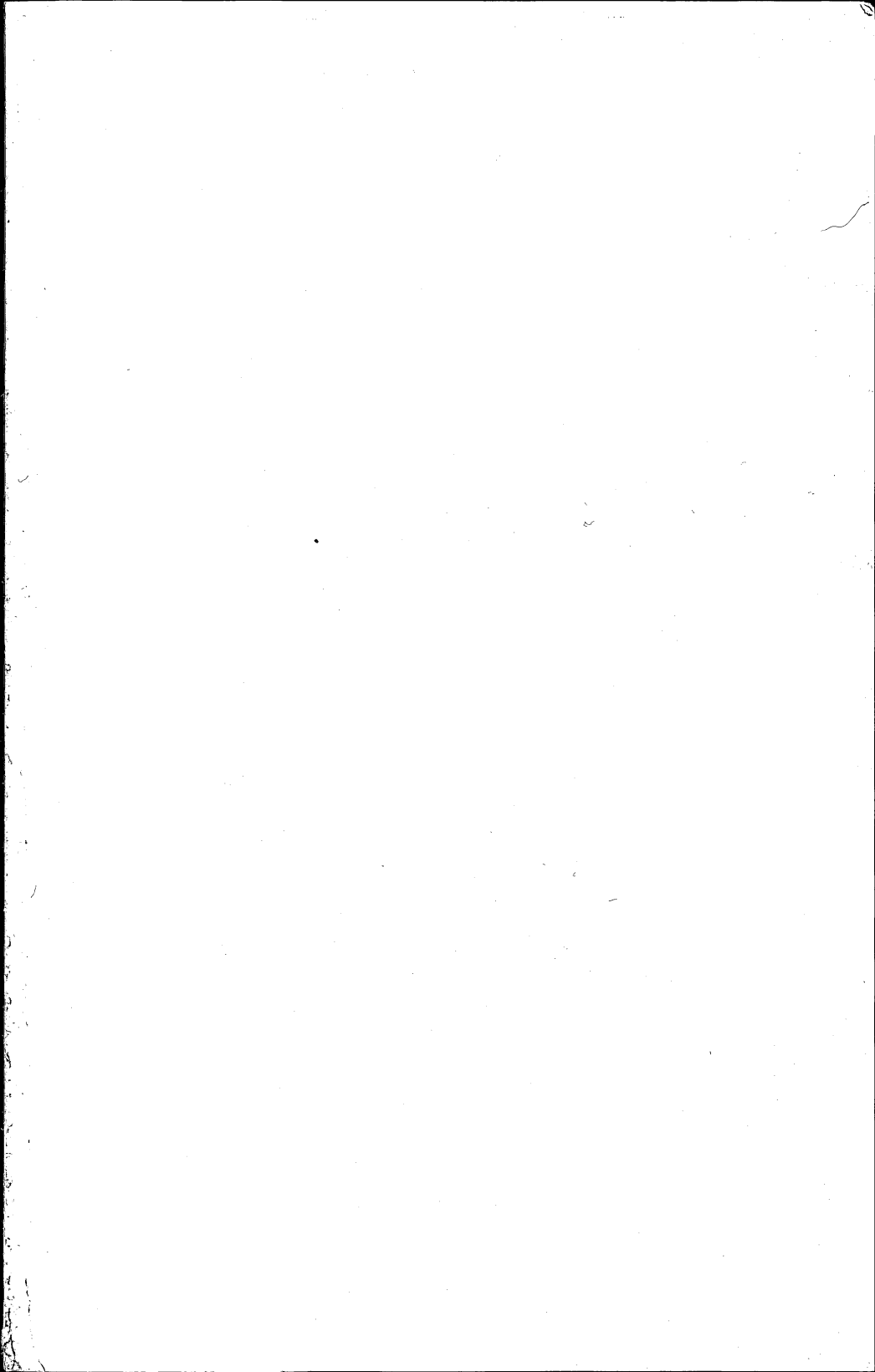


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Gottfried Semper: the Structure of Theatricality¹

Gevork Hartoonian

My intention in this essay is to reconstruct Gottfried Semper's idea of theatricality in our present time when the odds are enough to equate theatricality with the rhetorical mood of historical eclecticism, or the abstract expressionism detectable in neo-avant-garde architecture. I will discuss Semper's idea of theatricality within the purview of the spectacle of late capitalism. I would also like to benefit not only from Walter Benjamin's discourse on "exhibition value," but take into consideration the appropriation of "theatricality" in poetry and painting discussed by Charles Bernstein and Michael Fried respectively. Differentiating Semper's idea of theatricality from theatricalization that is hunting current architecture, I would like to make analogies between the sense of totalization embedded in what Semper-Wagner-Nietzsche saw in the Greek theater and the present culture of spectacle permeating globally.

Is there room for excess within elements basic to a constructed space? How does excess sneak into the purpose of the object and legitimize itself beyond recognition? Is our fascination with structures like the Eiffel Tower and the work of engineers at the turn of the last century, and even the recent structures conceived and built by Santiago Calatrava, due to the absence of excess? Or, contrary to our expectation, it is the excess in its full representation? And finally, what does excess have to do with the tectonic? For a positive response to these questions it's enough to recall Gottfried Semper's idea of constructed-form as "self-illumination" of technique, or look at Carlo Scarpa's architecture and drop the subject right here! But what about the present neo-avant-garde architecture and the excessive theatricality in their work that is usually theorized along Gilles Deleuze discourse on "fold"?²

The subject of theatricality is important not only because it was first introduced to architecture by Semper, but also because of the communicative dimension of architecture: the way a person relates to architecture by experiencing a building's space as well as appropriating its form. The communicative dimension of architecture, however, has changed since the crisis of the object induced by modernization and the introduction of new technologies into architectural production. We no longer understand classical language of architecture as our ancestors did; neither do we understand a building as an integral part of a coherent ensemble. Modernization disintegrated every kind of totality underlining the process of making artifacts as a formative theme for architecture. As we will see shortly, Semper's discussion of theatricality is indeed the highlight of his discourse on the tectonic: how the revealed poetics of construction becomes part of a larger cultural milieu while architecture appropriates available technical means and concepts developed in the realm of aesthetics.

My intention here is to explore the developmental tendencies of the culture of spectacle for rethinking the idea of theatricality. The point is not to prove the presence of "excess" in Semper's discussion of the tectonic, but to probe the idea of theatricality in our present time when the odds are enough to equate theatricality with the rhetorical mood of historical eclecticism and the abstract expressionism detectable in neo-avant-garde architecture. At the heart of my discussion of theatricality is the issue of appropriation of art and architecture and the object's potentiality for absorption. Before discussing Semper's idea of theatricality, I would like to share with my reader the way this subject is discussed in poetry and painting.

Charles Bernstein discusses theatricality and differentiates poetry from other forms of writing.³ According to him, an ordinary written text communicates with the reader by transparency of the information delivered. However, a poem transcends such textual transparency by utilizing formal and technical means intrinsic or external to poetry. The result is an artifice, a textual fabrication, whose relation with the reader mutates between two poles of absorption and impermeability. By absorption Bernstein means "engrossing, engulfing completely, attention, arresting attention, ...". By impermeability, on the other hand, he means "...distraction, digression, transgressive, baroque, ...".⁴ Some of his suggested techniques for absorption have been utilized by architecture and literature of the nineteenth century. I am thinking of the Romantics' quest to integrate architecture into a picturesque environment. For impermeability, instead, one should look for techniques such as shock, transgression and defamiliarization employed by dadaists and surrealists. Providing examples from various art forms, Bernstein makes the case that, by combining techniques of absorption and impermeability, a poem or any other work of art can reach the level of theatricality; a state of artistic deliverance by which

the reader or the spectator is attracted to the work even when an artist uses non-absorptive techniques. The point is not to press down the quality of the work by calculating what kind of means would generate certain expected impressions on the reader or beholder. Such an intention, according to Bernstein, "is in a certain sense simulation, theatricalization. That's what the commodification of product is."⁵ Theatricality, instead, adorns poetry with anonymity: one understands the message in an indirect way through manifold play of the visible and the invisible. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bernstein suggests, "absorption and impermeability are the warp and woof of poetic composition—an intertwining or chiasm whose locus is the flesh of the word."⁶ The same is true for architecture, I believe. Theatricality is the flesh of construction whose thickness speaks for the invisible presence of the dialectics of seeing and making, that is the way a building relates to its site framing a constructed space and opening it to the many-fold horizons of our culture.

Theatricality is also present in dance and music, the two artistic products that Semper considered closer to architecture than painting. Before discussing Semper's view on this subject, allow me to bring to your attention Michael Freid's discourse on theatricality and absorption that precedes Bernstein.

In *Courbet's Realism*, Fried discusses the dialogue between absorption and theatricality in mid-eighteenth century painting and pursues the subject's importance for contemporary abstract art. According to him, Denis Diderot's writing on drama and his dislike of theatricality or gestural expression, put the French painters in a difficult position. How to seal off the beholder from the world of painting became rather a critical task for painters, specially when the subject at hand was a dramatic mood, such as death in Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Filial Piety* (1763) or "farewell" as depicted in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1785). It is indeed in David's history paintings that Fried sees the seeds of dedramatization of action, especially in David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799), in the "sleek-limbed figure of Romulus poised to throw his spear." The idea is also at work in the "crowding of the pictorial field with innumerable personages at different distances from the viewer...."⁷ According to Fried, two developments were essential for Courbet's Realism to take place. First, a change in the subject matter of painting, that is, a move from historical subjects and court people to simple human beings and their habits. Following Jean-Francois Millet, Courbet depicted movement, action, and dramatic scenes by focusing on various aspects of everyday lifelike peasants working in the field. Second, an awareness of the sense of embodiment and its effect on perception enticed the body (and in this case Courbet's body) to emerge in the field of painting, initiating a unique dialogue between absorption and theatricality. To depart from Diderot's concern for theatricalization, Courbet not only made the beholder imagine that he/she had entered into the depicted

world, but he painted the "literal merger of himself as a painter-beholder with the painting which he was working".⁸ Introduction of corporeality into the field of painting bans gestural expression and blurs the line separating absorption from theatricality.

Fried also reminds us of another development that shed a different light on the subject of theatricality. The invention of daguerrotype in the mid-nineteenth century—a mechanical means of representing aspects of the world—encouraged some writers to see the invention of photography as a major motivation for Courbet's Realism. Even in Cubism's transition from analysis to synthesis, one important subject of discussion was how to depart from the "superficial realism of Courbet" to Paul Cezanne, who combined the empiricism of the senses with the conceptualization of the mind.⁹ Disputing these ideas, Fried observes that, "the issue of theatricality turns out not only to have been relevant to photographic practice but to have been given a particular inflection by the powerfully veristic character of the photographic medium."¹⁰ Which is to say that a person posing in front of a camera unconsciously is aware of his/her gestural act and the theatricality of the effect. Such a theatrical atmosphere does not exist in representational painting where a presumed organic coherency between the subject matter and the final work overrides any unconscious impulses.

