brien, David Craven, and Richard Leslie for their critical comments, editorial assistance and encouragement.

1 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" (the third stanza of the third section) in *Leaves of Grass* (1892; New York: Signet, 1954), 51.

2 Fred Orton, "Action, Revolution and Painting," *Oxford Art Journal,* 14.2 (1991): 3.

3 Boundaries between art history and art criticism are blurry. Speaking simply, one can suggest that art history examines art of the past, whereas art criticism deals with art of the present. However, as the present perpetually becomes the past, it follows that art criticism, over time, becomes art history. In this sense, Rosenberg's contributions to art, belong, today, to the discourse of art history. Just as Baudelaire and Ruskin remain relevant to 19th-century art history, Rosenberg's criticism should be relevant to 20th-century art history. As this paper reveals, however, the significance of his contributions to the criticism of mid-century art is dwindling at this time. Yet, given Rosenberg's interest in the identities of Abstract Expressionist painters, he deserves recognition as a central figure who, at an early stage, articulated the importance of identity in contemporary art practice — a concern that remains central to many artists who have worked since the 1950s.

4 This peculiar phrasing derives from Rosenberg's essay "The Concept of Action

in Painting." *Artworks and Packages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 214.

5 In fairness to historical veracity, it should be stated that during the twenty years since his death, Rosenberg has been the subject of several studies. In 1997, the only dissertation to study Rosenberg's writings was successfully defended (Elaine O'Brien, The Art Criticism of Harold Rosenberg: Theaters of Love and Combat, diss. City University of New York, 1997). Half a decade earlier he was the focus of Fred Orton's article "Action, Revolution and Painting" which surmised Rosenberg's Marxist proclivities and their manifestations in his post-war art criticism. Rosenberg experienced a renaissance of sorts in 1985: *The Case of the Baffled Radical*, a posthumously published book appeared (it received little attention and less praise); simultaneously, Rosenberg received pedestrian treatment in James Herbert's *The Political Origins of Abstract-Expressionist Art Criticism: The Early Theoretical Writing of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg* (Stanford Honors Essay in Humanitie, No.28. Stanford: Stanford University, 1985); and he was the subject of a sympathetic article by Marjorie Welish ("Harold Rosenberg: Tranforming the Earth." *Art Criticism*, 2.1 (1985): 10-28). In the early 1980s, he figured prominently in Annette Cox's *Art-as-Politics: The Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society* (Studies in the Fine Arts: The Avant-Garde 26. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982); and Stephen Foster's *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Studies in Fine Arts: Criticism 2. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Dore Ashton's eulogizing article, "On Harold Rosenberg." (*Critical Inquiry*, 6.4 (1980):615-624) was the first scholarly article since the critic's death to adequately assess his career and philosophy. Although there are several entries in this bibliographical overview, it's relative paucity, compared to that of Geenberg, indicates Rosenberg's waning influence in art critico-historical discourse. Meanwhile, Greenberg's reputation continues to swell with the publication of a four volume collection of his essays (*The Writings and Criticism of Clement Greenberg*, Ken O'Brian, Ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, vols. 1 and 2; 1993, vols. 3 and 4) and a recently published biography (Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life*, New York: Scribner, 1998). Sampling bookstores in and around New York, one will not find any of Rosenberg's books stocked (even though the University of Chicago Press keeps them in print) whereas one can easily find most of the volumes of Greenberg's collected writings and his biography. In short, while Greenberg's ideas are accessible to the general public, Rosenberg's are not.

6 Briony Fer. *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

7 Ibid., 4.

8 A.L. Rees and F. Borzello, Eds. *The New Art History* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1988), 7. Bibliography on the tension between traditional art history and "new" art history is extensive and need not be fully reviewed here. Most recently, the debate reached fever pitch in 1995 when *The Art Bulletin* published a series, included in all four issues of the 77th volume, entitled "A Range of Critical Perspectives" that described the persistent grip of formalism on art history. In the fourth issue, Carlo Ginzburg declared "Today some art historians regard interdisciplinarity as either a remedy for the alleged narrow-mindedness and conservativism of that discipline, or, alternatively, as a weapon against that discipline." ("Vetoes and Compatabilities," *The Art Bulletin* 77.4

(1995): 534.

9 I am indebted to Elaine O'Brien for rigorously encouraging, both in her recently completed dissertation on Rosenberg and in personal communication (February 5, February 25, and March 18, 1998), this explanation for Rosenberg's exclusion from contemporary art historical discourse.

10 O'Brien, 6.

11 Harold Rosenberg, Preface to the second edition of *The Tradition of the New* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) n.p.

12 _____., "The Riddles of Oedipus" (1946), *Act and Actor: Making the Self*, (New York: New American Library, 1970), 64-65.

13 _____., "Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion," *The Anxious Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 42.

14 _____., "Arshile Gorky: Art and Identity," *The Anxious Object*, 100.

15 Ibid., 104.

16 This metaphor draws specifically from Harold Rosenberg's essay "Parable of American Painting" in *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 13-22.

17 Harold Rosenberg, "Metaphysical Feelings in Modern Art," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1975): 232.

18 Paul Goodman, "Essays by Rosenberg." Rev. of *The Tradition of the New*, by Harold Rosenberg. *Dissent*, 6.3 (1959): 307.

19 See Orton's "Action, Revolution and Painting" for Rosenberg's Marxism; for Rosenberg's Platonism see O'Brien's dissertation, particularly the chapter entitled "Harold Rosenberg's Symposium"; Rosenberg's dialectical approach to Sartrean existentialism and its resonance in his writing is the focus of this essay.

20 It should be pointed out that New Criticism, especially as articulated by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, developed during the post-War era and was utilized as a central component of English literature pedagogy in the Universities whose demographics changed dramatically after the passage of the G.I. Bill (1944). For the influential essays "The Intentional Essay" (1946) and "The Affective Fallacy" (1949) see Wimsatt and Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*, Lexington: U Kentucky P, 1954.

21 "What Is Art? An Interview by Melvin M. Tumin with Harold Rosenberg," *The Case of the Baffled Radical* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1985) 263-264. Rosenberg passed away seven months after this interview. It was posthumously published in *Partisan Review* 45.4 (Fall, 1978).

22 Harold Rosenberg. "Character Change and the Drama." *The Tradition of the New*, 136.

23 "Harold Rosenberg on Criticism." *Looking Critically: 21 Years of Artforum Magazine*. Ed. Amy Baker Sandback. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1984) 18-19. This is Rosenberg's initial response to the question "Do you have a set of ethics or ground rules for the critic in the plastic arts, or for yourself?" asked by a member of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Contemporary Art Council, December, 1963).

24 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone, 1997): 28.

25 Hilton Kramer. "Month in Review," Rev. of *The Tradition of the New*, by Harold Rosenberg, *Arts Magazine*, 34 (September 1959): 56.

26 Max Kozloff, "The Critical Reception of Abstract-Expressionism," *Arts*

Magazine, 40 (December, 1965): 33.

27 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" (1952), *The Tradition of the New*, 25.

28 Annette Cox, *Art-as-Politics*, 135.

29 See Barbara Rose, "Hans Namuth's Photographs and the Jackson Pollock Myth: Part One: Media Impact and the Failure of Criticism," *Arts Magazine*, 53 (March, 1979): 112-119; and Bryan Robertson, *Jackson Pollock*, New York: Abrams, 1961. For confirmation of these falsehoods see Rosenberg "The Search for Jackson Pollock," Rev. of *Jackson Pollock*, by Bryan Robertson, *Art News*, 59 (February, 1961), 59-60. Nonetheless, scholars continue to repeat these errors as evidenced by Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 210; Ellen Landau, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 85-86; and Steven Niafeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Potter, 1989), 703-707. Fred Orton dismisses these falsehoods, once and for all, in a series of lengthy and fully cited footnotes in "Action, Revolution and Painting,"(16, Note 53-56).

30 Rosenberg, *Tradition of the New*, 152.

31 "An Interview with Robert Motherwell, "*Artforum*, 4 (September, 1965): 37. *Possibilities* (1, Winter 1947-48, 41-43), was a journal, published only once, by Rosenberg and Motherwell. See also Robert Motherwell, Ed. *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, Inc., 1951).

32 Rosenberg, in his review of Robertson's book quotes him: "During a conversation in 1949 with Harold Rosenberg, Pollock talked of the supremacy of *the act of painting* as in itself a source of magic. An observer with extreme intelligence, Rosenberg immediately coined the new phrase: 'action painting'(Robertson's italics)." He responds "The aim of this statement is obviously, to present Pollock as the originator of Action Painting in theory and in practice, if not in name...The statement is, of course, entirely false." See note 18 for full citation.

33 O'Brien, 7.

34 Orton, 10.

35 Paul Goodman, in his review of *The Tradition of the New* writes: "The theme of authentic identity and role is a great one; in our times it is in the air and forces itself on the writers, but this writer alone keeps it centrally in focus and does not treat it as an incident" 306.

36 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1997) 42-43.

37 Rosenberg, "The Concept of Action in Painting," *Artworks and Packages*, 217.

38 Sartre, 50.

39 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New*, 30.

40 Ibid., 31.

41 "What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement—certainly not as well as, if successful, it does the others. Yet without the definition something essential in those best is bound to be missed. The attempt to define is like a game in which you cannot possibly reach the goal from the starting point but can only close in on it by picking up each time from where the last play landed." Ibid., 23

42 Ibid., 29.

43 Ann Gibson reports of an interview with May Natalie Tabak, 19 April 1982 in which she claimed that "Sartre...would stay with the Rosenbergs when he was

in New York in the forties." *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1997) 194, Note 28. This is certainly true, but it should be pointed out that Sartre also stayed with David Hare, Lionel Abel and, most likely, others as well. What remains significant is that Rosenberg and Sartre were more than just acquaintances, they were friends.

44 Simone de Beauvoire, Letter (Thursday 8 May [1947]). *Letters to Sartre*, Quentin Hoare, Trans. and Ed. (London: Radius, 1991) 455-456. Curiously, in a footnote, Hoare identifies Rosenberg as "close to *Partisan Review*, . . . the author notably of studies on Thomas Mann." While this is true, it attests to the forgotten legacy of Rosenberg's more significant contributions concerning the philosophical parameters of Abstract Expressionism.

45 Carter Ratcliff, *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1996) 109.

46 Kramer, 56.

47 Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger, 1970) 270-271.

48 Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 294.

49 Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 4.

50 Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New*, 28.

51 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (NewYork: Philosophical Library, 1956) 74.

52 Ibid., 222.

53 Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosphical Library, 1957), 16.

54 Ibid., 18.

55 Both are reprinted in Harold Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

56 Rosenberg, "Sartre's Jewish Morality Play," *Discovering the Present*, 273-287. This essay is a revision of "Does the Jew Exist?: Sartre's Morality Play about Anti-Semitism," *Commentary*, 7.1 (January, 1949).

57 Ibid., 276.

58 Rosenberg, "Is There a Jewish Art?" *Discovering the Present*, 230-231. This essay was adapted from a talk given at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966 and was subsequently published in *Commentary*, 42 (July, 1966).

59 Rosenberg, "Sartre's Jewish Morality Play," *Discovering the Present*, 282.

60 Ibid., 282.

61 Hendrik Ruitenbeek. *The Individual and the Crowd: A Study of Identity in America* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1964) 125.