My interest in the idea of theatricality in architecture has to do with Semper's denunciation of architecture as an imitative art and the sense of spatiality embedded in his theoretical departure from the Vitruvian triad. Semper formulated an architectural discourse whose main themes are derived from skills and perception developed in other cultural activities. For him the original motives of architecture reside in the production process of the four industries of textiles, carpentry, ceramics and masonry. Exercising such radicalism in political life cost him several years of exile and poverty during the time when he wrote most of his theoretical work. While in London, Semper had the chance to follow closely the debates stirred up by John Paxton's design for the Crystal Palace. Against his British colleagues who argued for the duality of construction and ornament—as implied in historicist tendency for ornamenting construction, as well as in modernist zeal for the construction of ornament—Semper mapped the subject in the purview of cultural anomalies of capitalism. "This process of disintegrating existing art types must be completed by industry, by production, and by applied science before something good and new can result."¹¹ Reading these lines in the context of current nihilism of technology and commodification of culture encouraged me to draw some analogies between Semper's discourse on theatricality and the mystics of commodities that have enforced fad and fashion as the ultimate new. This is convincing not because of Semper's architecture, whose theatricality was suggested by iconographic references, but his belief in criticality of architecture for cultural com-

munication and for his idea that art, even in case of expressing tragedy, should break up tragic elements "in such a way that one could extract enjoyment even from its most affecting parts."¹² The implied theatricality in Semper's statement could be taken for theatricalization if one does not recall Carl Botticher's assertion that in a tectonic form the symbolic dressing is simultaneously juxtaposed with the structural function. Both Semper and Botticher stressed the dialogical relation between a structural system and the expected sensations evoked by the dressing. Addressing this subject, Botticher reminds us that

The aim is to grasp the principle of the statics and construction and the law and form of each part of the structural system that characterizes the style in question. Once this is understood, then the key is found to the riddle of the art-forms that have been applied to these parts as a kind of explanatory layers. Since these parts have been made for the sole purpose of creating a spatial structure, any forms applied to them that do not serve this material function and to make visible the concept of structure and space that in its purely structural state cannot be perceived.¹³

Or to put it in Semper's words, adornments are "structural-symbolic" when the art-form, in essence, enhances the structural values of the core-form through dressing.¹⁴ By making clear that the final form of architecture should not correspond to its structural system directly, Botticher charges the tectonic with an excess, the art-form, that is robbed by eclecticians and formalists alike.

Harry Francis Mallgrave is one of the few scholars who have explored the idea of theatricality, associating it with the thought of two other giants of Semper's days, Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner. According to him, one reason why

a limited biographical format is called for in the case of Semper, is the importance his theory and built works possess for more broadly based cultural studies. The Semper-Wagner-Nietzsche triangle of ideas alluded to the above underscores the centrality of Semper's thought to the nineteenth century, but it is a presence yet to be adequately perceived and assessed.¹⁵

This last point deserves attention not only because of the association one might make between the uncertainties surrounding these last decades of our century with those of the end of the last one, but also because of the formative-ness of the theme of surface and a perception of theatricality stirred up by telecommunication technologies. Moreover, current diversities in theories of architecture perpetuate a state of confusion equal to the nineteenth century's quest for style.

Mallgrave depicts Friedrich Schinkel as the forerunner with the concept of theatricality through which Semper saw an alternative to the crisis of architectural historicism in Germany. Schinkel sought to resolve the contemporary architects' fluctuation between utility and imitation by what he coined the "refinement of feeling," anticipating Adolf Loos's belief that the task of architect is to arouse feeling and sensation in the beholder. Traveling through historical sites, Schinkel was absorbed by the formal aspects of the buildings he visited. He was equally attracted to a sense of theatricality caused by modifications needed to accommodate an ideal form to a given landscape and its topography.¹⁶ And yet, Schinkel's interest in stage set design, panorama and landscape, sets him apart from those architects who sought abstraction and denunciation of history as a way to get out of the complexities, if not anxieties, generated by modernity. In defiance of the fallacies of an arbitrary simulation of history and reduction of architecture to utility and construction, Schinkel believed that the tectonic should express building's purpose artistically. According to Mallgrave, the Berlin Altes Museum demonstrates the architect's willingness "to draw from the historical treasury and forms but at the same time to modify these motifs in an original manner, taking into account contemporary ideals and conditions."¹⁷ Besides new building techniques and materials, what was contemporary for Semper and others of his school of thought was the transgression of time and space, and the latter's tectonic expression. According to Kurt W. Forster, "Schinkel recognized in the human imagination a native tendency to extend the transformation of nature into history beyond its time-bound order, to expand the process into the internal realm of desire."¹⁸ Drawing from drama and stage set design, both Schinkel and Semper saw architecture as a frame accommodating human experience. The tectonic of such a "frame" should absorb the beholder first and then direct his or her attention to the drama of life.

Schinkel's theory also alludes to a shift of paradigm at work in the 18th century French architecture. Those known as the "revolutionary architects" indeed departed from a sense of beauty associated with the proportions of the body for that of sublime. In the context of the experience of modernity, sublime was charged with psychological feelings of both gayness and sorrow. A feeling for "play" was also invested in the aesthetic writings of the century, whose original intrusion into the world of art might have to do with the primeval struggle against the not-yet-tamed nature. Semper, for his part echoing the romantic tradition, would "set up play as the basis of the aesthetic drive, and the means by which man confronts an often hostile world and deals with its imperfections."¹⁹ For Semper "play is humanity's 'cosmogomic instinct' through which he creates his own 'tiny world' (lawful and decorative) and mediates his contact with the world." In recapitulating these words, it seems fair to suggest that play and fancying with mask and tattoo was indeed a reaction to the

anxieties generated by modernization. This is where Wagner's music and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* enters the complex picture of Semper's life and architecture. Aware of Wagner's problematic concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Mallgrave underlines the similarities between Semper's understanding of theatricality and Richard Wagner's zeal for dramatization and the architecture of theater as the ultimate unison of all other arts. Nietzsche also underlined the understanding of art in association with the Greek chorus as a way out of the will to knowledge.²⁰ Indeed it is those non-visual and plastic qualities of music that enticed him, Wagner and Semper to emphasize on the dramatic potentialities of architecture that were at work in the festive ensembles of Greek and other early civilizations. As Semper put it, and according to Mallgrave, Nietzsche gleaned from him, "the haze of carnival candles is the true atmosphere of art." In a footnote to his theory of style, Semper continues, "The denial of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous creation of man."²¹

What is intriguing in Semper's idea of theatricality is the fact that he continuously weaves adornment with lawful execution of material and technical means. Furthermore, his reflection on theatricality is full of allusions to drama, theater and carnival and mask. In the above footnote we read

The spirit of masks breathes in Shakespeare's dramas; we meet the humor of masks and the haze of candles, the carnival sentiment (which truly is not always joyous) in Mozart's *Don Juan*. For even music needs a means to deny reality. Hecuba also means nothing to the musician—or should mean nothing.²²

And in order to prevent any misunderstanding of his stress on the necessity for architecture to deny reality, theatricalization, Semper advises that "Masking does not help, however, when *behind* the mask the thing is false or the mask is no good." And he continues, "In order that the material, the indispensable (in the usual sense of the expression) be completely denied in the artistic creation, its complete mastery is the imperative precondition." Finally, my favorite Semperian line: "only by complete technical perfection, by judicious and proper treatment of the material according to its properties, and by taking these properties into consideration and creating form, can the material be forgotten, can the artistic creation be completely freed from it, can even a simple landscape painting be raised to a high work of art."²³ I like this statement because it moves beyond the romanticist ethics of seeing form exclusive to the nature of material while, at the same time, it stops short of further intensifying—push the nihilism of modernity to its extreme—the destruction of the received tradition. Semper moves in between boarder lines separating theatricality from theatricalization, to deny material through embellishment of material

itself.

Semper's discussion of theatricality is also an aspect of his theorization of architecture as a cosmic art similar to dance and music. Indeed the delight experienced in dance and music has no imitative basis. These arts pursue similar laws of structure and ornamentation implied in the Greek word *Kosmos*, meaning the simultaneous presence of order and ornament. As I have discussed elsewhere, "Music and dance differ from imitative arts in that a distinction between what is essential to them and what is excessive is almost impossible."²⁴ For Nietzsche "the cosmic symbolism of music resists any adequate treatment by language, for the simple reason that music, in referring to primordial contradiction and pain, symbolizes a sphere which is both earlier than appearance and beyond it." This statement from *The Birth of Tragedy* alludes to the Greek artistic mind and a Dionysian desire to express nature symbolically. Emphasizing the significance of polychromy for Greek architecture, Semper saw monumental architecture beyond a decorated shed or an iconographic representation of its language. For him, architecture is an active part of an ensemble similar to the primitive sense of communal gathering for dance and choreography. Stressing the principle of dressing, such a setting would, at the end, become a stage-set in itself; a theatrical montage indeed. In addition to painting, Semper reminds us,

We should not forget the metal ornaments, gilding, tapestry-like draperies, baldachins, curtains, and movable implements. From the beginning the monuments were designed with all these things in mind, even for the surroundings—the crowds of people, priests, and the processions. The monuments were the scaffolding intended to bring together these elements on a common stage. The brilliance that fills the imagination when trying to visualize those times makes the imitations that people have since fancied and imposed on us seem pale and stiff.²⁵

Semper's vision of architecture is a symbolic form experienced in association with other cultural products. Indeed, architecture is the crust of the life-world, framing, almost like the shoe-horse-shape of stage, the totality of the everyday life experience; even those most remote archaic ones that presumably are washed out from the present objective world.