62 Erik Erikson. *Childhood and Society* (1950; New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 304.

63 Rosenberg, "The Orgamerican Phantasy," *The Tradition of the New*, 270.

64 Erikson, 282.

65 Collected in *Discovering the Present*, 141-153. Originally published in *Commentary* 30 (August 1960).

66 Ibid., 147.

67 Harold Rosenberg. "Psychoanalysis Americanized," *Discovering the Present*, 52. This essay was originally published in *Commentary* (April 1965) as a review of *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary American Culture* (Hendrik Ruitenbeek, Ed., New York: Delta, 1964), in which Erikson contributes "The Roots of Virtue" (225-245).

Passage from Realism to Cubism:
The Subversion of Pictorial Semiosis

VICTOR A. GRAUER

> Thus one dreams of a painting without truth, which, without debt and running a risk of no longer saying anything to anyone would still not give up painting.
>
> — Jacques Derrida, "Passe-Partout"

> I will take my stand in this passage.
>
> — Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon"

Introduction—of Three "Modernisms"

In a cogent, lucidly written essay, entirely typical for its time (the mid-eighties), Victor Burgin presents the "modernism" of Clement Greenberg as "an extension, into the twentieth century, of ideas which first began to emerge in the late eighteenth century as part of what we know today as 'romanticism'..." For Greenberg, "the visual artist [operates] through modes of understanding and expression which are 'purely visual'—radically distinct from, for example, verbalization. This special characteristic of art necessarily makes it an autonomous sphere of activity, completely separate from the everyday world of social and political life."[1]

To this "notion of the specificity of the 'visual'," also exemplified by Bell and Fry's 'significant form,' "as against the 'literary'," Burgin opposes "*another* history of art,...a history of *representations*." Conceptual art opens "onto that *other* history, a history which opens into history. . ." This art practice is "to be seen as a set of operations performed in a *field* of signifying practices, perhaps centered in a medium but certainly not bounded by it."[2]

Burgin bolsters his analysis with concise, convincing accounts of some of the most compelling issues of the day: humanism as logocentrism, the commodification of art, the ideological effects of the "apparatus," the fetishization of the art object, the constitution of the subject, "phallocentrism," etc. I would urge anyone not yet on familiar terms with this constellation to carefully study what Burgin has to say, as such issues are still of the greatest importance and I lack the space to deal with them adequately in these pages. *Nevertheless*, the critical viewpoint Burgin so adroitly represents, a viewpoint which has by now become firmly entrenched in our postmodern "culture," may well turn out to be, in its own way, possibly according to its own self-definition, every bit as reductive, self-deceiving and ideologically compromised as the positions it puts in question.[3]

In my view, it is possible to construct yet another, third, "history" of "art practice," the history of a modernism which cannot be conveniently reduced to either of the alternatives offered by Burgin, a modernism which has been effectively repressed by virtually all postmodern discourse on the arts. An eruptive instance of the "return" of this "repressed" is the following intriguing reference, which finds its way into Burgin's text and is then simply dropped, with no followup whatsoever: "It seems clear to me that, apart from Cubism's moment of brilliance, like a star that burns most brightly in the moment it extinguishes itself, painting has been in steady semiotic decline since the rise of the photographic technologies."[4]

More extensive and certainly more helpful, is another passing reference in a different essay within the same volume:

> [In the light of an ideologically aware criticism] Cubism and its sequel appears differently from the way it is *normally* presented in the "history of art" . . . Modernist historicism characterizes the Cubists as opening the door upon "objecthood", but it is a door through which they themselves declined to pass. . .[In Cubism] there is neither the presentation of "pure signifier" (Modernism) nor "pure signified" (realism) but rather an attempt perpetually to prevent the one from collapsing into the other. Cubism is not the fledgling "non-representational" art it is presented as, it is a mature body of work on representation. Cubism subverted the founding unity of the subject in its "natural" understanding of the coherence of "objective" reality. . .[5]

Why does Burgin, despite such insights, treat Cubism as merely a transient "moment of brilliance," dismissing it in the very act of praising it, rather than an exemplary instance of yet another, third, "modernism"? Was it indeed an isolated case? In my view, to become aware that such a "third stream" exists, it is necessary to move out from the restricted, pictorially centered, realm of traditional discourse on "fine art," to a more broadly conceived interdiscipli-

nary approach, capable of encompassing, in addition to the pictorial, fields such as music, cinema, literature, etc. The development of such an approach has been my concern for some time, leading me to the conviction that there is indeed, in the work of certain artists, composers, filmmakers, writers, etc. of our century, a strain of modernism which does not fall into either of Burgin's two opposed camps and which is *not* simply reducible to any poststructural, "postmodern" strategy of the "text."[6]

The Cubism of Picasso and Braque plays an essential role in the construct I've been developing and, in order to determine more exactly what this "essentiality" might entail, I want to limit my attention, rather narrowly this time, to this one area. The question of exactly how, in Burgin's words, "Cubism subverted the founding unity of the subject in its 'natural' understanding of the coherence of 'objective' reality" and what this encounter between the "natural," "objective reality," the "unity of the subject " and Cubism might mean will be among my principal concerns here.

A. From the "Natural" to the "Semiological"

The story of the struggle between art as "perception," what could be described as some sort of direct, unmediated "visual experience" and art as "language," a conventional system of signs intended to convey "meaning" via a fundamentally conceptual process, goes back a very long way. The conflict came to a head in the late nineteenth century with the development and subsequent dissolution of a major Realist movement affecting all the arts. In my view, the history of the birth of Cubism from the intensification/collapse of this movement is of decisive importance. This history, and its theory, has, of course, already been written (apparently by Clement Greenberg)[7], countersigned (by his critics as well as his followers), folded into a reductive "definition" of what modernism "was" all about, closed and placed on a dusty shelf. We must reopen this "closed book," re-examine and rewrite it.

To See A Sight

What can it mean to "see" something? A huge literature exists on this question, of course, and it is easy to become enmeshed in arcane issues. In the present context I must drastically oversimplify. What concerns me here is, to once again quote Burgin, the so-called "'natural' understanding of the coherence of 'objective' reality." The "real" world seems to present itself to us as a steady, seamlessly continuous whole which exists, moreover, totally outside us as a set of objects. "Realistic" paintings and photographs appear to unproblematically document this experience. The briefest consideration of the workings of our visual "apparatus," however, will demonstrate that this view is mistaken. The human eye is in constant, irregular motion, of which we are never consciously aware, a "saccadic" twitching, resembling the movements of a bird's head. (Birds must move their heads to produce such movements

since their eyes are fixed in their sockets.) Our attention (conscious and unconscious) is also continually shifting from one point to another, from right to left, up to down, wide view to detail. What falls on the retina is therefore radically discontinuous in comparison to the stable, continuous world we "see." For this reason, and others which will concern us below, our common sense notion of "natural" vision cannot be natural, but must involve some unconscious, culturally determined, cognitive process, which "constructs" such unitary "vision" for us. Clearly, under such circumstances, we can no longer speak of a "subject" which exists "in here" as opposed to an "object" "out there," in the "real world." Nor can we speak of "vision" as though it were some sort of natural function, something that could ultimately be reduced to the workings of an "innocent eye."

The painters of "realistic" paintings are not passive recorders of whatever falls on their retina, but *active* observers, choosing to *direct* their attention toward details in order to *construct* the illusion of an overall view from fragments assembled according to some sort of conventionally determined pictorial "language." For example, as we focus our attention on a particular thing, it will tend to command our visual field as in a close-up and will seem to grow larger than it seemed when seen as part of the total field. Moreover, as we shift our attention to some other detail, our sense of its spatial relation to the first will weaken considerably. One thing will always command our attention while the things around it remain vague. A fundamental difficulty, then, is to reconcile details with one another and with the total space in order to reconstruct on canvas the illusion of what we are "supposed" to see "naturally."

The "language" of mid-nineteenth century Realism employs some form of perspective (either as a deliberate discipline or a set of loosely defined rules of thumb) to deal with this problem by creating an abstract, ideal background space within which every detail can be placed. But this geometric grid forces each object to exist passively within it. Idiosyncrasies, special eye-catching features of unusual objects, must be smoothed over lest they threaten the uniformity of the overall plan.

Cézanne and Early Cubism

In the words of Meyer Schapiro, Cézanne "loosened the perspective system of traditional art and gave to the space of the image the aspect of a world created free-hand and put together piecemeal from successive perceptions, rather than offered complete to the eye in one coordinating glance as in the ready-made geometrical perspective of Renaissance art."[8] In the absence of any clearly conventional controlling system, Cézanne's tortuous, "piecemeal" method produces distortions which can no longer be held within reasonable bounds, which can no longer remain, as in traditional paintings, discreetly subliminal.

Not only do the various objects contend with one another, but larger

objects call forth tensions within themselves. One part of a large pitcher may not jibe with another, so that, as a whole, it leans and swells unpredictably over areas of its visible surface.[9] Table edges exhibit abrupt breaks in continuity, crudely, obviously, masked by crumpled tablecloths. Each object strains to assert formal dominion over its neighbors and, as a result, the entire structure seems ready to break apart.

Braque and Picasso were inspired by Cézanne to an even closer scrutiny of the contingencies of the objective world. During Cubism's early phase, familiar, ordinary things, bottles, glasses, newspapers, guitars, violins, and the inevitable tabletops, are subject to the most intense study, examined and reexamined in a variety of juxtapositions. In the process of struggling to see the object in the depth of its own space only, without the aid of any system or set of conventions, the young Cubists discover the equivalence of analysis and dissection. Each thing, then each dissected part, begins to have a life, to produce a space of its own. So fearsome is the Cubist hold on the visual fragment, the small detail on which a single act of attention can rest, and so strong is the pull of the contradictory spaces, that the object seems ready to explode.[10] In the later phase of Cubism, the tensions apparently resolve. The distorted, "four-dimensional" space of analytic Cubism magically gives way and the "surface" of the canvas (apparently) emerges into the foreground of our awareness.

The "Greenbergian Surface"

The most serious error of the Greenbergian view is the notion that the above dialectic is *essentially* a question of "depth" vs. "surface." According to a widely held interpretation of this view, what begins as an attempt to produce a "window on the world" by means of the accurate representation of "natural" seeing-in-depth, ends with a reversal which makes of the flat, "material" surface of the canvas itself that which is most important, that which is "real."[11] For many of Greenberg's critics, who all too easily accept his interpretation as an adequate and complete picture of modernism as a whole, this "reversal" reveals modernist art to be an empty, detached "aestheticism," a throwback to the idealized, elitist aesthetic of Kant, focused entirely on the artwork as object.[12] According to these critics (and today they are legion), what was willfully ignored both by Greenberg and the artists he championed, was the fundamental and persistent problematic of art as language and, ultimately, "text."

In this essay, at certain points, I may sometimes seem to be following a more or less Greenbergian line. Indeed, I strongly feel that the visually oriented "depth vs. surface" dialectic he promoted cannot be completely ignored. Nor can the profound insight behind Ruskin's flawed notion of the "innocent eye." Postmodern theory has been far too eager to reject such views outright. Ultimately, however, as I've stated above, Greenberg's overemphasis of "depth vs. surface" must be regarded as a serious error. For

among those matters essential to an understanding of Cubism are: art as language and as "text." To fully engage this problematic, we must not, as is now all too common, simply oppose visuality and spatiality to signification and language but, on the contrary, attempt to make ourselves more aware of the ways in which issues of spatial organization and vision are intimately connected with issues centering on art as semiosis.

The Pictorial Sign

While few today would want to claim that pictorial art can present an unproblematic, unmediated encounter with either the "real world" or Greenberg's "actuality of the [painted] surface,"[13] the manner in which the "language" of visual art *mediates*, the exact nature of its semiotic functions, remains very much an unresolved issue. In the extended "Critique of Iconism" appearing in his *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco considers several parallels between pictorial "language" and linguistics offered by various investigators (including, at one point, himself) and, for the most part, rejects them as oversimplifications. As Eco states, "The presence of discrete units in verbal language is found on all levels: from lexical units to phonemes, and from phonemes to distinctive features, everything would seem open to analysis. On the level of the supposed iconic codes, however, we are confronted with a more confused panorama." Eco argues, for example, that "iconic *figurae* do not correspond to linguistic phonemes because they do not have positional and oppositional value."[14] In other words, iconic elements cannot be analyzed and reproduced according to the same formal processes of segmentation that have made linguistics so effective as a scientific tool. A related problem stems from the fact that iconic signifiers do not appear to be very strongly *coded*—unlike linguistic signifiers, which have an arbitrary relation to their signifieds, iconic ones tend to be "analogous" to (to resemble) what they signify. Saussure had defined a language system as made up exclusively of a pure field of differences or oppositions, having no need for any "positive terms," i.e., elements that could signify intrinsically, without the need to be placed in opposition to anything else. As "analogue images," iconic signs would seem to function as such positive terms, thus resisting placement in such a field. Eco struggles mightily with such problems, even suggesting that there may be many different kinds of iconic function, but ultimately, as he himself more or less admits, his analysis is inconclusive.

In a more recent, exhaustive, study of a vast literature, *Pictorial Concepts*, Goran Sonesson, after carefully examining Eco's theories along with the work of literally hundreds of other investigators, finds serious difficulties with all and comes to no definitive, and only a few provisional, conclusions. One can read Sonesson two ways: either the whole matter is hopeless (which he denies, but which his study strongly suggests) or, somehow, by combining the most reasonable and insightful aspects of all points of view, and correcting the

many errors, a semiotics of pictorial language that "admits of many meanings of meaning . . ." will somehow emerge "because meaning itself is multiple."[15]

Sonesson's own positive contribution to the theoretical mix is his application to semiotics of Husserl's notion of the "Lifeworld." Essentially a theory about the way social and psychological context affects our perception of the world around us, the Lifeworld concept appears intended as a kind of all purpose receptacle, a framework within which some future master theory (or agglomeration of theories) could find its place in the general context of "normal" human social interaction.[16] This is, in my view, a promising notion, with some relevance to certain aspects of the position I will develop below.

In his book *Vision and Painting*, Norman Bryson sees problems more fundamental than any of the more or less technical difficulties exposed by Eco and Sonesson. Subjecting Saussurian linguistics, on which so much of structuralist semiotics is based, to a thoroughgoing "post-structural" critique, Bryson finds it seriously wanting, both in itself and with respect to the visual arts: "As the most material of all the signifying practices, painting has proved the least tractable to semiology's anti-materialist proclivities."[17] Declaring that purely formalist strategies, even when successful," can never *fully* account for the effect of the real in painting,"[18] Bryson faults linguistics based semiology for failing to recognize that "painting is embedded in social discourse which formalism is hardly able to see, let alone explain in its own terms."[19] In a later essay, "Semiotics and Art History," Bryson and collaborator Mieke Bal propose that we look beyond the pictorial equivalent of the "word" or "sentence" to "conceive the sign not as a thing but an event, the issue being not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs, but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation, as an event in the world."[20]

Recently, art historian James Elkins has taken Bryson and Bal to task for proposing an approach that "begs questions about the way pictorial meaning happens at all."[21] Faulting their attempt to build a pictorial semiotics which hopes to escape the strictures of formal linguistics, yet nevertheless must depend on some of its most basic concepts, Elkins states that "[v]isual semiotics, as it appears in such texts as 'Semiotics and Art History,' is an account of visual narratives and not a full theory of the semiotic nature of pictures." Elkins' complex argument, which I cannot properly summarize here, exposes serious problems with all sorts of approaches to visual semiotics, both structural and post-structural. He concludes that "semiotics's basic assumption that visual elements are either disordered, meaningless marks or proper signs" cannot be maintained. It therefore "makes sense to propose that graphic marks be understood as objects that are simultaneously signs and not signs."[22]

Behind and around all of the above looms the "grammatology" of Jacques Derrida, that extraordinarily complex, famously difficult challenge to structural linguistics and semiotics at their very core. Among other things,

Derrida reminds us that the notion of "external reality" or "metaphysical presence" which dissolves as we critically examine the subject/object dichotomy behind "naive" realism is also the basis for our notion of the sign, which requires an "outside" referent. Eliminate the subject/object dichotomy and we eliminate the sign. "But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity."[23] As Derrida's analysis forces us to acknowledge, no "reasonable," fully rational, approach to the most fundamental problems of signification is likely to be successful.

While, as all of the above certainly demonstrates, the issues surrounding pictorial semiotics are extremely complex, I would like to make two relatively simple statements concerning them. First, most investigators seem too eager to build up and out from a set of fundamental elements on the basis of segmentation, consequently ignoring the possibilities of a strategy based on building down and in from the most general principles. One such principle, *syntax*, understood in a very broad sense, as a kind of overall "force-field," organizing the relationships between and among all the signifiers to produce "grammatical" rules, is, in my view, crucially important to our ability to understand how meaning is, as Sonesson's "Lifeworld" notion suggests, literally, *constructed* as a kind of environment within which one must become *oriented.* I will have more to say about this presently.

Second, in my opinion the root of most of the problems revealed by Eco and Sonesson (and possibly Derrida as well) can be traced to attempts to account for everything within the domain of a single system. While Sonesson's negative results might encourage us to give up on the hope for such an account, the importance he gives to the Lifeworld idea clearly reflects a firm belief on his part that semiotics will indeed someday be grounded by a single unifying concept. At the other extreme, we find Norman Bryson arguing, in the spirit of post-structuralism, that, in principle, no systematic approach of any kind can begin to account for the multifarious effects of pictorial representation.

With Bryson (and Derrida), I doubt very much that all of semiosis can be brought together within one all-embracing idea. On the other hand, I do not think it wise to thereby simply drop all attempts at formal, systematic theory. As Elkins has indicated, such an approach would have to beg too many questions and could too easily precipitate a regression to a simplistic, narrative centered historicism. What may be needed is a theory which takes seriously Elkins' proposal that "graphic marks be understood as objects that are simultaneously signs and not signs." Such a theory, necessarily built around a contradiction, might need to be both systematic and radically *dis*unified. To put it another way, such a theory could be unified only to the extent that it is also radically disunified. This is, in fact, just the sort of theory I have already proposed, in another publication,[24] and would like to further develop here. In some sense it is a theory already "proposed," many years ago, by the great

Cubists themselves.

Cubist Semiology

Cubism was, almost from the very first, informed by a kind of "semiotic" awareness far ahead of its time, a development that grew inevitably from the radically realist "struggle to see" initiated by Cézanne.[25] Attempting to do justice in paint to contingent details as perceived in their own equally contingent space, the Cubists are forced to delve critically into the whole process by which objects are represented on canvas, until, in the words of William Rubin, "[t]heir quest ended by making the very process of image formation virtually the subject of their pictures..."[26] Analytic Cubism is, indeed, the analysis of pictorial language itself and, in their analysis, the Cubists discover many of the methods we now associate with structural linguistics and semiotics.

For example, concerned with the representation of space in depth, early Cubism places great emphasis on shading and modeling. But in the absence of perspective, or any other overall guiding system, such methods can have only a limited provenance. As the Cubists fragment the overall space, the various locally defined areas of depth contradict one another and, as they do, the purely conventional role of shading and modeling begins to make itself felt. As Cubism progresses, we become increasingly aware of such devices as remnants of a process of encoding which is, in some sense, being revealed to us.[27]

Equally interesting in this respect is the Cubist use of line. Picasso's remarkable *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard* contains a maze of lines that can look totally arbitrary, meaningless. Only after careful study does it become apparent that, in fact, all the lines are remnants of meaningful articulations: a pair of parallel zigzag lines demarcate what could have been a sign for "nose"; just below, a strong horizontal, seen in a certain way, reveals a "mouth"; lower still, a hardly noticeable diagonal shows how easy it might be to speak the word "collar" in the "language" of the painter. With some persistence one can even make out, in the lower portion, a cuff, a hand, the thumb of a second hand, and, on one side of the figure, lines that suggest shelves surmounted by a window. The very resistance these lines offer, their refusal to easily coalesce into signs despite their borderline identifiability as quasi-signifying traces, is what prompts the process of analytic inquiry on the part of the viewer. Less problematic imagery, deployed with less sophistication (as in the work of so many of the "lesser" Cubists) would lead to a much simpler, more passive reading and/or the "enjoyment" of the canvas as a decorative "stylized" entity.

As Cubist analysis intensifies, webs of lines cover the entire canvas, growing simpler, straighter in the process, with greater emphasis on horizontals and verticals. While this development has often been described as "geometrical," there is no evidence whatsoever that either Picasso or Braque used compositional methods remotely connected with this science (though some of

their followers clearly did). Nor is there any basis for the claim, associated with Clement Greenberg, that horizontals and verticals are emphasized as "affirmations of the [rectangular] picture plane." (Indeed, several such works are painted on an *oval* canvas.) Nor is there, as far as I can see, any evidence of an a priori "grid."[28]

I suggest that the prevalence of "geometric" elements such as straight lines and orthogonal relationships in late analytic Cubism has a dual function. On the one hand, it must be regarded as a simplification in the interest of precise spatial determination. I will return to this aspect later. On the other hand, not necessarily unrelated to the first, it can be understood as stemming from the discovery of principles we now associate with Saussure, who defined a language system as a network of pure difference or opposition lacking any positive terms. In a sense, late analytic Cubism becomes just such a network, in which "geometrically" straightened lines and simplified, arclike curves express mutual opposition: horizontal vs. vertical, diagonal vs. opposite diagonal, curve vs. opposite curve. In a similar spirit, almost all "positive terms," if we can so characterize "motivated" signs, have vanished—the iconic signifier no longer resembles its signified in any straightforward way. A play of differences and oppositions is essentially all that remains.[29] While the images are usually maddeningly complex, the basic elements of which they are composed are both simple and few, as though forcing upon our attention linguist Louis Hjelmslev's notion of "a language . . . so ordered that with the help of a handful of *figurae* and through ever new arrangements of them a legion of signs can be constructed."[30]

Hjelmslev's *figurae* are semiotic elements of second articulation, a generalization of the linguistic *phoneme* (*morphemes*, such as words, are considered the elements of first articulation, those elements which can carry "meaning"—they are built up from elements of second articulation, *phonemes* and *figurae*, which do not have "meaning"). The question of whether or not pictorial images can be regarded as possessing second articulation has been a continuing subject of debate.[31] Most semioticians have found it difficult to accept that pictorial elements such as shading, cross-hatching, simple linear configurations, etc., could be regarded as *figurae*, for a variety of reasons, most notably: 1) such elements seem to lack "segmentation," that is, they often continuously flow into one another and there appears to be no principle upon which their articulation into distinct *figurae* could be based; 2) while the total number of *phonemes* or *figurae* in any given language must be strictly limited, the total number of pictorial elements, even in a single painting, can be enormous; 3) while in themselves certain pictorial elements can lack "meaning" or "reference" (a lack deemed necessary to second articulation) they do carry iconic reference in the context of the overall depicted scene, something which does not happen to phonemes—for example, some cross-hatching in itself might not represent anything at all, but in the context of a landscape, it

could represent, say, the shadowy side of a tree trunk, an effect in which meaning could be said to spread from the whole to the parts, which does not happen in verbal language.[32]

Given the above, it is not particularly difficult to notice that, in Analytic Cubist paintings, *everything proceeds as though their creators were consciously intent on revealing a level of second articulation that was implied but repressed in traditional pictures.* Thus, in Cubist paintings we do in fact find a kind of *segmentation*, based indeed on binary opposition (horizontal vs. vertical, diagonal vs. opposite diagonal, etc.). As with phonemes, the number of possible elements (straight horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines, simple arcs, simple shadings, a restricted range of colors) is strictly limited, not only within a single painting, but throughout whole series of works by both artists. As Cubism becomes increasingly "hermetic," moreover, the "spread of meaning from the whole to the parts," alluded to above, reverses itself into a "spread of meaninglessness" from the parts to the whole. Thus if we can say that the smoothly continuous veneer of traditional paintings appears to lack second articulation, we could go on to claim that the Cubists may have found a way to strip that veneer, revealing the sort of *figurae* that may indeed lie buried in the pictorial flux of the most traditional works.