Now what would be the vicissitude of such an experience in the realm of architecture? And what would be the index of the aforementioned totality in the present high-tech modern capitalism? What kind of shared collective experience is left to us after the loss of aura? In response to these questions it is appropriate to recall Walter Benjamin's discourse on experience. According to Benjamin, the ritualistic value of the work of art is embedded in two qualities:

first, that the symbolism of the auratic art is understood indirectly, and second, in order to communicate with this symbolism one has to enter into the work itself. Mechanization and the introduction of mechanical reproduction into the world of cultural artifacts has dissolved the aura and adorned the work of art with different qualities. In a photographic or filmic reproduction of a painting or an event, the final work breaks the crust of its symbolic function by the very possibility of being exhibited and appropriated beyond its temporal propriety. The work also attains some qualities that are pumped into it by technology and thus repress the cult value of the work. Benjamin describes the new horizon opened by technologies of reproduction in terms of "optical unconscious" by which "a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."²⁶ Redemption of the work of art from its aura, therefore, generates a world of phantasmagoria, the spectacle, which in the present context of commodification of the life-world should neither be considered as a mere technological effect nor, as Guy Debord reminds us, its "something added to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality."²⁷ My intention, in the rest of this presentation, is to explore the developmental tendencies of culture of spectacle for rethinking the idea of theatricality.

Studying the impact of the nihilism of modernity, Benjamin was skeptical of restoration of any collective experience of the kind exercised through religion and language in pre-modern cultures. Knowing the fact that disintegration of every possible totality is essential for the project of modernity, one is left, according to Benjamin, with the choice of either maintaining an active affirmative, or a passive reactive position: "One takes the destruction as an opportunity to establish a new configuration of experience, the other intensifies the destruction."²⁸ To put his ideas in the context of current problems in architectural theories, one could justify the neo-avant-garde's exploitation of the formal implications of computer technology for two reasons. First, theatricalization of architecture might be seen as a radical move for those who see technology as the only index of totalization. This point of view considers technology determinant for social and cultural evolution. Second, theatricalization takes the perceptual experience of telecommunication technologies for granted and suspends all ties that might connect architecture to the beholder. The result is an abstract form whose discrete charm competes with the fetishism of commodities.²⁹ Like commodities, an abstract form is invested with excess; the disappearance of tradition generates an architecture that is anonymous and unfamiliar to the beholder's collective memory. The lack, occupied and energized by image-making forces of telecommunication technologies, has endowed architecture with theatricalization.

Abstraction and anonymity are aesthetic implications of architecture's entanglement with the drive of commodification. There is also a degree of

abstraction and anonymity in theatricality as far as the tectonic exceeds the technical exigencies of construction. Theatricality might be associated with what was alleged to be Courbet's "superficial realism," that is to say, the aspect that caused Courbet's realism to be seen as superficial is also suggestive of the fact that theatricality does not deny construction, but alludes to the latter's "structural-symbolic" expression. The differences also have to do with the fact that unlike the pictorial realm of painting, the beholder's relation to architecture is rather indirect. One does not design a building while having in mind the place of the beholder. Rather, in the manner of stage-set design, one conceives architecture as a back-stage in front and around of which the life-world unravels.³⁰ My intention is not to present a passive picture of architecture, but to underline the active role architecture plays in the construction of the condition of life, the project of architecture. Exploring Benjamin's concept of experience, Howard Caygill suggests, "Architecture provides the main site for the interaction of technology and the human, a negotiation conducted in terms of touch and use. It is both a condition and an object of experience, the speculative site for the emergence of the 'technological *physis*'."³¹ Through use and touch and even in spite of theatricality architecture absorbs one's attention and then directs to a larger totality.³² The idea is not to conceive a perfect form fitting into a given unified signifiatory whole. Instead, to envision an architecture that is more than both construction and a familiar sign. Excess aims at unbounding foundations and setting the work in the "mirror-play of the world."³³ Obviously, in my differentiation of theatricality from theatricalization (gestural expression), the emphasis is put on the "thing" character of architecture while undermining its pictorial appeal. The thingness of architecture necessitates a turn from pictorial considerations of the place of the beholder to his or her experience with architecture.

Beyond the neo-avant-garde fashionable and appealing position, one is left with the choice of accepting nihilism of technology not because of its apparent radicalism, but for the reason that architectural tradition can survive only by being galvanized through new modalities opened in the dialectics of seeing and making. Furthermore, most architects believe that construction and the relation of architecture to nature transcends the problematic duality between the subject and the object. How architecture relates to nature, to the forces of gravity, landscape, light and wind, are the bedrock of a shared collective experience as far as architecture's project is concerned. An affirmative approach to the nihilism of technology would invest in recollection of tactile sensibilities and tectonic solutions of architecture's tradition that address nature, and would recode these received traditions in the purview of the latest technological innovations.³⁴ Interestingly enough, in the prolegomenon to his theory of style, Semper speculates that "These phenomena of the decay of the arts and the mysterious, phoenix like birth of new artistic from the destruction

of the old arts is all the more meaningful to us, since we are probably in the midst of a similar crisis...."³⁵ Semper seemingly sounds Benjaminian, however, a phoenix like architecture similar to the work of Surrealism would absorb the beholder in a snapshot and unleash what Benjamin termed "involuntary memories" of an auratic experience. Transgression of the "latest new" through memories of an archaic past opens architecture to the discourse of excess. Architecture is construction plus something else. The surplus speaks through a joint articulating the dialectics of tactile and tectonic solutions of a dormant past and present technological experiences. In this context theatricality does not suggest formal playfulness: it vindicates the formative themes of architecture that are woven with socio-political, cultural and technological developments of this last decade of the millennium. Appropriation of architecture in the vastness of culture is indeed at the heart of Semper's discourse on theatricality.

Semper's idea of theatricality and the "spatiality" implied in his thought has led me to discuss these two themes beyond Semper and in the context of the spectacle of late-capitalism. Equally important is the fact that, although virtual-reality is a significant aspect of the present technological experience, it is not necessarily the only one that should be grafted into architecture. Both theatricality and "spatiality" as such have been at work in various facets of the early experience of modernity, and more so in cinematography and montage. In my previous writings I have spoken of the idea of montage as a mode of construction appropriate to an architecture that accommodates the project of modernity. In this space I would like to suggest that what Semper-Wagner-Nietzsche saw in the Greek theater is true for film, itself an ensemble of music, art, technology and "the crowds of people." Pursued closely, montage, from its fragmentary stage setting to the art of cutting and sewing, frames a sense of theatricality equal to Semper's zeal for "masking of reality." My occasional return to film and its analogy to architecture also has to do with the fact that, in terms of reaching out and communicating with the masses, and the ties that every cultural product has made with capital and the world of market, film is the only industry that comes close to architecture.³⁶ Still, similar to architecture, the art of filmmaking has gone through various transformations caused by constant innovations taking place in the world of technology. Introduction of sound, color, wide screen and lately digital techniques, have opened new horizons in the filmic experience and yet montage has remained essential for the art of filmmaking. This is true for architecture too. The entire history of architecture can be construed in the purview of changes that have transformed the concept of construction from *techne* to *technique*, and from the tectonic to montage. As in film so in architecture, montage can be utilized to evoke sensation and feelings appropriate to the purpose of a constructed space. This potentiality of montage is exploited in our best schools of architecture merely

in the two dimensionality of telecommunication technology. Perhaps, when (?) the forces of gravity and thus nature are overcome, then virtual reality might be translated into architecture in its full capacity. Until the time that such a dream-day is actualized I think we are better off dwelling on the concept of montage and articulating the tectonic of lightness and an experience of spatiality that is prevalent in various production activities of our present-day culture.

Finally, Semper's and Botticher's ideas should not be taken as dogmas. Facing the historical eclecticism of his time, Botticher suggested that one neither should take tradition for granted nor discard it totally. Beyond these two extremes he drew two conclusions that I believe are worth citing here: "First, we must for the time being hold on to what has been directly handed down to us.... Second, it follows that we must not make use of tradition for its own sake...." And he continues, we should "decide what part of tradition merely belongs to the past, was valid only then, and therefore must be rejected and what part contains eternal truth, is valid for all future generations, and therefore must be accepted and retained by us."³⁷ "Eternal truth?" Perhaps this is too strong an idea to ask these days. However, Botticher's critical attitude towards tradition is even more valid today. As I mentioned before, the forces of gravity and the importance of landscape are proper benchmarks to make a site (sight?), a spectacle, exhibiting an architectonic event, the experience of which would ignite "disorientation," to recall Heidegger, and open a different window into the life-world. This is not a far-fetched theoretical demand. Present architectural practice is full of projects and buildings that affirm, in different degrees, the importance of montage, and theatricality, if not theatricalization.

Notes

- 1 This text is a revised version of an essay presented to the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia/New Zealand, in Wellington, New Zealand 2000.
- 2 Drawing from Wölfflin's reflection on Baroque architecture and Leibniz's philosophy, Gilles Deleuze presents the idea of fold in analogy to a house with two tires: one is stretched horizontally and the other vertically; one is adorned with the pleats of matter and the other, like soul, is opaque and windowless. These two levels (floors?) are distinct from each other and yet stay in harmony. The harmony is held intact by the "point of inflection" where one fold unfolds into another. In this inclusion or enveloping, the need for relational correspondence between outside/inside is eliminated. See Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Especially the chapters on "the Fold" and "What is Baroque?" For Deleuze's idea of "point of inflection" see Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
- 3 Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," *Poetics*, (Cambridge: Harvard

- University Press, 1992), pp. 9-90.
- 4 _____, *Poetics*, p. 29.
 - 5 _____, "On Theatricality," *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1987*, (Los Angeles: Sun and Light Press, 1986), pp. 205.
 - 6 _____, *Poetics*, p. 86. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty see *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), especially the chapter on "The Intertwining—The Chiasm." Reflecting on visibility and touch, Merleau-Ponty suggests that: "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication." *Ibid.*, p. 135. Transcending the idealist and empiricist discourse, Merleau-Ponty presents a concept of "object" that does not stand on its own but rather is woven into many-fold horizons of a given culture. His position is intriguing in the context of current shift from the object to the text.
 - 7 Michael Fried *Courbet's Realism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 17. For a detailed discussion of Denis Diderot's ideas on theatricality see Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
 - 8 _____, *Courbet's Realism*, p. 224.
 - 9 On this subject see Kenneth E. Silver, *Espirit de Corps*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 299-361.
 - 10 Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, p. 45.
 - 11 Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry F. Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 144.
 - 12 Harry F. Mallgrave, *Gottfried Semper Architect of the Nineteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 232. Mallgrave's book on Gottfried Semper is a fine supplement to the present proliferation of Semper's oeuvre. Besides the early translations of Semper's major texts, in the last two years several publications have made important contribution by shedding light on various aspects of Semper's discourse. These books explore themes such as the tectonic, *bekleidung* (the principle of dressing), *stoffwechel* (transforming motifs from one production activity into another." This attention to Semper comes to its full circle in Kenneth Frampton's *Studies in Tectonic Culture* (1995), that was followed up by the *ANY*, no. 14. Mallgrave's work, however, stands out for its fine and detailed biographical account and the way he weaves the formative themes of Semper's architectural theory within the socio-political, cultural, and technological developments that have characterized the heroic period of the early experience of modernity.
 - 13 Carl Gottlieb Wilhelm Botticher, "The Principles of the Hellenic and Germanic Ways of Building With Regard to Their Application to Our Present Way of Building," trans. Wolfgang Herrmann, *In What Style Should We Build*, (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1992), pp. 147-168.
 - 14 Semper, "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts," *The Four Elements of Architecture*, p. 252.