As should be clear by now, Cubism can be regarded, like semiotics itself, as a tool for the *analysis* of the *workings* of pictorial language, not only for the painter, but the viewer as well. What, indeed, is it that one does standing before a late analytic Cubist painting, struggling to puzzle it out? We can, if we like, try to appreciate such works as "pure form," but as "form," they are decidedly, aggressively, impure, presenting to the eye, as often as not, what can only be described as a clutter. We must remember, however, that these are always paintings of something, always, in fact, paintings of certain very specific items and/or people. The only way "in" to the secrets of these remarkably secretive works is to fix on one particular area at a time and attempt to "read" it, that is to search for a way to link some provisional *signifier* and *signified* into some sort of *sign.* In the attempt, trying now this, now that configuration of lines and facets to see whether or not, through position, opposition and difference, they can produce a convincing signified, we are in fact ourselves undertaking an analysis, not unlike the sort of thing linguists and semiologists do: e.g., identifying syntagms, attaching them (provisionally) to paradigms, distinguishing hierarchical levels (e.g., *phonemes* as opposed to *morphemes*), seeking out binary oppositions, performing commutation tests, distinguishing denotation from connotation, continually testing potential meaning against context.[33]

The resulting "analysis" can tell us much: lines which may have seemed arbitrary may gradually reveal themselves as something more, the side of a table, say, or the crease on a sleeve; areas which seemed spatially vague will coalesce into part of the foreground or background; configurations that

seemed flat will suddenly carry the eye backward to extreme depth. The "semiotic" efforts of artist and viewer can combine in this way to provide a uniquely fascinating experience of discovery, in which many of the codes (or, if one prefers, "tricks") of traditional pictorial language may be revealed. Thus, whatever we may think "pictorial semiotics" entails (and as we have seen, this is still a highly controversial issue), Cubism does seem, in some sense, to reveal important aspects of how it might operate.

B. The Dismantling of Pictorial Semiosis

Despite the many intriguing parallels discussed above, Cubism cannot really be regarded as a form of semiotics, not simply because the latter is a "science" and the former an "art," but because the Cubist analysis of the image goes beyond that of semiotics, beyond analysis itself, to thoroughly dismantle, not only the most basic processes of pictorial signification and the meanings they produce, but the detached, "scientific" subject which semiotics is designed to serve. Thus, the "semiotic" action of Cubism "amounts," if I may take a phrase of Derrida out of context, "to ruining the notion of the sign at the very moment when... its exigency is recognized in the absoluteness of its right."[34] For, in the very act of producing/ revealing its segmentation of the pictorial "stream," Cubism subverts the sign function at its origin, the "syntactic" field which grounds it. In so doing, Cubism cannot also function as a metalanguage,[35] or indeed a language in any sense and becomes something quite new, difficult, problematic. To understand what this might mean, we need to more closely examine that relationship between pictorial space, semiosis and "syntax" which I have already invoked. Please remember that here and throughout the remainder of this essay the word "syntax" must be understood in very general terms, as a kind of organizing (*tax*), unifying (*syn*), rule-producing, "force-field," controlling the structure of what Hjelmslev has called the "expression plane," the realm of the signifiers. We need also, for very different reasons, to exercise caution in our understanding of "visual," "perceptual," "surface" and similar words—these terms, which we think we know so well, will become increasingly problematic and strange as our analysis proceeds.

Space, Syntax and Proto-Syntax

In the words of art critic John Berger, "perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world [which is] arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God."[36] This statement gives us a clue to the ideological nature of perspective and the "transcendental subject" produced by it. In such a work everything is presented in terms of an apparently passive background into which things are placed. In terms made familiar by Gestalt psychology, we are seeing *figures* displayed on a *ground*, what artists call "negative space." As gestalt psychology has demonstrated, the figure is all we consciously see—the ground is subliminal.

What is this unobtrusive background? In one sense it is simply the surface of the canvas, rendered invisible by the illusion of depth. In another, more subtle, sense it is perspectival space itself, invisibly guiding and controlling almost every aspect of what is painted and the way it will be perceived. Like ideology, this space, functioning as a unifying, organizing "syntax," secretly, invisibly arranges everything "behind the scenes," quietly manufacturing "nature." As Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz have demonstrated (in the context of film theory) the "transcendental subject" produced by this sort of construct can be understood in terms of the well-known Lacanian theory of the "mirror-stage."[37]

For Lacan the mirror of the "mirror-stage" produces, in the awareness of the child, a "Gestalt . . . [which] symbolizes the mental permanence of the I . . . " Only in and through such an integrated subject is the development of language possible. Indeed, for Lacanian semiology, this "imaginary" is a necessary precondition for any form of symbolization.[38] Considerations of this sort led me to propose, in an earlier publication, what I have called the first "semio-aesthetic" principle, which must in some sense be regarded as axiomatic: "*any object of perception can signify (take on meaning) only in relation to a controlling syntactic field.*"[39] The "field" in question can be regarded as simultaneously a vector field (perspective), a field of differences/oppositions (Saussure) and a gestalt field (Lacan's "imaginary").

If we can regard the perspective system as a fully developed syntactic field, then it should also be possible to recognize the existence of no less fully developed "syntactic systems" for similarly producing "transcendental subjects" throughout all provenances, historical and ethnographic, of the visual arts. At certain points, however, we encounter a treatment of space that seems to operate without any clearly defined rules: cave art, certain examples of tribal art, certain Medieval pictures, Fauve, Expressionist, Surrealist, etc. paintings, even many so-called "postmodern" works, where images are juxtaposed in a manner that seems to ignore or minimize pictorial syntax of any kind, yet nevertheless hang together conceptually in a more or less meaningful way. The existence of such works is evidence of what we might call a "proto-syntactic" awareness.

This phenomenon can be related to what Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, has called *secondary elaboration*, a mental function which causes us to "make sense" of even the most fragmented and confused sensations or thoughts: "An intellectual function in us demands the unification, coherence and comprehensibility of everything perceived and thought of..." Freud relates secondary elaboration, which finds its basic principle in what he calls "the omnipotence of thought," to primitive animism and taboo in a manner that suggests (via the principles of "similarity" and "contiguity") a further connection with the rhetorical codes, *metaphor* and *metonymy*.[40]

In this regard, we must consider also the important work of linguist

Roman Jakobson, who discovered a fundamental analogy between the pairs *metaphor/metonymy* and *paradigm/syntagm*. Since metonymy operates by creating a mental connection among physically contiguous signifiers, it can be said to function, like Freud's secondary elaboration, as a loosely defined, rhetorical, or "proto" syntax. This insight, which became a vital part of Jakobson's theory of poetics, contributed as well to his pioneering (if flawed) work on the semiotics of Cubism.[41]

An appropriate example of this proto-syntax at work can be found in the famous pre-Cubist Picasso painting of 1907, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.* Here the women's faces and bodies are broken down into a series of stereotyped "*figurae.*" Some are drawn from Western high art, others from European and African "primitive" art. As in many Fauve paintings of the time, considerable liberties are taken with conventional pictorial syntax. Yet the picture still "scans," the "codes" still function, the viewer still finds a way to put it all together mentally.

If we look casually, for example, at the leftmost figure, we see a woman who is apparently pushing a curtain aside with her left hand. Covering all but the head and hand, however, we may see things a bit differently: a head in profile with a disembodied hand sitting on top of it like a hat. The simple conjunction of sign for head and sign for hand is all we really see—there is no visual evidence that an arm is raised, or even exists; nor is there any modeling of the sort that would syntactically "place" the hand in the space behind the head. What is it that causes viewers to think they see an odd looking woman lifting a curtain when all they really see, in the absence of any trace of traditional pictorial syntax, are juxtaposed signs?

To answer this question, we must look to the notion of a presyntactic mental function, as described above—in Jakobson's terms, an instance of *metonymy.* Despite the fact that Picasso had gone a considerable distance in liberating iconographic signs from syntax there remained, nevertheless, this *proto-syntax* to perform the syntactic function in a cruder manner, linking all the signs, forcing the viewer to "read" the painting conceptually, repressing any tendency to see in purely visual terms.

With "proto-syntax," *metonymy*, "secondary elaboration," what have you, we have arrived at something absolutely fundamental, something which might well have provided the original impetus for all the more highly elaborated, strictly regulated, ideologically controlled and controlling "language systems" of today. For, as Freud has stated, the basic principles of animism remain in the modern world "as the foundation of our language, our belief, our philosophy."

As Cubism develops, one of its crucial projects becomes the disruption, not only of traditional pictorial syntax, but also this *metonymic* proto-syntax and the "omnipotent" subject it produces. To this end merely "breaking the rules," doing without perspective and/or other similarly "syntactic" con-

ventions is not enough. In the mere *absence* of syntax, meaning and its subject are still implied and will arise (as in works such as *Les Demoiselles*) in the form of a kind of ambiguous but nevertheless fundamentally conceptual, proto-syntactic rhetoric. This is an extremely important point, as it performs the absolutely essential function of separating the modernist sheep from the goats. So the formula bears repeating: breaking the rules is not enough; substituting strategies of pictorial "rhetoric" for pictorial "logic" is not enough—only an active *negation* of syntax and rhetoric both, and at every level, can effectively oppose the all-pervasive integrative power marshalled by "omnipotence of thought."[42] To understand Cubism's ability to subvert "omnipotence of thought" through such a negation, we will need to press farther. Of key importance at this point is the profoundly disjunctive role of the spatial "technique" known as *passage.*

Passage and Space

Passage may be regarded as an art of transition, a way of "passing" smoothly from one form to another. For example, there might be a subtle but continuous passage in the form of a color transition from one edge of a yellow-green leaf in the foreground to a portion of a blue-green mountain on the horizon, contiguous with the leaf on the picture-plane. Or a shadow on the upper part of one side of a face might imperceptibly merge with a dark area in the background. By discreetly using passage to leave certain boundaries vague, the traditional artist could effectively mask the conflicts that pit the unique space of a given object against the overall scheme required by perspective.

Clearly, passage is a powerful tool for the alleviation of spatial disparities. In the "old masters" and Realists alike, it softens discrepancies between assertive forms and the overall space. Cézanne used it more intensively and liberally but for essentially the same purpose. During the development of analytic Cubism, heavily influenced by Cézanne, passage produces a multidimensional "warping" but also serves to pull the space of the surface together. With the advent of "synthetic" Cubism, this space has been almost completely unified. To understand how passage nevertheless always carried within itself the seeds of radical disjunction, we must turn our attention from space *per se* to space as it functions within pictorial representation—in semiotic terms, taken somewhat loosely, space operating *syntagmatically.*

The reconciliations of passage are not perceived within the virtual, three- dimensional space of traditional Western representation. This space, controlled by pictorial syntax, is much too rigidly circumscribed to permit passage to be directly visible. It operates, therefore, entirely on the subliminal "surface," where its transitions are not easily perceived as such and can even serve to enhance effects of atmosphere and depth. By "drawing the viewer in" unconsciously, to mentally supply subtle effects of depth that are not actually painted but can seem to be, passage contributes strongly to the formation of

the "transcendental subject."

The multiple disparities of Cézanne's representational space are so extreme that he is forced into liberal use of passage to mitigate them. As the picture depends more and more on such surface adjustments, the *negative space* of the surface begins to emerge in the awareness of the viewer. Since there is no room for such a space in traditional pictorial syntax, the viewer tends to interpret the emergence of the surface as a distortion of the space surrounding the depicted objects. Thus the disparities that passage originally covered over, disparities between represented objects, re-emerge as disparities within representational space, i.e., visual syntax itself.

A Visual Aporia

While emergence of the "surface" was a serious problem for Cézanne, who wanted to preserve "realistic" representation, it was seized upon by the Cubists as a means of iconographic analysis and disruption. In their hands passage, more and more clearly perceived as the opening of form to negative space, weakens representational syntax so it can be radically distorted and dismantled. Easily grasped examples of this strategy can be found in a relatively early analytic Cubist canvas, Picasso's *The Reservoir, Horta de San Juan*, of 1909. The roof of the central building (lowermost of the complex of buildings hovering above the horizontal arc representing the far wall of the reservoir in the lower half of the picture) is depicted by a single facet (facet A) whose rightward tilt would normally cause one to see it as receding into depth. It is linked by passage, however, to a facet (facet B) depicting the side of a building immediately to the left. This link tends to pull the upper part of facet A forward, in conflict with the "grammatical" recession into depth. Facet B is pulled even more radically in two directions. As a signifier for the right side of a building, it must be "read" as receding from left foreground to right background. But the passage to the adjoining rooftop weakens this effect, while the facet's alignment (which suggests "reverse perspective") tends to pull it in the other direction.

The resulting tension thrusts a piece of the "background," contiguous with facet B on the upper right, forward. This dark, triangular chunk of negative space commandeers both facets as though it were the front of another building, with facet B as its left side. On this reading, facet A can have no meaning at all and simply disappears. And facet B must be read as receding downward from right to left. As a signifier with two equally possible but contradictory signifieds (the side of either one building or the other), oriented in two contradictory directions (rightward to the rear and up or leftward to the rear and down) it has become a visual "aporia." The whole unsettling force of the aporia is "felt" by the passage between facets A and B, which cannot absorb it. Since vague, border areas of this sort are exactly where, in traditional works, the participation of the viewer is most strongly solicited (so s/he may

mentally fill in details that are only suggested) it is in such areas that the subject is most strongly "invested," and, in this case, undone.[43]

From Discontinuity to Disintegration

Despite its many discontinuities and paradoxes, the *Reservoir at Horta* is still a more or less "readable" work. As analytic Cubism develops, the entirety of representational space becomes much more thoroughly saturated with passage and contradictorily aligned facets. In the resulting fragmentation, these facets, remnants of iconographic signs, become totally detached from the objects they would ordinarily unite to signify. With such a complete dismantling of the visual gestalt, the object all but vanishes as a readable signified, its sign elements disassembled in such a way that no effort at conceptual resynthesis can be successful.

A good example is Picasso's *Ma Jolie* of 1911-12. Careful study gives one a sense of a woman seen from the waist up, in profile, strumming on a zither-like instrument. This information is gained only in bits and pieces, however. One sees a curved line that could be a chin, a diagonal above it that could be a nose in profile. Some distance below these, to the left, a grouping of three curved lines within a small triangular shape can be read as a hand. Two diagonals meeting at a point to the upper right seem to form an elbow—etc. These fragments are all located more or less where they should be in terms of human anatomy. But no amount of puzzling can bring them all together to give us the familiar gestalt of a human side view.

The upper part of the "elbow," for example, stops abruptly short of any upper arm or shoulder. The facet which might signify this elbow, is opened to the upper left by passage, thus simultaneously pushed "forward" to the surface and "backward" to the background. Any signifying power it might have had is thereby drained. In a similar manner, almost any area which must be read spatially in a certain direction in order to "scan" overall is pulled in another direction (or directions) locally by disembodied, contradictory spatial cues, linked and drained of meaning by open networks of passage.

As should be evident, fragmentation in itself would not be sufficient to thwart pictorial syntax so thoroughly that no coherent form can emerge. Fragmentation is, in fact, just as common in conventional syntax (both pictorial and linguistic) as in Cubism. It is the effect of *negative space*, brought into our awareness and unified by passage, which works against any tendency, syntactic or proto-syntactic, to integrate the fragments, thoroughly exploding that perceptual gestalt which is so essentially part and parcel of the Lacanian imaginary, the transcendental subject and the signifying process generally.

The Negative Field and Its Subject

We are now in a position to draw some theoretical conclusions: 1) if the traditional organization of space can be regarded as a kind of *syntax*, its negation, "negative space," is, in effect, the negation of that syntax; 2) therefore,

that type of organization which promotes "negative space" can be regarded as equivalent to what we may call *negative syntax*, or *antax*, a structural principle (*tax*) which can operate to pull apart (*an*), to *disrupt* signification, form, the subject, thought itself—it is this principle, at work already in those aspects of passage we have been discussing, which provides the key to our understanding of the disruptive power of Cubism; 3) if traditional, "positive" space can be said to function generally, as we have indicated earlier, as a kind of "positive" or "syntactic" *field*, we can posit an opposing field, as produced by negative syntax, which we may call the "negative" or "antactic" field.

Since the syntactic field has been thoroughly subverted, the subject once produced by it is put, in the words of Julia Kristeva, "*en procès*," which is to say, both "in process" and "on trial/ in question." The move from a Lacanian to a Kristevan subject at this point, is, indeed, highly appropriate. The problematic, "unsettled" "*sujet en procès*" is produced by what Kristeva has called *le sémiotique* (not to be confused with *la sémiotique*, the science of semiotics), a "heterogeneousness to signification [which] operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness."[45] As should be evident from this quotation alone, Kristeva's theories, developed in response to certain aspects of avant garde poetry, have a strong bearing on my own, a relationship which I have explored elsewhere[46] and cannot pursue here. In the present context, her formulation can facilitate our understanding of how the self-assured subject of traditional pictorialism is thoroughly "unsettled" by Cubist "negative syntax."[47]

Resolution Outward

While negative syntax dissolves representation, its disembodied, semiotically defused sign-parts are retained in the multi-dimensional "depth" created by the now free-floating shadings and fragmented recession lines linked throughout the surface by passage. Through a remarkable process of evolution, representational disjunction leads to "perceptual" intensification, to the point that each facet, no matter how confusing, how difficult to interpret, has an especially vivid, distinctive "look." I will have occasion presently to say more about this "look," achieved through uniquely spatial simplifications and precisions without precedent in the history of art.

As Cubism evolves, the facets begin to expand, to take up more space on the "surface" and this (increasingly problematic) "surface" begins to emerge more and more with a weight of its own. In a "synthetic" Cubist work such as Picasso's papier collé *Musical Score and Guitar* of autumn 1912,[48] for example, the entire surface is divided into only nine areas, each a precisely shaped and placed piece of colored paper or, in two instances, sheet music, each clearly differentiated from the others. Each area partakes in some way of some aspect

of the shape (or negative space) of a guitar and the group is assembled in a manner very roughly resembling the overall shape of a guitar. Unlike examples of late analytic Cubism, it is not terribly difficult to see that a guitar is in some sense being depicted, but when we try to put everything together into some overall *figure*, *gestalt*, *morpheme*, *sign*, what have you, we are unable to do so—all paths toward some potential syntagmatic integration lead *antagmatically* outward toward a visually determined proportioning of colored shapes in stark juxtaposition.

For example, we can see that the lower contour of the large upper-central, cream colored area resembles the outline of the side of a guitar. As we look upward to find the other side, however, it transforms itself into a neutral rectangular shape extending all the way to the top—the potential sign function dissolves into a "flat surface." Just to the left is a brown shape flush with the straight edge of the first, curved on its left side like the side of a guitar (but also resembling a violin). Again, any potential signifying power this shape might have is canceled by the context—the "side" of the instrument is placed where the top should be and, instead of being a continuation of the body is in stark, contrastive juxtaposition with it. There are thus tantalizing resemblances, "traces" of iconic function, which have been flattened out and juxtaposed in a manner that might suggest arbitrary linguistic signifiers.[49] But no such function is any longer possible either. Picasso has here, as in so many works of this period, *conflated* icon (the motivated sign) and symbol (the arbitrary sign) in a context which effectively neutralizes both.

In works such as this, the use of passage to mediate between "surface" and depth is no longer necessary—*all* has become "surface." Passage, which has always in any case been *of the surface*, has not really disappeared but opened out into large planar areas—in this sense, all has been transformed into *passage*. Negative syntax now manifests itself in the decentered, disjunctive placement and precise proportional determination of these areas.

What we are left with is a powerful design containing *remnants* of signifying material. While the "surface" was originally present only as an all but subliminal trace, it is now the *representational* elements which survive merely as traces. Thus the high-handed use of sheet music as though it were simply another piece of paper or, as in so many other works of this period (though not this one), the almost decorative use of lettering or bits of newspaper. We may certainly still "read" the music or newsprint, if we like. We will still recognize in such works that a "guitar," "violin," "wineglass," etc. is in some sense "referred to." What has been eliminated is not the codes of signification, but their power to function as such, and, in so functioning, *control* the way we see. Thus, the negative field of Cubism is not so much antireferential as *multi*referential.

Multireferentiality, in the sense that I am here employing the term, must not be confused with either *ambiguity* or *polysemy*, which imply two or

more perfectly conventional meanings, each of which is clearly grounded in traditional "positive" syntax. Multireferentiality involves the liberation of sign-elements from syntax altogether, in such a way that a host of different and/or opposed *un*conventional readings become equally possible, with no need for resolution on some higher, "paradigmatic" plane which could provide them with meaning. In the words of Derrida, regarding *dissemination*, "the force and form of its disruption *explode* the semantic horizon...[While] polysemia, as such, is organized within the implicit horizon of a unitary resumption of meaning...[dissemination] marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity."[50] Cubism could thus be said to reveal the hidden disseminative action of the traditional pictorial "text" in a manner comparable, in some sense, to Derrida's revelations regarding the literary and/or philosophical "text."[51] (I will have more to say on the problematic relation between Cubism and Derridean deconstruction in the final section of this essay.)