- 15 Mallgrave, *Gottfried Semper*, p. 9.
- 16 Barry Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel An Architecture for Prussia*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publication Inc., 1994), p. 28. According to the author, the true hire of Schinkel's architectural vision is Friedrich Gilly whose design "drew on more than the latest archaeological knowledge. It embodied the contemporary theory that through the manipulation of mass and proportion, light and shade, rhythm and texture, architecture constituted a formal language that spoke more directly to the senses than even speech" (p. 14).
- 17 Mallgrave, p. 87. See also Mitchell Schwarzer, "Freedom and Tectonics," in *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 167-214. Presenting the nineteenth century philosophical debates on realism and idealism, Schwarzer suggests that like Kant, Schinkel accepted semi-independent processes for architectural materiality and ideality." Unlike Kant, however, Schinkel believed that, "nature, not the subjective mind, contained the essence of architecture." p. 173.
- 18 Kurt W. Forster, "Only Things that Stir the Imagination": Schinkel as a Scenographer," in Karl Friedrich Schinkel and John Zukowsky, eds., *The Drama of Architecture*, (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1994), pp. 18-35.
- 19 Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture*, p. 35.
- 20 For Nietzsche, music was the art that could overcome its material basis and by intensification of its melody it also could surpass the domain of the "will to power." There is a sense of formlessness in music that architecture could archive only by denying the forces of gravity. Tilmann Buddensieg reminds us of Nietzsche's speculation on music's possible belonging "to a culture in which the dominion of men of power, of every kind, has already come to an end." These kind of reflections point at Nietzsche's interest in an architecture that could eliminate the symbolic and religious burden of classical revivalism permeating in the late nineteenth century. For a comprehensive study of Nietzsche's reflections on architecture, see Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth, eds., *Nietzsche and "An Architecture of Our Minds"*, (Los Angeles: the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999). The above quotation is from Buddensieg, *Architecture as an Empty Form: Nietzsche and the Art of Building*, *Ibid.* p. 270.
- 21 Semper, p. 257.
- 22 Implied in this statement by Gottfried Semper is the import of the tectonic for any discussion of "dressing" or the mask in architecture. Without relating the mask to the tectonic, one might end up negating the import of construction for the dialectics of theory and practice. Perhaps, aware of this risk, Kenneth Frampton was hesitant to touch the idea of theatricality in his massive work on the tectonic. From a different perspective, Anthony Vidler stresses the uncanny space behind the mask, thus dismissing the tectonic. He discusses the mask in analogy to Nietzsche's esteem for formless architecture. Vidler, "the Mask and the Labyrinth: Nietzsche and the (Uncanny) Space of Decadence," in Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth, ed. *Nietzsche*, pp.53-63.
- 23 Semper, p. 258.

- 24 Gevork Hartoonian, *Ontology of Construction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 88.
- 25 Mallgrave, p. 59.
- 26 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hanah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
- 27 Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p.13. For a thorough elaboration of the concept of phantasmagoria see Sussan Buck-Morris, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), pp. 78-109.
- 28 Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Color of Experience*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), p.32. For Benjamin reflection on experience, see "The Storyteller," and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*.
- 29 Exploring the origin of the fetish, William Pietz remind us that the word fetish derives from Latin *facticius*, meaning "artificial in the sense of materially altered by human efforts in order to deceive" as opposed to genuine. The world "factitious" also has been used to connote the "unnatural fabrication of appearance, of the signifiers of exchange value, without the substance or use value that the appearance promised." Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II," *Res*, p. 25. Pp. 23-45. Reflecting on Karl Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, Jacques Derrida locates the "mystical character" of the commodity form in "some theatrical intrigue: mechanical ruse (mekbane) or mistaking a person, repetition upon the perverse intervention of a prompter.....There is a mirror, and the commodity form is also this mirror, but since all of a sudden it no longer plays its role, since it does not reflect back the expected image, those who are looking for themselves can no longer find themselves in it." Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 155.
- 30 Here I am benefiting from Michael Fried's discussion of Denis Diderot's differentiation between the place of audience in the construction of the dramatic tableau and theatricality of the Rococo kind. See Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 93. According to Diderot, "had it been understood that, even though a dramatic work is made to be represented, it is necessary that author and actor to forget the beholder, and that all interest be concentrated upon the personages,", Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, p. 94.
- 31 Caygill, p. 116.
- 32 See Gianni Vattimo's discourse on the interplay between locality and region in *The End of Modernity*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 83.
- 33 Martin Heidegger "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Gianni Vattimo presents an intriguing analogy between Heidegger's idea of Stoss and Walter Benjamin's discourse on shock discussed in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." For Heidegger, see "The Origin of the Work of Art." Written around 1935, these two essays benefit from Georg Simmel's discourse on the human life in metropolis. According to Vattimo, both Benjamin and Heidegger emphasize, in their own way, the importance of art as a work disorienting the beholder by unbounding his or her expected sensations and habits. See Vattimo, "Art and Oscillation," in *The Transparent Society*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 45-61. Also see Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction

of Tradition,” and Andrew Benjamin “Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present,” both in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-31 and pp. 216-250.

- 34 According to Walter Benjamin, “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that precedes us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power to which the past has a claim. This claim cannot be settled cheaply. Historical materialists are aware of that.” Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, p. 254.
- 35 Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, p. 182.
- 36 Interestingly enough, Michael Kahn, who has edited Steven Spielberg’s films, suggests that, “The director is like the architect—it’s his or her vision—and the editor is the builder,...with Steven, it’s like building a beautiful house.” Quoted by Bernard Weineraub, “Hollywood’s Kindest Cuts,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1998, p. E1.
- 37 Botticher, p. 161

Guilty Pleasures: Pipilotti Rist and the Psycho/Social Tropes of Video

Rebecca Lane

The holy-unholy subject of gender has taken hold of the unconscious in a particularly powerful manner. For this reason I am convinced that we will be able to approach the wounds, the festering kernals that have been stored there, only with the force of the visual, the figurative, and sounds. 'Different' images can help bring about resilient change far more readily than verbal pamphlets. The language of images finds a more direct access to the unconscious, where prejudices slumber; it coins us far more strongly than words.

-Pipilotti Rist¹

It is difficult, within the context of contemporary art, not to feel some degree of ambivalence towards the tacit celebration of video art. Its current normative status is undoubtedly—along with that growing up around internet/web based and telematic pieces—representative of yet another embrace of technology and new media as the means to constitute contemporary “progressive” forms of artistic expression. Judging from the current overt glorification of cutting-edge technology as artistic media, one finds that with the acceptance of these media practices, come comparable value judgments as to the undeniably “progressive” nature of the content of the works featured. The overarching acceptance on the part of museum curators of video’s relevance and expressive potential points not only to prevailing sentiments about the creative promise of technology, but also reflects and simultaneously taps into the most marketable constituents of the current art/museum-going public. In the near domination of new media in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and recent exhibitions such as *Bitstreams*—just two of the most recent cases in point—the inversely reciprocal relation between curatorial celebration, and critical outrage highlights the inherent issues at the levels of taste and consumption that continue to plague discussions of new media.²

Since the early 1990’s, Pipilotti Rist, the Swiss video artist and one-

time pop star, has been implicated in exactly this sort of dialogue between the commercial/commodity status attributed to much video art—as simply MTV in the gallery—and its potentials for meaningful contemporary expression. Rist occupies a unique position within video art's identity/identification debates, for, throughout her career she has openly embraced *both* poles of the debate as relevant and beneficial to her artistic aims. Not only does Rist not have any problem with her work being ascribed a pop-cultural status (she revels in it, in fact) but she also sees her work as part of a larger project of social change.³ Her staunch belief that the unconscious is “where prejudices slumber” contributes to the overriding thematic of extremely personal, internal imagery coupled with the medium through which many individuals both receive and communicate those exact internal prejudices at the level of the social.⁴ Her video installation work, as a result, unsurprisingly courts psychoanalytic readings,⁵ and Rist herself cites themes of dreaming, sensory modification, fairy tales, and probing the depths of the psyche as key elements inspiring her installations.⁶ The psychological dimension which Rist brings to the medium of video is arguably an important element among many that have secured her work critical success in the eyes of audiences and critics alike.

I would like to suggest that the discernable presence of this union of the internal/psychological with the external/social in Rist's work serves to throw into relief the ready embrace of representations of the psychological in lieu of the encroachment of the technological into art at this historical moment; her videos seek to provide a social remedy of sorts that exposes the mechanical/functional wounds of the psyche by way of the machine's capacity to render imagery “psychological/internal”—in other words, it's formal capabilities to create imagery that is both distorted and manipulated to an individual's personal ends. Rist's approach entails the conveyance of the psychological through visually coded representations specific to “feminine” psychology. Two pieces most demonstrative of this trend, and most indicative of Rist's own attempts to probe the psychological, are her early piece (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*), 1988 and the more recent *Ever is Over All*, 1997 (Fig. 1-10). Both videos—the former a single channel video tape, and the latter an adjacent two screen video installation—deal with issues of gender and female sexuality, and in a broader sense, with environment, space, and the sensory experience of art viewing by way of their video format. Both the content and formal elements of these two pieces articulate two poles of contemporary discord and ambivalence towards technological media and its use in art production, as well as similar sentiments towards feminine sexuality/psychology; this continuum is articulated through the artist's own biography and statements about these pieces.

By juxtaposing these two seemingly disparate elements—the “masculine” practice of technology with explicitly “feminine” imagery and con-

tent—Rist's work reveals an attempt over time to fuse together what Michael Balint has termed "narcissistic withdrawal" and the "unavoidable integration of the discoveries of 'modern art' with the demand for 'mature love' for the [art] object."⁷ Such reintegration occurs at both the level of the art objects themselves and at the level of female psychology in Rist's videos. This is particularly evident when one examines her pieces through the lens of Janine Chassguet-Smirgel's formulation of female guilt.

Mistakes or Guilty Repetition?