A Dissenting View

Before continuing, I must take note of the fact that I am here in disagreement with many respected authorities, among them Roman Jakobson, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, Francis Frascina,[52] Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, all of whom regard Cubism as, in some sense, a language. Frascina, echoing Jakobson, has argued that Cubist signs operate via metonymy, as visual rhetoric, a notion called into question earlier in this essay. This approach makes it impossible to distinguish between paintings such as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which in my opinion *does* operate metonymically, and later, more characteristically Cubist works, which as I have argued at length, treat the sign function in a radically different manner. Yve-Alain Bois, following Kahnweiler, strongly influenced by Saussure, sees a break in Cubism, due to an "epiphany" of Picasso's regarding the fundamentally "linguistic" nature of an African mask. Thus from 1912 on, in Bois' view, Picasso turns in a series of *papiers collés* and constructions, from the "iconism" cum "indexicality" of analytic Cubism to a more "linguistic" (thus for Bois more properly semiotic) approach based on the "arbitrary nature" of the sign.[53] Rosalind Krauss, fundamentally in agreement with Bois, also focusses on Saussurian linguistics as manifested in more or less the same Picasso works.[54]

Both Bois and Krauss reveal an awareness of the complexities of the Cubist encounter with semiosis that I can neither adequately summarize nor challenge here. While much in the work of both is not inconsistent with my own views, I will attempt, very briefly, to point out some important differences: 1) I believe the treatment of space cannot be separated from issues of pictorial semiosis (and its subversion), whereas they posit, for Cubism, a very definite "break" from fundamentally spatial to fundamentally semiotic concerns; 2) they write as though Cubism were a kind of rediscovery of the ideogram or hieroglyph, as though its most powerfully original aspects depend on an aware-

ness of painting as a "system of signs," whereas for me Cubism is a subversion of the signifying process;[55] 3) inhibited, perhaps, by fears of falling back into Greenbergism, they place little emphasis on the role of spatial determination, especially in the later works, while I find that the extraordinarily precise *placement* of lines, planes, passages so characteristic of all phases of Cubism, tells us that more is going on than just a play of signs. Most fundamentally, for me the movement from analytic to synthetic Cubism can be understood as a development of the subversive action of passage-as-negative space, starting as marginal "trace," opening out more and more to the "surface," finally emerging in its own right as determination of the negative field. I therefore see no need for positing a "break." Nor do I feel that Cubism, in any of its phases, can be contained within the "space" of either Peircean or Saussurian semiotics. As I have attempted to demonstrate, it develops a semiotic/antisemiotic "space" all its own.

In Sum

To summarize (and again we must recall that many of our terms, such as "surface," "visual," "perception," "sensory" are problematic and provisional as will presently be explained) what begins with Cézanne as a vague warping of "positive," i.e. virtual, representational space evolves in the movement from analytic to synthetic Cubism into a flattening and consequent clarification of the "negative field" associated with the space of the surface. What begins, in a painting such as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* as pictorial metonymy, transforming juxtaposed elements into meaningful, if crude, representations, becomes as in *Musical Score and Guitar*, simple juxtaposition in and for itself. What begins in analytic Cubism as a rhythmically disjunct web of lines and passages suggesting (contradictory) spatial recessions, reverse perspective, etc. resolves into a division of this surface according to precisely determined, relatively simple proportions. What "ought" to be a breakdown of solid things ("signifieds") into their weightless, conceptual parts ("signifiers") turns out to be a transfer of visual weight from conceptually depicted things to the "surface" on which they have been depicted. Perception in terms of an overall coordinating representational, signifying gestalt, a centered whole "greater than the sum of its parts," has been subverted and transformed into the perception of decentered, disjunctive parts and whole juxtaposed in a context of mutual equivalence, what Mondrian was to call "dynamic equilibrium."[56] While remnants of pictorial language remain, and cannot be ignored, the *hegemony* of language has been broken—univocal meaning has been replaced by a multireferential field, the negative *antactic* field produced by negative syntax.

We must, at this point, cast a glance backward at those terms I have been warning you about: "perception," "sight," the "surface," "sensory experience," etc. They are problematic since, through the course of my argument, they have themselves undergone a kind of "passage" from one realm of mean-

ing to another, radically different from the first. One might want to say the negative field, in opposition to the fundamentally conceptual positive field, involves "*direct unmediated* experience": of "vision," "space," "perception," "seeing," "surface," etc., and, indeed, there are passages in earlier publications of my own which, taken out of context, could be (mistakenly) understood in this sense. But all these words are already implicated in what Cubism works to undermine. So, by the time we arrive at synthetic Cubism and already for some time before this, what it might mean to "see" such works has been radically altered by the works themselves to the point that the old terminology of "vision," "sensory experience," "surface," etc. has been transformed. To understand what a rethinking of these terms might entail for this new situation, we must delve more deeply into the strangeness that is the negative field.

C. Deconstruction and the Image

Unlike the workings of a traditional dialectic, the Cubist network of differences and oppositions does not exist to efface itself within an ultimate unity, a "synthesis" which would transcend difference and opposition either to establish a metalanguage on some higher level or assert the absolute privilege of some sort of Greenbergian "presence." On the contrary, as we have already learned, Cubism operates against such a dialectic, pushing all oppositions to their limit in a manner that defies any form of conceptual (or "perceptual") reintegration. In this it more closely resembles what it may well have indirectly inspired, the critical method associated with Jacques Derrida known as "deconstruction."[57]

Passage and Differance

Perhaps the closest Derrida ever came to a definition of this term appears in an early (1963) essay "Force and Signification," where he speaks of "a *certain* organization, a certain *strategic* arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strength of the field to turn its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting* it [emphasis is the author's]."[58] In a somewhat later (1966) essay, he actually names this force: "It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the *deconstruction* of that heritage itself [emphasis mine]."[59] Closely associated with "deconstruction" are certain key terms, such as "differance," "the trace," "spacing," "erasure," the "supplement," etc.

With reference to this now well known constellation, I would like to make and briefly discuss an "outrageous" or perhaps even "naive" contention of my own, one that, given the highly problematic nature of Derridean discourse, I would not hope to adequately defend, even outside the limitations of the present context, but that might, nevertheless, communicate on some level

why I perceive an intimate relation between the Cubism of Braque and Picasso and the remarkable project of Derrida: in terms of the evolution we have been tracing in these pages, what has both guided and fueled the "force of dislocation" which "fissures" an "entire system," "deconstructs" it by "turning its own stratagems against it," can be seen as "differance" and the "trace" as the double action of Cubist facetting and passage. Passage as "spacing," as "erasure," as the "trace," as "difference/deferral," as "temporization," as that which causes "each element appearing on the scene of presence [to be] related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element,"[60] as "the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other,"[61] passage in all these senses, to recover my own voice, can be related to that opening of forbidden channels between the otherwise discreetly articulated elements of a structure, that discreetly disguised opening out into vagueness of the forms of the structure, which at the hands of traditional artists engages the viewing subject in a conspiracy to disguise the fact that signification can be neither fully expressed nor contained by form, structure, syntax.

This "innocent," "supplementary" device, when appropriated, commandeered and forced to its limit in Cubism, prevents the pictorial elements ("marks," "traces,") from coalescing on any level to produce semiotic effects but forces them through a *negative* structure or *antax* to fall back on the negative field of their own (and our own) contingency. In this sense the work of Braque and Picasso must be regarded less as "text" and more as *deconstructor* of text, thus comparable not so much to other paintings as to the *work on text* of Derrida himself.[62]

The Truth in Painting?

The relation of passage to a whole set of ideas important for Derrida's later thought is brought out quite forcefully in his *The Truth in Painting*. The introductory chapter is entitled "*Passe-Partout*," a French "idiom" meaning either "pass-key" or else a certain type of frame-within-a-frame, but which also means literally "pass-through-all." Here, with respect to yet another "key" term, the *trait*, which can mean "mark," "feature," "stroke," "connection," Derrida writes, "A trait never appears, never itself, because it marks the difference between the forms or the contents of the appearing." He relates it to "the *broaching* of the origin: that which *opens*, with a trace, without initiating anything." [Emphasis mine.] A bit later he continues:

> Between the inside and the outside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified, and so on for any two-faced opposition. The trait thus divides in this place where it takes place. The emblem for this *topos* seems undiscoverable; I

shall borrow it from the nomenclature of framing: the *passe-partout.*[64]

In the essay which follows, the "Parergon," Derrida writes in similar fashion of the parergon as frame: "There is always a form on a ground, but the Parergon is a form that has, as its traditional determination, not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away."[65] In *Memoirs of the Blind,* he elaborates on the same theme: "all the colored thicknesses that [a tracing, an outline] retains tends to wear [it] out so as to mark the single edge of a contour. Once this limit is reached there is nothing more to see."[66] It is this "withdrawal of the line" which makes a place for language.[67]

I lack both the space and the erudition to do more than speculate briefly on Derrida's intentions, but it seems we can, up to a point, think as "passage-in-general" (*passe-partout,* "passage-through-all") all that which like the trait, the contour, the *passe-partout,* the parergon, "melts away" at those borders which mark the difference between figure and ground. Would it be going too far to claim that the systematic wearing away of these borders, a wearing away calculated to bring out the manner in which they are always already wearing *themselves* away is already, long before Derrida, a principal task of the great Cubists, a task he may have inherited from them?

Ground of the *Trait*

For Derrida, this "melting away," this "making space," or "giving ground" which is the *trait,* the *parergon,* the trace, etc. produces an abyss: that which perpetually divides figure and ground has no ground of its own, no "home" of its own, must perpetually retrace its steps, like Derrida himself, and indefinitely defer its action. The negative field would seem not to be limited in this way and because of this, *its* deconstruction of "metaphysical presence" might not be, as for Derrida, "impossible" but complete and definitive. To better think this possibility, let us more closely examine some of the essential characteristics of this construct.

The negative field is a differential field, that is to say it is determined as is the positive field by, in the words of Saussure, "a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others."[68] Moreover, according to Saussure, "the linguistic signifier...is not phonic but incorporeal—constituted not by its material substance but the differences that separate its sound-image from all others."[69] As a result of a similar, yet at the same time radically opposite process, very possibly equivalent to that which, for Mondrian, "annihilates the plastic means,"[70] the negative field is also incorporeal, constituted not by "material substance" (e.g. the "surface," as usually understood) but the "materiality" of radical disjunction. Thus, not only is it "unthinkable," but also in some sense quite different from before, "unseeable."

The negative field can be characterized as irrational, even as the *ground* of the irrational, but it is also "logical," in a sense that can perhaps best be conveyed by the remarkable phrase of Alexander Baumgarten: *Ars Analogi Rationis* ("art of the analogy of reason"). This phrase constitutes the essence of what he called, in a founding act for which he has rarely been given adequate credit, *aesthetica*. Baumgarten's "sensory logic," both opposed to, yet structurally analogous with, logic "proper" has for its object, not the abstract categories of the conceptual, but on the contrary, the "individual in its immediacy as it is grasped in sensate experience" by means of poetry or the visual arts.[71] Since I have written elsewhere on the significance of Baumgarten's ideas,[72] I will not elaborate except to say that, though he influenced Kant, the former's theories can by no means be said to be incorporated within those of the latter, and are still, in fact, little known or understood.

The negative field is therefore an *aesthetic* field, which makes it once again a matter of: "perception," "sensory experience," "seeing," "materiality," etc. This is reflected in the incredibly precise, precisely "logical" *placement* of all elements which produce the field, a precision especially evident in the radically simplified, highly disjunctive spaces of synthetic Cubism. Such precision, which cannot be accounted for by either the Saussurian considerations invoked by Bois and Krauss or any conceivable geometric principle, is, for me, founded in what I have called "'the perceptual axiom,' the anti-axiom which explodes the 'axiomatic' itself,"[73] that which lies at the heart of Baumgarten's *aesthetica*, his *ars analogi rationis*. But just as *aesthetica* is, first of all, *ars*, i.e. an *artifice*, *not* a "given" of nature, so must we understand the negative field as opposed, not simply to the *conceptual*, but the entire opposition *conceptual (formed by thought) vs. perceptual (unformed presence, given directly by nature)*, which, as Derrida has revealed, lies at the heart of both logocentric metaphysics and the idealist aesthetics of Kant. This opposition, produced by what I have called the "positive field," is itself opposed by the negative field,[74] which, finally (for now) we can call, in Derridean terms (but hardly in accord with Derridean "doctrine"): *ground of the trace (as trait, mark, contour, etc.) / the trace (or trait — as passage — that which "passes through all") as ground.*

Opposing, as it does, both "thinking" and "perception" in any usual sense, the negative field opens new vistas on both. One could say that, in Cubism, as in Derrida's own texts, univocal thinking is challenged by an awareness of multireferentiality, "dissemination." "Seeing" or "perception," as passive "experience," in terms of what Derrida has called "an irreducible receptivity,"[75] or what for Greenberg would simply be an unmediated encounter with "the material surface," can have no meaning in the context produced by the negative field. What we have been calling the "surface" has in any case melted away into the negative field as *ground*—"*analogi rationis*." But seeing in quite another sense, perception in quite another sense, is of the essence. I

prefer to describe it as the *act of seeing*, the *struggle to see*, the seeing of seeing itself, as struggle, in its contingency, its heterogeneity, its ephemerality, its materiality, its "passing." Such seeing, radically *other* to the conceptually controlled perceptual processes, logical *or* rhetorical, that have traditionally repressed it, radically *other* also to the original dream of Realism, that "metaphysical presence" always questioned by Derrida, radically other to the whole dichotomy, "sensible" vs. "intelligible," which, for Derrida, founds metaphysics itself—this "other" seeing, does not, cannot, transcend, but simply (and successfully) opposes, *from without*, the same repressive *logos* which Derridean deconstruction hopelessly hopes to deconstruct from within. In the light of such seeing, where neither our words nor our "thinking" nor our "vision" can follow, in the *ratio* established by this anti-rational proportion, the untranscendable *ratio* of logic and reason *can*, without paradox, be held at bay, and a certain "truth," finally, be "told." In painting.

Notes

1 Victor Burgin, "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms," in Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), 30, 31.

2 Ibid., 39.

3 Healthy signs of reaction against the narrowly "postmodern" view of the arts, and culture generally, have been revealing themselves of late, as in for example W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), Donald Kuspit's *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Christopher Norris' *What's Wrong with Postmodernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) and *The Truth About Postmodernism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993).

4 Burgin, Op. Cit., 36.

5 Victor Burgin, "Modernism in the *Work* of Art," in Ibid., 18.

6 See Victor Grauer, *Montage, Realism and the Act of Vision*, unpublished monograph, 1982; "Modernism/ Postmodernism / Neomodernism," in *Downtown Review*, Vol. 3 no. 1 and 2, 1981/82; "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," in *Semiotica* Vol. 94, no. 3 and 4, 1993 (reissued, with an additional preface and postscript directed for the most part to musical issues, in *Music Theory Online*, vol. 2, no. 6, Sept. 1996, available on the Internet at http://boethius.music.ucsb.edu/ mto/issues/ mto.96.2.6/ mto.96.2.6.grauer.html); "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence," in *Art Criticism*, vol. 11 no. 1, Spring 1996.

In "Modernism/ Postmodernism/ Neomodernism" I claim that there are at least three distinct "modernisms": "A" modernism, which encompasses the major Cubists, Mondrian, Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Boulez, Stockhausen, Joyce, Stein, etc., along with the remarkable American filmmaker Stan Brakhage is the only strain of modernism which I find to be totally and completely of the 20th Century; "B" modernism is, essentially, "romantic" modernism, an application of certain aspects of "A" modernism to a fundamentally idealist aesthetic, the intensification of a late nineteenth century outlook—

this category includes most of the Futurists and Constructivists, Kandinsky, Malevich, most of the Abstract Expressionists, etc.—this is, essentially, the modernism of Clement Greenberg; "C" modernism I associate with the tradition of skepticism and self-reflexive thought, founded by the Sophists of ancient Greece—this form of modernism, best exemplified by the work of Duchamp, represents an attack on the pretensions of "B" modernism, and provides the basis for that strain of postmodern art and criticism which has reacted most strongly against "modernism" generally.

7 Almost all the many references to Greenberg in the literature of postmodernism cite one volume, a miscellaneous collection of brief critical essays entitled *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

8 Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cezanne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1952), 9, 10.

9 See, for example, the analysis by Merleau-Ponty in his "Cezanne's Doubt," in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 13,14. One of the clearest analyses of the contradictions discussed here can be found in Aaron Berkman's relatively little known *Art and Space* (New York: Social Sciences Publishers, 1949). See especially 115, 116. I am indebted to Berkman for many insights regarding Cezanne.

10 It is commonly held that the Cubists fragmented objects according to "multiple views" so their signs could then be "conceptually" reconstituted by the viewer over the course of time, the "fourth dimension." Thus Werner Haftmann speaks of the "representation of different aspects of an object in juxtaposition, so that the partial views of an object can be turned into a total mental view . . ." in *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1965), 99-100. While something *resembling* "multiple viewpoints" does seem to be at work in Cubism, the notion that such "partial views" could somehow be turned into "a total mental view" over time or otherwise is, in my opinion, totally misguided. The role of the conceptual in Cubism is far more problematic.

To fully grasp the falsity of the multiple viewpoint theory one need only compare a Cubist painting with certain examples of Northwest Coast Indian art, where, indeed, objects are systematically splayed out and flattened so that all views, front, sides and back are simultaneously visible. These representations appear confusing and unreadable until their very consistent language is explained. Once given the keys, we can reconstitute the signified objects mentally with little trouble. Northwest Coast Indian art is a language of fragmented, multiple views—when we learn to "read" this language, its "partial views" are turned into "a total mental view." Cubist paintings never resolve in this manner. For an equally skeptical view of "multiple views" see John Adkins Richardson's "On the Multiple Viewpoint Theory of Early Modern Art," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 53 no. 2, spring 1995.

11 Thus, art historian Linda Nochlin writes of the transition from Realism to modernism as "the transformation of the Realist concept of truth or honesty, meaning truth or honesty to one's perception of the external physical or social world, to mean truth or honesty either to the nature of the material—i.e. to the nature of the flat surface—and/or to the demands of one's inner 'subjective' feelings or imagination rather than to some external reality," in *Realism* (New

York: Penguin, 1971), 236.

12 A classic example of a critique of both "Greenbergism" and "modernist" art on the basis of a simplistic application of Greenberg's thought is Rosalind Krauss' essay, "Grids" in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Myths* (Boston: MIT Press, 1985), in which the author argues that pervasive use of "the grid," simultaneously "material" and "ideal," reveals a fundamental contradiction at the heart of a modernism seeking to repress the essentially romantic roots of its deepest impulses. There is certainly some insight in this, but, in an apparent eagerness to atone for past Greenbergian sins, Krauss concocts a "metanarrative" as reductive as anything ever produced by Greenberg, finding "grids" and artistic dead-ends everywhere she casts her eye. As she once seemed to understand, things are not that simple. Indeed, in her (pre-poststructural) *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), she goes to some length to distinguish between two wings of Constructivist art, one basically neo-romantic, neo-idealist, the other "concerned primarily with the surface of its materials and the contingincies of the situation, spatial and otherwise, of its immediate existence" [see 43-53]. In her later writings, such distinctions vanish. (See my essay "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence" [Op. Cit., 17-22], for a response to the charge of a self-deluding idealism—as in "Grids"—so often and unjustly brought against Mondrian.)

13 Op. Cit., 72.

14 *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1979), 214, 215.

15 Goran Sonesson, *Pictorial Concepts* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1989), 14.

16 The basic properties of the "Lifeworld" concept are set forth in Ibid., 30-34.

17 See Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (New Haven:Yale University Press, 1983), chapters 1-4 and 85.

18 Ibid., 67.

19 Ibid., 85.

20 Norman Bryson and Mieke Bal, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991), 194.

21 James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, *Traits*, Contours, *Orli*, and *Splendores*: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Summer 1995), 827.

22 Ibid., 859.

23 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 279-281.

24 See "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," Op. Cit.

25 A somewhat similar view has been expressed in Yve-Alain Bois' "The Semiology of Cubism" in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, Ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1992), where he writes of "a 'semiological attitude' [which] had been at the core of what is usually called Cubism right from the start. . ." (175). For Bois, however, this attitude is more a reaction against realism than a development from it.

26 See "Picasso and Braque: An Introduction," in *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1989), 16.

27 Much more is at work, however, than a simple process of "flattening" the space.

Even at its most thoroughly fragmented and "decoded," the Cubist facet is capable of producing a very powerful illusion of depth, a major source of the extraordinary fascination these paintings can command. It is in demonstrating the full power of the illusion, powerful even in the process of being "decoded," that Cubism becomes a truly profound analysis of representational syntax.

28 I'm not sure what to make of the strange claims of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois regarding the importance of "the grid" to Cubist painting. See Krauss, "The Grid," Op. Cit., and Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," Op. Cit., 180 et seq. Both write as though Picasso and Braque were in the habit of laying out *a priori* geometric grids as guides in the organization of their work. In a "question-answer" session published in the *Symposium*, after Bois' essay, Edward Fry takes strong exception to this idea and I agree. While certain other artists (Gris, for example) may well have utilized such a device, there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of grids, *a priori* or otherwise, or any other form of rational systemization, anywhere in the work of either Braque or Picasso. There are indeed many instances of linear simplification (straight lines, simple curves) and opposition (horizontal vs. vertical, diagonal vs. opposite diagonal), but no evidence that such simplifications are connected with some regularized scheme, geometrical or otherwise.

29 As Yve-Alain Bois demonstrates in his "Kahnweiler's Lesson" in *Representations* 18, (Spring 1987), this aspect of Cubism was already recognized by linguist Roman Jakobson and his associates during the Twenties and became, moreover, an active influence on the development of structural linguistics and semiotics at the time. Bois credits art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (who of course had many opportunities to discuss such matters with Picasso, Braque and Gris) with developing a very similar insight independently. Many links between Cubism and Saussurian linguistics are revealed in this most interesting paper and its highly significant sequel, "The Semiology of Cubism." [Op. Cit.] See also Rosalind Krauss' "In the Name of Picasso" in *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Myths*, Op. Cit., where Saussurian linguistics is applied to Picasso's collages in a most interesting manner. For my problems with the views of both Bois and Krauss with respect to the Saussurian model, see below in the text.

30 As quoted in *Sources of Semiotic*, ed. D. S. Clarke Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 131.

31 See, for example, the treatment of *figurae* in Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* Op. Cit., 213-216 and Goran Sonesson, *Pictorial Concepts*, Op. Cit., 159- 193.

32 For a thorough treatment of this problem, see Sonesson, Op. Cit., 291-295.

33 It is a commonplace of poststructuralism that the receivers of *any* message perform a *work* on the message, thereby contributing to the "production" of its meaning. As should be obvious however, such "work" when applied to the problem of reading traditionally organized imagery at the level of object recognition is essentially unconscious and immediate. Analytic Cubist images, on the other hand,

force their viewers into struggling with the work from a *consciously* active analytic standpoint in order to see anything in it at all. Such viewers, like semiologists, are *aware* of their own "work on the image."

34 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns

Hopkins University Press, 1974), 50. Derrida is writing in reference to Peirce's notion of "infinite semiosis."