Creatively I work with so-called feminine methods. For planning and organizing I copy a lot from what men do. Sometimes I could die of shame when I sit in meetings and have to play games, but that's the price I have to pay. When a woman wants to get a project going she has to use methods that go against her nature. Women do not like to admit that they are using men's strategies because they're afraid that by doing so, they are no longer sexually attractive and they have to suppress their feelings.⁸

(Entlastungen) Pipilotis Fehler ([Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes) is a nightmare; it is torture enacted over and again before the viewer's eyes. In multiple sequences one observes the video's female protagonist struggling against physical and psychological impediments; the physical struggles enacted on screen are accompanied by voice-overs that speak directly to the irreconcilable gap between the woman's efforts and reality. In one sequence the woman faints repeatedly; in another, she dives into a swimming pool only to have her head forced under water as she breaks the surface; in yet another she attempts to climb over a fence, but falls before she can propel herself over to the other side. Amidst these failures of action/volition, the video itself fails; the reception is distorted, pixilated beyond the point of verisimilitude and full of static. The woman's trials are thus obscured from complete representation: the viewer never gets the full story, for neither does one see the woman complete her action, nor is one able to view these attempts uninhibited due to the treatment of the video medium itself. As viewers, then, we too occupy a position of failure: a failure to experience visually the resolution of Pipilotti's mistakes; instead, one is left with the flickering repetition of simple, easily achievable actions gone sour.

The visual "truth" of these images is ambiguous as well in relation to the voice-over narratives that accompany each scene. These voice-overs explicitly run contrary to the actions depicted via the images; what appear to be mistakes, as the title to the piece suggests, are discordantly attended by a "voice-over [that] keeps listing rules, accompanied by the beating of a metronome. A child's voice responds by repeating phrases such as 'All the things I must learn,' 'This is the world, this is correct,' 'Everything is exactly where I

left it."⁹ At the level of vocal narrative, much like that found in the piece's visual narrative, then, one finds another form of failure, for these statements refuse to acknowledge the woman's very apparent efforts of resistance. Either she struggles against external physical forces, in the form of the hand that submerges her beneath the water or the barrier of the fence, or she wrestles with her own internal weakness in the re-occurring fainting spells; these struggles are figured and indicated *only* through the repetition of the video's images. By showing these mistakes over and again (and in some cases within different settings, as is the case in the different fainting sequences) Rist presents struggle *itself* as failure, and subsequently presents no possibility of success in the wake of her mistakes. Experience—i.e. multiple attempts—here does not connote learning or its possibility, but rather, points only to the reiteration and reaffirmation of the impossibility of the protagonist's activities. Rist presents resolution in both its positive and negative forms: the woman and the viewer alike are resigned to accept the inevitable normalizing presence of failure, and one is forced to arrive at such resignation by viewing a digitized image that itself refuses to "resolve."

If the woman's efforts in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipiloti's Mistakes*) truly denote "mistakes," then one is prompted to question why the child we hear in the voice-over taught to learn these same "mistakes" as rules? In her essay on the piece, Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that the combination of the images and the voice-over content function as an expression of female hysteria, and as such, "is ruled by the belief in perfection and plenitude, even while it insists on highlighting the dissatisfaction with any given situation."¹⁰ In that respect, then, the hysterical subject of the piece according to Bronfen, seeks to convince herself (the child, immature element within her) that her "mistakes" are in fact a part of her life, and must be accepted and incorporated within it as a necessary and unquestionable aspect of experience despite their painful reality.

One could also extend a contrary reading to this hysterical formulation if one frames (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipiloti's Mistakes*) with feminine guilt as articulated by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel.¹¹ According to Chasseguet-Smirgel, the female experience of the Oedipus complex involves a change of object—an idealization process—that results in "a specifically feminine form of guilt attached to the anal-sadistic component of sexuality, which is radically opposed to idealization."¹² This shift in the girl's idealization from that of the maternal breast to the paternal penis entails an exchange of one extreme for another; at the time of the change of the object Chasseguet-Smirgel notes:

The idealization process on which the change of object is founded weighs heavily on women's future psychosexual development. In

fact it implies an *instinctual diffusion*, each object being, at the time of the change of object, either entirely negatively cathected (the mother, her breast, her phallus) or entirely positively cathected (the father and his penis). Because of this the little girl will tend to *repress and counteract* the aggressive instincts which exist in relation to her father in order to maintain this instinctual diffusion.¹³

Because the girl experiences frustration in relation to her mother, her turn to the father's penis as the new idealized object, contrary to more standard Freudian interpretations of this phase,¹⁴ in fact stems out of necessity; the girl is placed in a no-win situation, for she only has two possibilities in terms of ideal objects: only two parents to choose from in the wake of frustration. Therefore, "[t]he father then becomes the last resort, the last chance of establishing a relation with a satisfying object...In most cases the father-daughter relation is characterized by the persistence of instinctual diffusion...since the second object must be safeguarded."¹⁵ The ensuing guilt towards the father/the masculine which Chassguet-Smirgel's formulation outlines—the fact that the idealization of the masculine object must be preserved at all costs regardless of aggressive tendencies towards that object—permeates female psychosexual development.

If we turn once more to (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilotti Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) this notion of female guilt reveals itself to be entirely appropos. The bracketed portion of the title, [Absolutions], which Bronfen herself also notes,¹⁶ I feel, when coupled with the visual presentation of "mistakes," highlight the tensions to be found in female relations to idealized masculine objects explicitly—in this case, the technological media of video as a creative device. I am retaining the word "mistakes" in quotes at this point, because I would like to question whether the repeated actions figured in the video are themselves the actual mistakes to which the title refers.¹⁷ As I mentioned earlier, the child's voice in the video assents to learning the rules listed, learning that this indeed is the state of the world in its verity. However, what I would argue is that the failures of transgression featured in the video demonstrate the *end result* of Pipilotti's mistakes; these mistakes *have already been made*, and the (inner) child must learn that such mistakes merit *this* reality.

As an arguably "masculine" format, with all its associations of hi-tech, scientific process, video may be read as functioning in a manner analogous to the idealized father/penis in Chassguet-Smirgel's formulation. Rist acknowledges that her medium of choice involves precision and technique,¹⁸ yet she insists upon its expressive capabilities. In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist she comments: "I often say that video is like a painting on glass that moves, because video also has a rough, imperfect quality that looks like painting. I do not want to copy reality in my work; 'reality' is always much sharper and more contrasted than anything that can ever be created with

video. Video has its own particular qualities, its own lousy, nervous, inner world quality, and I work with that."¹⁹ Rist herein expresses a desire to attribute to video an expressive capability once only associated with painting and graphic formats, by denying the documentary capacities normally associated with video. Instead, we find that Rist emphasizes the peculiarities of the medium, and her description of video sounds not unlike a description of the unconscious.

By rejecting a traditional format such as painting in favor of video, Rist is representative not only of current trends in contemporary art, but also of contemporary female/feminist artists as well. Not only are traditional media "frustrating" in their inability to engage the world of contemporary art, but they also leave the female artist relegated to "traditionally female" modes of creation—a situation that one finds Rist rejecting at every turn.²⁰ Instead, video is like the unconscious, it contains the means within its use to express "universal feelings,"²¹ to express female sentiments while still appealing to a mass audience. This of course requires a change in object—a change in media—to thwart marginalizing efforts to categorize female artists by their choice of media, and this requires playing ball with the boys. (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) is fraught with exactly these tensions, for by accepting a format like video as a means of creating a "female" art, one is doomed to fail from the onset; the only way to get noticed in the contemporary art world is to use new media techniques, "to use methods that go against [her] nature."

The repetition of absolution that the imagery of (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) features not only represents the implicitly feminine situation of transgression involved in being a contemporary female artist—and it is impossible not to take the title's autobiographical reference at face value, to read this guilt as specifically Rist's own—but it also breaks with the "instinctual diffusion" of repression and counter-cathexis involved in the idealization of the male object; this is found at the level of the video's formal surface. As I mentioned earlier, the video's reception is distorted, and the artist describes her intentions when she explains:

I subjected the images to all kinds of interference: I played them too quickly for two simultaneously activated recorders, then put the pictures through a time base corrector that evens out the irregularities. That was only one of twenty-five kinds of disturbance that I experimented with on the tape. Asking too much or too little of the machines resulted in pictures that I was thoroughly familiar with, my inner pictures—my psychosomatic symptoms. This technique is similar to painting where expressiveness or tackiness comes closer to the truth than a perfectly sharp, slick representation.²⁰

Rist clearly articulates in this statement the extent to which the images alone are unable to convey the entirety of their emotional relevance/resonance; she is compelled to aggressively attack the *images* (and their connotations) through the medium's formal/technical capacities in order to achieve the psychological/social effect and response she desires. In their refusal to adhere to the guilt-ridden state of instinctual diffusion, Rist's formal manipulations of the video run the risk of alienating the woman/the artist from this idealized masculine format; by eschewing guilt on a technical/creative level for the self-admitted mistakes of the work's title, Rist enacts a simultaneous gesture of conciliation and obstinate refusal.

Rist does not utilize video's documentary potentials to document her mistakes, but rather presents them in relation to her self-acknowledgement not to fall into similar traps; in a sense then, the only absolution occurring in this piece is Rist's absolution of herself from any culpability in her move to "work with so-called feminine methods" while consciously "using men's strategies."²² Such self-absolution is not unlike the results of the "narcissistic withdrawal" of which Michael Balint speaks in his 1953 essay "Notes on the Dissolution of Object: Representation in Modern Art," where he states:

The treatment of the object [in modern art], or the artist's attitude to it, i.e., his phantasies, feelings, emotions, ideas, images, etc., when stimulated by his chosen object, are conspicuously on what psychoanalysis would describe as the *anal-sadistic level*. The objects are dismembered, split, cruelly twisted, deformed, messed about; the dirty, ugly qualities of the objects are 'realistically' and even 'surrealistically' revealed;... less and less regard is paid to the object's feelings, interests, and sensitivities; kind consideration for, and 'idealization' of, the object becomes less and less important.²³

Rist's strategy of distorting the video in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*) entails a similar disrespect for the object as that which Balint describes; the anal-sadistic content of female guilt from which the images stem are thus also locatable within the modern artist's own internal/psychological process of narcissistic withdrawal from the object as object, in one's refusal to treat it in an idealized fashion. This video alienates Rist as an artist somewhere between this state of un-idealization and disrespect, and that of guilt and conciliation.