35 As an example of what a visual metalanguage might be, we can turn to the remarkable work of M. C. Escher, whose prints *can* be understood as constituting a language about the language of visual representation. Escher is involved in many of the same issues as the great Cubists, but his treatment of space, solidly based in the grammar of "positive" syntax, is far less problematic and challenging.

36 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Pelican, 1972), 16.

37 See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," in
Cinethique 7/8 (1970), translated from the French in *Film Quarterly* (Winter, 1973/74) and Chrisitan Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier" (1975), translated in *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 1975).

38 See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage As Formative of the Function of the I As Revealed In Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949) in *Ecrits*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7.

39 For an explanation of this principle see Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," in *Semiotica*, Op. Cit., 237-238.

40 Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo" (1913), in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by A. A. Brill (New York:Modern Library, 1938), 867, 872-873, 876, 880.

41 An excellent summary of Jakobson's theory appears in Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 19-22.

42 I am for this reason highly skeptical of the recent adaptation of Bataille's *informe* by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss. *October* 78 (Fall 1996) is devoted largely to this topic.

43 The power of this sort of visual aporia might best be understood by comparison with what might seem an equivalent effect in so many of M. C. Escher's designs where certain images can be read in more than one way. Escher's "paradoxes" stem from long known and well understood effects based on the presence of two or more conflicting syntactic fields. One can clearly see what is represented, but cannot decide whether to "place" it within one framework or the other. The much more complex paradoxes of Cubism work to undermine the very possibility of seeing in terms of any syntactic field whatsoever. The powerful form-dissolving action of Cubist passage undermines both the very ground of pictorial semiosis and the subject produced by it, thus undermining representation and ultimately "seeing" itself. If Escher's rather mild ambiguities can be called "paradoxes," we are justified in calling the far stronger effects of Cubism "aporias."

44 For an extended discussion of *negative syntax* and the *negative field* in a broader context, involving music as well as the visual arts, see Grauer, "Toward A Unified Theory of the Arts," op. cit., 243-250 and "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence."

45 Julia Kristeva, "From One Identity to Another," *Desire in Language*, trans. by Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 133. See also Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

46 Victor Grauer, "Montage, Realism and the Act of Vision," unpublished monograph.

47 In a fascinating, probing but also rather fanciful and partisan study of Duchamp in *Pictorial Nominalism: Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991), Thierry de Duve presents a very different view of the role of the subject in Cubism: "In demanding realism and, in particular, a realism of conception, orthodox [i.e., non-Duchampian] Cubism did not so much try to represent the object as it was . . . as to ensure that the subject would stay as he was, a master of his perceptual field and sure of his own identity. . . The Cubists [wanted] to safeguard or reconstitute the self-presence and the unity of the classical subject at the price of an active breaking up of the world of objects." Thus, for de Duve, it is not Braque and Picasso but the bitter Cubist "outcast," Duchamp, who achieves a "complete dismemberment of the self."(78-80) It is difficult to see how one could argue that a breakup "of the world of objects" could preserve the "classical subject" without first assuming that "object" and "subject" can be clearly separated, a position which I doubt de Duve would want to reinstate. He, like so many other "postmodern" critics, is taking Greenbergian modernism ("mastery of the perceptual field") much too literally and, as a result, drawing completely untenable conclusions. It is indeed difficult, especially from the Lacanian viewpoint so central to de Duve's analysis, to see how the "object" could be totally reconstituted without this having a profound effect on the "subject." Nor is it easy to see how a viewing of Cubist imagery, probably the most complex and unsettling in the history of art, could lead one to imagine oneself "master of the perceptual field."

48 Reproduced in William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), 257.

49 Indeed, the relation between the effect of flattening and the invocation of written or printed text in Picasso's *papiers collés* has led both Rosalind Krauss in "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* and Yve-Alain Bois in "The Semiology of Cubism," to posit a move on Picasso's part from the iconic sign to the "unmotivated," i.e. arbitrary sign of verbal language. For reasons which immediately follow in the text and others to be presented shortly, I cannot agree.

50 Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 45.

51 Thus, statements such as Victor Burgin's claim that for modernism, "the art object was to signify nothing; that is to say, it must not serve in the place of something which is absent as *the signifier of that absence* but rather it must serve, like the fetish, to *deny* that absence" must be understood as strictly applicable to certain aspects of Greenbergian modernism, and certain artists he admired, but certainly not to all modernist works. See Burgin, "Tea With Madeleine," in *The End of Art Theory*, op. cit., 106. Cubism, as Burgin himself has implied, does not deny the referent but in fact multiplies it.

52 Francis Frascina "Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism," in Harrison, Frascina and Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993) 87-183.

53 See Yve-Alain Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," and "The Semiology of Cubism."

54 See Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," in *The Originality of the Avant-*

Garde and Other Myths and "The Motivation of the Sign." While Krauss and Bois each develop complex, impressive and insightful arguments, many of their points are weakened by what appear to be flawed premises: First, both place a great deal of importance on a simplistic reading of Peirce's *index*, which cannot, as they seem to think, be regarded as an unmediated "presence" which could somehow escape or even undermine semiosis (for a thorough examination of this issue see Sonesson, 38-65); Second, there is little in the work of either which reveals an awareness of certain fundamental problems of pictorial semiotics, as raised in my earlier discussion of Eco, Sonesson, Bryson, Elkins and Derrida – indeed, their framework for treating Cubist semiotics *proper* (as manifested for them only in Picasso's constructions and collages) depends upon the linguistics model, long ago dropped by most investigators as unworkable; Third, I find the "motivated" (iconic) vs. "arbitrary" (signifying) opposition they posit untenable for many reasons, notably the fact that arbitrary signs cannot function in the absence of socially established conventions, which Cubism clearly flaunts – they apparently have failed to notice how the opposition *motivated/ arbitrary* is consistently put into question by both Picasso and Braque.

55 Both Bois and Krauss seem often on the verge of moving beyond semiosis to a recognition of the manner in which Cubism not only invokes the sign but at the same time puts it in question. Thus, Bois writes of how, in Picasso's *papiers collés,* "signs take on a life of their own, almost entirely disconnected from the identity of the object as referent. . . As a result of this disconnection, the signs 'migrate' in all kinds of directions." "The Semiology of Cubism," 191. But there is a holding back, a curious reluctance to proceed beyond the merely polysemic. Elsewhere, invoking Shklovsky's notion of "defamiliarization," the "making difficult" of the sign, Bois writes: "But an investigation of this meta-linguistic, or rather meta-semiological, level of Cubist production would constitute in itself a vast chapter which I cannot open here." (Ibid., 178.) As Bois hints in this section, there may well be a fear of "falling back" into "modernist" constructs, a process which might end by once again privileging the visual over the "textual."

56 Much in both Mondrian's theory and practice casts considerable light on the workings of Cubism, which influenced him profoundly. For a discussion of this relationship, see my essay "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence," 3-11.

57 To dismiss simply as hindsight the notion that deconstruction may in some sense be derived from Cubism, would be to reveal that one is staring down the wrong end of the historical telescope. Modern semiotics has clearly been profoundly affected by Cubism, and the writings of Derrida show many signs of Cubist influence however indirect. While the history I have in mind is complex and in some ways speculative, the following time line should be taken seriously: Cubism -> Futurism -> Constructivism -> Russian Formalist Linguistics -> Structuralism -> Modern Semiotics -> Poststructuralism -> Deconstruction — or, more directly (and speculatively): Picasso -> Lacan (Picasso's physician and member of his intimate circle) -> Derrida.

58 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 20.

59 Ibid., 282.

60 Peggy Kamuf ed., "Differance," in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 65-66.

61 Ibid., 70.

62 As the above strongly suggests, the negative field not only opposes, but appears also to interpenetrate the positive field in such a manner as to imply a mutually *complementary* action. See also my "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," 247-259. Since a veritable abyss nevertheless yawns between the two opposed terms there would seem to be some resemblance to the notion of complimentarity developed by Neils Bohr to deal with certain aporia of quantum theory, such as the wave/ particle opposition. Certain formulations of Derrida also seem to have a similar, radically complementary, aspect. The role of complementarity in the thought of both Bohr and Derrida is the subject of Arkady Plotnitsky's *Complementarity: Anti-Epistemology after Bohr and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

63 Jacques Derrida, *Truth in Painting,* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McCloud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1987.

64 Ibid., 11, 12.

65 Ibid., 61.

66 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins,* trans. Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 53. Similar themes, the wearing away of borders, the "giving" of "place," "passage" as trespass of borderlines, are treated in several of Derrida's most recent works.

67 In the essay already cited, James Elkins produces an extended critique of *Memoirs of the Blind.* What most disturbs him is Derrida's "general lack of interest in seeing and a concomitant fascination with the invisible . . . Is it possible not to read an unthematized and even a personal lack of engagement with images in this 'logic' that takes us so swiftly from transcendental conditions to the possibility of writing? . . . Derrida's is a repressive reading, a way of silencing the drawn trace by letting it melt away into writing." (837-838)

68 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale* (Paris: Payot, 1922), 159.

69 Ibid.

70 "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." Piet Mondrian, "General Principles of Neo-Plasticism" (1926) in Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: Life and Work* (New York:Abrams, 1956).

71 Leonard P. Wessell, "Alexander Baumgarten's Contribution to the Development of Aesthetics," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* vol. 30 no. 3 (Spring 1972), 339. Wessell is here paraphrasing from Baumgarten's major work, *Aesthetica* (1750-58).

72 See Grauer, "Toward a Unified Theory of the Arts," 244-245.

73 See Grauer, "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence," 22.

74 Derrida writes of the strange, almost mystical notion of *khora* as presented in Plato's *Timaeus* in "*Khora,*" trans. Ian Mc Leod, in Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). The *khora,* for Plato, is neither "sensible" nor "intelligible" but belongs "to a third genus"; Derrida asks: "Beyond the . . . opposition of *logos* and *mythos,* how is one to think the necessity of that which, while *giving place* to that opposition as to so many others, seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very

thing which it *situates*?" (90) He goes on to write of a "structural law which seems to me never to have been approached as such by the whole history of interpretations of the Timaeus. It would be a matter of a structure and not of some essence of the *khora*, since the question of essence no longer has any meaning with regard to it." (94) The *Chora* (sic) is, for Julia Kristeva (to whom Derrida never refers), a central aspect of her notion of *le semiotique*. "(U)nnameable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to meaning, to the One, to the father, and consequently, (that which is) maternally connoted . . .," she quotes Plato. *Chora* indicates what Kristeva calls "the semiotic body" as an emptiness or mold within which its opposite, signification, shapes itself as a child within the mother. Reference to the maternal function is an important aspect of this formulation; indeed, the *chora* first manifests itself in that period of infancy prior to the mirror phase when there is no perceived distinction between child and mother. Kristeva, 133, 136. See also Kristeva, "Place Names," op. cit., 284.] Despite their differences, both formulations reveal the limitations which any purely language-based attempt to get beyond the "sensible/intelligible" dichotomy must encounter. Derrida must posit *Khora* "as a matter of structure" which is at the same time indeterminate; Kristeva's construct must be centered in a "body" which perpetually retreats into the world of metaphor. Both notions bear too close a resemblance to the Jungian archetype. While the negative field shares certain qualities (or should I say "lack" of qualities) with *Khora* (both are neither sensible nor intelligible), it is a determinate, limited construct, not an indeterminate, "infinite" possibility, which works to undermine the "archetype" at its source. See Grauer "Mondrian and the Dialectic of Essence," 12-17.

75 Derrida, "*Khora*" 111.

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