Ruby Slippers And Red Hot Pokers

[*Ever is Over All*] is a fantasy. When I created it, I wasn't thinking about fairy tales. It's true that it has some similarities, but maybe

that's because it depicts a delicate, feminine girl doing something very aggressive. This is a familiar aspect of fairy tales: the small child wins against the monster. There's always a balance of power to comfort the weak, the poor, the children. Fairy tales prove that the key to winning a struggle depends on our mental force and not on power or physical force. That interests me a lot. I'm very interested in the power of weakness and the beauty of the non-elegant. In that way, you can say that I refer to fairy tales. You know, if you glorify or empower a seemingly fragile woman, it can suggest mental strength. I'm fighting against clichés by exaggerating the person and giving her an unusual physical presence on screen. This suggests to me mental power or the strength of self-hypnosis.²⁴

Pipilotti Rist's 1997 video installation *Ever is Over All*, in stark contrast to (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*), is far from ambiguous in its content, and revels in formal brilliance, saturated color and discernable narrative. The piece contains two adjacent screens typically installed to meet one another at the intersection point of two walls of a room. On one screen, a young woman dressed like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* strides confidently down a city street; she wears a pretty, flowing blue dress and red shoes and in her hand is what appears to be a magic wand of sorts with a flower at its tip. The woman eventually smashes this wand into the passenger window of a parked car with visible glee. A female police officer, rather than apprehend the young woman for her vandalism, simply smiles and salutes as the two women pass each other by. The second screen shows a video loop of a field of flowers shot at incredibly close range, rendering them monumental in scale when juxtaposed with the adjacent street scene. They have the appearance of bright abstract forms more so than flowers, and at points their projection even encroaches upon the screen of the woman.

In Peggy Phelan's description of the piece she writes:

Many read the video as a kind of feminist revenge fantasy. The phallus flower is wielded by a woman in a conservative dress; her counterpart, the woman police officer wearing the clothes of the state and representing 'the law of the father,' applauds the power of the phallic woman. Unlike other feminist 'revenge' texts, however, *Ever is Over All* is matter-of-fact, hypnotically beautiful in its slow motion effects and fade to flowers. The video is clearly a feminist work, but...[t]he daring exuberance of thinking outside the law, imagining a different relationship to property, to movement, to the criminal power of beauty itself is the video's truest achievement.²⁵

As Phelan rightly observes, *Ever is Over All* is celebratory in its tone and presentation. The transgressive element of the video that Phelan cites as the piece's primary strength, however, needs further elaboration in order to determine exactly what such celebration and transgression are in reference to. Rist's own comments about the piece, particularly when she states: "I'm fighting against clichés by exaggerating the person and giving her an unusual physical presence on screen. This suggests to me mental power or the strength of self-hypnosis,"²⁶ also make apparent the necessity to delve more deeply into the question of transgression in this installation. Phelan's description, in its own critique of clichés, nonetheless posits an alternative, and equally stereotypical reading of this piece: that a female artist depicting resistance automatically intends it as a feminist act of "thinking outside the law," meaning the law of the conscious world of (masculine) society. Yet Rist herself overtly posits the unconscious, and even more specifically the fantasy element involved in an individual's personal capacity for mental empowerment, at the center of this video's concept. As a result, the content of this work is not strictly rooted strictly in social transgression, but incorporates mental transgression as well; transgression of mental norms here stems from a deliberate exchange between the psychological *and* the social in this piece, and is one which takes place between its form and its visual/narrative content.

It is difficult not to address Rist's claims in relation to the unarguable visual quotations *Ever is Over All* takes from *The Wizard of Oz*, a movie which itself centers around imagination, dreaming, and rebellion.²⁷ Based on L. Frank Baum's original story of 1900, the MGM film version of 1939 starring Judy Garland is the version of the story with which most audiences are familiar, and is also the version in which the tropes of Dorothy's blue dress and ruby slippers figure most prominently.²⁸ Linda Rohrer Paige has argued that Dorothy's ruby slippers in the film are indicative of the character's ability to "imagine" herself outside her situation as a woman within a patriarchal society, but that these tools of the creative, imaginative potential of woman are both a blessing and a curse.²⁹ Noting the ties to the Hans Christian Anderson Tale "The Red Shoes"³⁰ and the story of little Karen who puts on the forbidden dancing shoes—to Karen's dismay, once she has donned the shoes she cannot get them off again and has to have her feet cut off—Rohrer ventures that the shoes function as a specifically female attribute of the problematic nature of female imagination.

These are the shoes of power, which signal anxiety or death for those who dance in them; they are Dorothy's slippers in the *Wizard of Oz*....The ruby slippers constitute evidence of Dorothy's symbolic kinship to the wicked witches. Although they belonged to the first witch [who was killed by Dorothy's house, and from

whom Dorothy inherited the slippers], they fit Dorothy's feet perfectly. They are Dorothy's inheritance of the female imagination and thus function as a semiotic marker of her sisterhood to the two wicked witches. Because she inherited woman's symbol—the red slippers—Dorothy unknowingly reveals her kinship to the witches.³¹

By giving her own female protagonist in *Ever is Over All* the same ruby slippers as Dorothy—and she unmistakably forces the viewer to make this connection by likewise including Dorothy's signature blue dress—Rist also invokes the double-edged sword of female imagination and creativity. However, unlike Dorothy, Rist's protagonist does not compromise her fantasy with any mantra such as "there's no place like home;"³² she doesn't show any signs of seeking a return to the "real" (masculine) world outside the realm of her vandalous (feminine/ist) activity. This woman instead is the embodiment of fantasy: Rist's own. As such, *Ever is Over All* functions as a projection of such fantasy through the creative activity of art making. As Freud proposes in "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming":

We can begin by saying happy people never make phantasies, only unsatisfied ones. Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind phantasies; every separate phantasy contains the fulfillments of a wish, and improves on unsatisfactory reality. The impelling wishes vary according to the sex, character and circumstances of the creator; they may be easily divided into two principle groups. Either they are ambitious wishes, serving to exalt the person creating them, or they are erotic. ...But we will not lay stress on the distinction between these two trends; we prefer to emphasize the fact that they are often united.³³

Thus, if *Ever is Over All* is to be read as Rist's own fantasy, it is clear that despite the celebratory, formally and emotionally bright appearance of the work, these qualities in actuality serve to mask the artist's dissatisfaction, and is an attempt on her part to act out in response to frustration. While Phelan would identify this dissatisfaction as "the law of the father," I would argue that the frustration Rist projects here is akin to the feminine guilt discernible in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* (*[Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes*). In this case, by contrast, rather than figuring guilt itself through an emphasis upon failure, *Ever is Over All* presents a response *against* guilt. Contrary to Phelan's assertion that this piece is a "feminist revenge fantasy," which effectively locates the intentions of the piece to be oppositional with regards to the outside world of patriarchal society, if we take this piece to be a fantasy in response to guilt—one dealing specifically with the artist's own female psyche—

the piece takes on new significance. Whereas in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([Absolutions] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*), Rist enacted guilt and attempted to respond to it by *rejecting* instinctual diffusion in relation to the idealized object—technological media—*Ever is Over All*, embodies a new maturity on the part of the artist to deal with frustration and guilt through the production of an art object.

In this installation, not only does the piece incorporate the room—the very environment housing both the viewer and the object—but in its crisp, colorful presentation, the video conjures up the surreal realm of fantasy while simultaneously functioning as an aesthetically pleasing piece to view. The dual projections of the woman with her “red hot poker”—the type of flower on the tip of her metal wand—and the field of actual red hot pokers meet to form a rich tableau and project the appearance of “an animated painting,”³⁴ the one scene bleeding into the other. Gone are the distortions, flickers, and static of the earlier piece: elements that serve to draw attention to the failure and weaknesses of the video medium itself. *Ever is Over All* is a celebration of the video medium in all its glory and potential to give a “perfectly sharp, slick representation”: exactly what Rist claimed to be avoiding in (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([Absolutions] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*).³⁵

Due to the element of wish-fulfillment present in *Ever is Over All* (as per Freud's conception of phantasy noted above) one finds this reversal in formal approach indicative of Rist's own desire to idealize the object, to adhere to an “instinctual diffusion” in relation to the video medium. This shift corresponds to what Balint describes as the reconciliation of “narcissistic withdrawal” with an “unavoidable integration of the discoveries of ‘modern art’ with the demand of ‘mature love for the object.’”³⁶ The acquisition of this mature state on the part of the artist will come about, he claims, because: “The artists and the general public equally will have to learn to feel again regard and consideration for the objects, but this time not because the objects can be used for the purpose of projecting onto them our phantasy of ourselves as independent and inviolate, imperishable and eternal; *the objects will have to be loved for what they are.*”³⁷ *Ever is Over All* unlike (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([Absolutions] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) is not a projection on to the object of Rist's guilt and aggression against idealization, but, I would argue, is a projection *through* the object—through the capacity of projection itself contained within video—of a mature love and embrace of both the object/video medium and the artist's own situation in relation to the object/video medium. In other words, *Ever is Over All* overtly denies any reason for guilt in the wake of the transgressive activities that its videos feature. 1997, the year of the piece's inception, interestingly enough, is the year Rist's work was first selected for inclusion in the Kwangju, Istanbul, Lyon, and Venice Biennales, in addition to 10 other group exhibitions over the course of the same year. The undeniable

art world embrace of her work, and the success the artist had begun to enjoy by this point in time, is clearly reflected in *Ever is Over All*'s complete rejection of guilt as found in the earlier video.

(*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) and *Ever is Over All*, therefore, occupy two distinct and extreme poles of within the career of Pipilotti Rist. The extremity of these two positions are evident in the struggle the artist enacts through her changing approach towards and use of the medium of video. These two works demonstrate a continuing process towards both a mature love for the art object of video, as well as towards a resolution of feminine guilt on the part of one of today's most prominent female artists. In her current work, respect and wholeness for the medium of video dominate, and female guilt has morphed into a celebration of the success of the persistent challenges the individual psyche poses to technological media. Pipilotti Rist's career promises to serve as an example of the potential to develop a mature relationship with one's own unconscious and the communicative possibilities of even the most "impersonal" of media, both in the psychological and social realms in which her works continuously impact viewing audiences.

Notes

- 1 Pipilotti Rist, as quoted in Elisabeth Bronfen, "*(Entlastungen) Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*)," in Peggy Phelan, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Pipilotti Rist*, (New York and London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 90.
- 2 *Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, March 7-May 26, 2002, *Bistreams*, Whitney Museum of American Art, March 22-June 10, 2001.
- 3 See epigraph and note 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Cf. Phelan and Bronsen in *Pipilotti Rist* for the two primary examples this paper will engage.
- 6 Cf. Rist, "I rist, you rist, he rists, we rist, you rist, they rist, tourist: Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Pipilotti Rist," interview in *Pipilotti Rist*, 6-28, and Rist, Pipilotti, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in *Wonderland*, catalog, The Saint Louis Museum of Art, July 1-September 24, 2000, pp. 90-94.
- 7 Michael Balint, "Notes on the Dissolution of Object-Representation in Modern Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 10, no. 4, (1952): p. 327.
- 8 Rist, "'I am Half-aware of the World': Interview with Christoph Doswald, 1994" in *Pipilotti Rist*, p. 125.
- 9 Bronfen, p. 88.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 11 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, "Feminine Guilt and the Oedipus Complex," in *Female Sexuality—New Psychoanalytic Views*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970, pp. 94-134.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 97, original emphasis.

13 Ibid., original emphasis.

14 Cf. Sigmund Freud, "The Passing of the Oedipus-Complex," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, Philip Rieff, ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 176-182.

15 Chasseguet-Smirgel, 98.

16 Bronfen, pp. 81-84. Bronfen herself brackets off the term [Absolution] by dealing with it entirely in a manner separate from her interpretation of the images in this piece as "hysterical," in the tradition of Charcot. She aligns Rist with other women working with these themes such as Louise Bourgeois and Annette Messager merely based upon the formal similarities of the woman fainting to images of female hysterics. Unfortunately, this reading neglects Bronfen's own astute initial observations of the significance of absolution to all of Rist's images in this piece. She argues that: "The hysteric's excessive language—her fits of bodily incapacitation, her hallucinations, her histrionics, her double consciousness—serves as a mode of address to an audience. The message behind this aberrant behavior is her uncompassionate discontent with the symbolic codes that constrain her, forcing her to accept a clear gendered identity when she would prefer to conceive of herself along more fluid lines. The hysteric's body, contorted with unsatisfied desire seeking to relieve itself of the rigid laws of normalcy, follows one of Sigmund Freud's seminal discoveries regarding the hysteric's body language. Namely the hysteric has recourse to speaking her distress through her body when symbolic language fails." (Bronfen, 87-88) While I agree that Rist is indeed drawing from this tradition, I feel there is a glaring ellipsis between Bronfen's attention to the hysterical and the notion of absolution. While the hysteric has no recourse to language, and is overcome by her bodily responses to an impossible situation—these responses being outside of her conscious control—the notion of absolution which Rist invokes speaks directly to volition, to seeking recourse for one's actions via one's feelings of guilt; this absolution presents itself in the form of repeating the *result*, the "mistake" itself: failure. For Rist figures atonement in the insistence that the transgressive actions themselves are the after effect of the mistake—the original approach itself is what is flawed in her formulation. I will show further that Rist's atonement and recognition is very conscious and self-directed.

17 See note 14 above.

18 Rist, "I rist, you rist, he rists, we rist, you rist, they rist, tourist: Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Pipilotti Rist," interview in *Pipilotti Rist*, p.15; see Rist's comments on Nam June Paik.

19 Ibid., p. 12.

20 It seems worthy of notice with regards to this point that there is an increasingly high number of women working with video as their primary medium, and that female video artists have been at the forefront of this practice since its introduction during the 1970's; one thinks in particular of the extensive work by Joan Jonas during those early years. Another woman currently working with projects similar to Rist's that readily comes to mind is Diana Thater.

21 Ibid, p. 19.

22 Ibid, p. 125.

- 23 Balint, p. 327.
- 24 Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in *Wonderland*, catalog, The Saint Louis Museum of Art, July 1-September 24, 2000, p. 90.
- 25 Phelan, "Opening Up Spaces Within Spaces: The Expansive Art of Pipilotti Rist," in *Pipilotti Rist*, pp. 59-62.
- 26 Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," p. 90.
- 27 Phelan notes the fashion tropes of the blue dress and red shoes (59) as I have done above, but makes no further analysis of the relationship between the two pieces.
- 28 Victor Fleming, dir., Mervyn LeRoy, prod., *The Wizard of Oz*, MGM/UA, Santa Monica, Ca., original release date, 1939, sound, color, and black & white film.
- 29 Linda Rohrer Paige, "Wearing the Red Shoes: Dorothy and the Power of the Female Imagination in the *Wizard of Oz*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, (Winter 1996):146-53.
- 30 Anderson, Hans Christian, "The Red Shoes", trans. E.V. Lucas and H.B. Paull, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1945: pp. 62-69.
- 31 Paige, pp. 147-149.
- 32 Here one might refer back to the voice-over narratives within (*Entlastungen*) *Pipilottis Fehler* ([*Absolutions*] *Pipilotti's Mistakes*) and their self-convincing tone and make a comparison to Dorothy's repetitious "There's no place like home."
- 33 Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming," in *Character and Culture*, Philip Rieff, ed., (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 37.
- 34 Phelan, p. 59.
- 35 Rist, "'I am Half-Aware of the World': Interview with Christopher Doswald, 1994," p. 124.
- 36 Balint, p. 327.
- 37 *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

Memory and Projection in Annette Messenger's Early Work

Laurel Fredrickson

Introduction

When Annette Messenger rented a small two room apartment in Paris's fourteenth arrondissement at the beginning of the 1970s she divided her identity and art work into parts. In her bedroom she identified her work and activities as those of "Annette Messenger-collector" and in the second room, which she called the studio, as those of "Annette Messenger-artist." The decision to bifurcate her identity and activities would influence Messenger's production for the next thirty years, and participate in bringing to collective consciousness the effects on individuals and the collective of socially sanctioned traumatic processes.

In Messenger's art works from 1970 to the present one finds repetition, fragmentation, multiple identities, explicit references to death, danger and violence towards women, images of damaged children, evisceration, and the penetration of forms by phallic objects. Despite the richness of these works as sources of multiple association there is the sense of absence within them, as if something has been removed but which lingers and returns. Even in her collecting, Messenger deals with parts. Things never seem whole and complete. Preoccupied with the desire to cut up and dismember, and drawing upon her own and the viewer's fascination with the abject, she renders familiar domestic objects, actions, and thoughts, disturbing and disquieting. Messenger's art works suggest hidden secrets of the domestic sphere without revealing them. By placing her works in the public space of art, she extends the personal (perhaps her own but certainly that of others) into the social. Here the work of art becomes part of a collective enterprise; a collusive site for the intermingling of the memories and amnesia, as well as the fears and fantasies, of both artist and viewer.

This paper will focus on art works that Messenger created between 1970 and 1975 and address their significance in establishing her characteristic approach and thematic content. It will discuss some of the fifty-six albums that Messenger created in her bedroom, including compilations of altered photographs, appropriated proverbs, and drawings, but will focus in particular upon one work that Messenger made in the studio, *Boarders at Rest* (1971-1972), a sculptural installation of dozens of dead sparrows dressed in hand-knit wool sweaters that Messenger carefully laid out in rows in a glass vitrine on a bed of white linen.¹

While it is beyond the scope of my project here to consider Messenger's extensive and significant art production after 1975, it is worth pointing out that many of the themes and materials, as well as the approach that she developed in the early seventies continue to inform her work up to the present. For example, in the well known series of installations entitled *My Vows* (1988-1989) Messenger hung small framed photographs of fragmented body parts in groupings on gallery walls, conjoined with obsessively repeated words related to "love" written in colored pencil on the wall. In the early 1990s she used taxidermied animals in a number of works, including *Nameless Ones* (1992) for which she impaled actual animals and birds, whose heads she replaced with those of stuffed animals, on metal spikes. In another installation from this period, *The Pikes* (1991-93), Messenger combined drawings of body parts with small enigmatic maps and stuffed elements reminiscent of both bodies and internal organs, many of which hang pendulously in dark stockings, again held up against the wall or impaled by long thin metal spikes. And in *The Experiences* (1998) Messenger created soft, disturbing, hybrid bodies from assorted toy animal parts.² As these brief descriptions suggest, her work continues to explore themes of a sexually and emotionally charged nature, which, while often ironic in tone, seem to point, if not testify, to psychological pain.

The visual and psychological tropes, including doubling, fragmentation, frequent holes or absences, as well as violence to the body, that Messenger consistently uses in her work, specifically in the context of a narrative of sexuality, bear a close relationship to the language of trauma as it has been theorized in clinical psychology. While Messenger's art may not be autobiographical or attest to personal trauma, it certainly evokes a sense of the more broadly experienced traumas that women and children experience as actual and potential victims of differing forms of psychological and physical violence in contemporary society. Such works may be considered as visual signs of what Kristine Stiles theorizes as *cultures of trauma*.³ Messenger's fragmentary and repetitive art works, particularly in relation to her concurrent splitting of her personal environments into multiple identities, can be thought of as sites of memory, enigmatic visual testimonies to the absent presence of the unthinkable, of the unforgettable that remains outside of discourse.

An understanding of this dimension of Messenger's work may be deepened through its analysis in relation to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is characterized by dissociative survival mechanisms, which are delayed responses to either a single trauma or a series of overwhelming events. Traumatic memories cannot be voluntarily recalled, and forgetting or amnesia constitutes a significant aspect of PTSD. The narratives of survivors of sexual abuse or other traumas are punctured by holes, voids, and absences. Traumatic memories cannot be voluntarily accessed because they have not been structured into the narrative of the survivor's life, but reoccur automatically, however, when triggered by similar events later in life. Overly literal, immediate, and powerful, they control the subject and influence his or her behavior. Cathy Caruth writes that, such memories take

the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.⁴

I will theorize Messenger's works as silent *commemorative sites of memory*,⁵ as well as *sites of projection*, mediated through visual discourse. I interpret her art to be a testimonial to the internal fragmentation of women in response to overt abuse that reduces them psychologically to a mere assembly of parts: faces, legs, breasts, buttocks and reproductive organs. Messenger's art works reveal how, as sites of memory, sculptural objects are also sites of projection, haunted by what cannot be said, but giving visual "voice" to familial and social violence and its repercussions. Mute, ambiguous, often obstinately obscure, such art forms seem to concretize the inarticulable, making visible through spatial visual production internal suffering that cannot be expressed in words. As concrete forms of cultural production such works can be considered a sculptural language that makes visible signs of trauma. Kristine Stiles has pointed out, that "every example of violence or destruction in art, especially when it is related directly to the artist's body, contains a lingering trauma still present from the past. An absent presence animates the unorganized psychic experiences of the artist, either unconsciously or consciously and drives the production of the work. Such art is an overture, a sign that visually signifies the invisible, the process of destruction itself operating within the psyche of the artist . . . The performative language of trauma — what I consider a sculptural language — includes visualizing dissociation through spatial and temporal drift."⁶ Some of the characteristics of the performative language of trauma include repetition, numbed movements, and a range of self-denigrating or self-destructive behaviors, in addition to those that victimize others. Repetition, in particular, Stiles points out, may permit "the artist to

arrive at a particular state of consciousness that brings internal experience into physical expression even though it may be bereft of speech."⁷

Although Messenger's work has been analyzed on a number of different levels, her emphasis on fragmentation, collecting, and repetition in works that implicitly suggest violence and death, and the splitting of her activities between different "identities" have not been theorized through the discourses of traumatic memory. Although the term "traumatic memory" has been mentioned, albeit in passing, at least once in relation to Messenger's work, its significance has not been explored in any depth.⁸ Critics seem to have responded to the implicit pain, numbing, and muteness of Messenger's work but have deflected these expressive features through discussions of her ironic references to social distress or incessant fragmentation which they have read merely as emblematic of the decentered post-modern subject.

Many critics have called attention to the amusing and child-like dimensions of Messenger's oeuvre. They have described her art works as tragicomic, dead pan, mischievous, and as examples of ironic "school girlish humor."⁹ But they have not considered how humor can be used to deflect psychological probing, and both protect and isolate a traumatized subject. Critics suggestively allude to a darker dimension to Messenger's "humor" but orient their analysis towards the semiotic character of her works, or characterize their "uncanniness" as postmodernist defamiliarization. Sheryl Conkelton theorizes Messenger's work as carnivalesque, finding its themes, processes, and materials to be anarchistic transgressions of hierarchical cultural categories. She argues that Messenger's refusal to differentiate between art and life strategically opposes dominant power relations while celebrating "revolutionary spirit and individual power."¹⁰ Messenger, Conkelton writes,

ignores the proprieties and social categories that maintain established powers, her art — which alternates between quiet, almost religious reverence and wild, often sexual escapades — conjures a visiting carnival in which normal life is disrupted and all expectations are turned upside-down.¹¹

Conkelton considers Messenger's decision to divide her home and activities a subversion of prevailing gender divisions, and a challenge to artificial separations of art and life.¹² In her view, Messenger's art work confuses binary dichotomies by making the familiar strange through dislocations, distortions, and repetitions.¹³ Messenger's art work certainly defamiliarizes the familiar and challenges social conventions, but Conkelton's references to such post-modern critical categories as the "carnavalesque" and "subversive" at times seem facile and jargonistic, reducing psychologically complex works to a series of post-modern tropes.

In a similar manner to Conkelton, critic Annelie Pohlen addresses multiplicity in Messenger's work as characteristic of the post-modern condition.¹⁴ For Pohlen, the artist's interest in seriality and her own life as subject matter derive primarily from late 60s utopianism and conceptual art.¹⁵ She notes that, "from the beginning, Messenger [made] decisions in accordance with the spatial, that is, material givens."¹⁶ These material "givens" went further than site, for Messenger began to draw from the conditions of her life as a woman. Although she did not consider herself a feminist, Messenger drew from her desires, fears, and fantasies to create works whose themes reflect broader social issues for women. Responding to Messenger's decision to divide her life and production, Pohlen writes,

[s]oon living a double life became positively essential. Her spirit of protest induced her to make up her mind, and from then on she deployed a conscious strategy for something that — in hindsight and triggered by something other than her own sight — is a social reality all the same: the loss of unity, the establishment of multiplicity, dismemberment, a shift of view, compulsory views, loss of identity, obfuscation, change of focus...¹⁷

This statement draws attention to how Messenger actively responded to the social limitations imposed upon women and the denigration of women's work to that of mere "craft" by turning to "non-art" materials and themes, while emphasizing how her artistic process and production not only refuse unity but embrace fragmentation and multiplicity.

Pohlen accurately situates the origin of Messenger's approach as an artist in the conceptualism and serialism of the late '60s and early '70s. And her writing suggests how such practices, particularly when utilized by a woman artist, lead to questions of context and site that have political and social implications that extend far beyond a content imbedded in an exploration of art for its own sake. But Pohlen's theorization of Messenger's tropes of multiplicity, dismemberment and loss of unity overly reductively in relation to post-modern theories of fragmentation obscures the richly complex and often contradictory ways in which conscious artistic and critical strategies interact with unconscious motivations, as well as personal and social contingencies. The following quote bears this out:

the basis of Messenger's work, in all its forms, is the urgent investigation of the interface between visual representation, presumed identity, traumatic conception, and the truthful knowledge of what might be defined as — human — identity.¹⁸

Significantly, in her statements replete with implicit psychological content,

Pohlen almost casually uses the term "traumatic conception" without exploring what she might mean by this allusion other than relating the work to an inherently non-postmodern universalizing conception of human identity.¹⁹

For his part, Jeff Rian draws attention to how "darker perspectives in regard to the world predominated [Messenger's] feelings," referring to the artist's response to women's lives under patriarchy.²⁰ Like many critics, Rian considers Messenger's non-art materials and gendered themes feminist in nature. Others, however, disagree. Eric Troncy, for example, argues that Messenger's art and interest in simple actions and behaviors from the early 70s express "day to day banality, drudgery that borders on obsession."²¹ If Messenger is indeed a feminist, he asserts, the character of her feminism should be related to its evocation of *real time*,²² in a similar manner to the efforts of the filmmaker Chantal Ackerman, rather than to an explicitly political position. Messenger herself has refused the categorization of feminist for her work because she fears that it will thereby be dismissed as unimportant.²³ Such a characterization suggests her awareness of the obstacles encountered by women artists whose work deals with "women's" issues and who are therefore taken less seriously by the art world than artists whose work addresses "universal" human experience and psychology. Her position may also reflect the difficulties that many French women seem to have about identifying as feminist, reflecting, in my view, a limited sense of the range of feminisms and positions in relation to them. But although Messenger refuses such a designation for her subject matter and approach, her work clearly reflects the influence of the women's movement and the questions posed by feminists about female identity, roles, and social position that were already becoming prevalent in the early 1970s.

For example, Messenger drew from a variety of art influences. And, although avowedly not a feminist, she nevertheless considered art history to be male history and chose to address subject matter and materials drawn from women's lives. The serial character of Messenger's works and her emphasis on the everyday derives in part from conceptual art practices of the time. However, she has remarked that "in France there isn't conceptual art in the strict sense of the term."²⁴ Closely associated with other young French artists, like Christian Boltanski and Jean Le Gac, who similarly came of age in the late 1960s, Messenger also looked to the work of artists like Joseph Beuys.²⁵ Messenger has also noted the significance to her development of Art Brut, particularly artists like Jean Dubuffet and Adolf Wölfli, whose works reflect the influence of the so-called art of the insane. She was also drawn to Surrealist photography, and the shared interest of Surrealists in non-high art sources, collecting, and fragmentation and dismemberment of the body. A photograph by André Breton of a monastery in Rome decorated with human bones particularly fascinated her. Other influences range from such disparate sources as the work of Ed Ruscha, Gustav Moreau, Odilon Redon, and Goya, as well as popu-

lar culture, votive objects, and medical photography.²⁶

The interpretations of the critics cited above offer relevant insights into Messenger's art work, but do so without adequately addressing the issues they raise. Or they position Messenger's work in the context of an overly simplified reading of fashionable critical theory. While postmodern theorizations of the self as inherently fragmented and decentered have been extremely important in challenging traditional conceptions of identity that are grounded in, and support, the Eurocentric and patriarchal social order, recourse to them alone is inadequate for, if not detrimental to, an understanding of art works like Messenger's.²⁷ Such works call for a more psychologically complex discussion that can account for how the personal, often highly painful or traumatic, intersects with the social. For her part, Pohlen responds to the pain and emotion in Messenger's art works but retreats without drawing further conclusions from the signs within them of the effects of trauma. Perhaps the alternations between, what Conkelton calls, "quiet, almost religious reverence and wild, often sexual escapades"²⁸ unsettle a critic uncomfortable with the personal and psychological, and unable or unwilling to engage with the subjective even if it has social ramifications.

This may derive in part from the way in which Messenger's works seem to demand and yet refuse definitive interpretation. She seems to deflect psychological probing by drawing attention to her conscious questioning of the relation between activity and identity. In addition, Messenger resists psychological interpretations of herself as the artist. She has complained about how differently French critics treat male and female artists, asserting that in contrast to the manner in which they address the work of men, critics plumb women's lives for explanations of their work.²⁹ She likens this to how nineteenth century psychiatrists treated "hysterics" by having their names scratched upon these women's backs. In addition, Messenger conceives of her work in a dual way, as both the telling and the making up of stories.³⁰ She has remarked, that "for me, it's a 'natural' gesture to rip bodies apart, cut them up . . . We are all definitely torn apart . . . It's also my desire to reveal scraps, fragments, instants of things; so that there are only a few precious traces, so that the viewer reconstitutes his/her own direction, something which I have no desire to impose."³¹ Such comments suggest that the artist deliberately constructed her works in such a way that they become as much sites of projection as of expression.

While respecting Messenger's desire not to be "probed" by the critic, and acknowledging a lack of biographical information to support a hypothesis of personal trauma, I will argue that Messenger's art works may be understood as silent sites of memory that can be considered through the discourse of traumatic memory. As she herself has stated, "In order to be touched by a work of art, it must first refer to the person who made it, a strong personality,

and it must touch the collective, everyone must find something in this order.”³² It seems worthwhile, therefore, to follow a historian like Giambattista Vico and seek an elusive fractured “truth” by attempting to understand “the meaning of the imagination that once informed” these artifacts.³³

I. Boarders at Rest

Message created *Boarders at Rest* (1971-72) after being invited to participate in an exhibition sponsored by Woolmark at Galerie Germain in Paris. She relates how she came upon the idea for this work: “I remember very well, I was walking in a Paris street and I stepped on a dead sparrow. I picked up this sparrow and returned home and knit a wool wrap for it.”³⁴ Noting the banality of finding a dead sparrow in the city, Message found herself wanting “to take care of it, as a child. I started to dress it, to take care of it, like a baby.”³⁵

Message collected dozens of these sparrows and had them treated by a taxidermist. She knit each of them individual woolen sweaters in a variety of styles, generally using the kind of muted colors babies and old women often wear, including pale blue, white, rose, and cream. Although the sweaters vary from bird to bird, each is simply, almost childishly knitted, without elaborate stitching like the clothing that little girls make for their dolls. Some sweaters almost cover the little bodies to show only the tips of tails and small portions of heads, others fit like socks with little cuffs while some have protuberant knitted buttons to close them. Others wrap like scarves around trunks to show more of the birds’ bodies. Each sweater appears to have been designed to fit the form of the bird as it was found, stiffly immobile on the street. In some cases, wings lie tightly against the bodies, while in others they fan out as if in flight. Most of the birds’ legs project stiffly from tiny apertures.

In addition to dressing the sparrows, Message baptized them, made them a feather alphabet, and, as Carol Eliel writes, created “sculptural devices to take them for ‘walks’ and ‘punish them’.”³⁶ In an interview Message recalls, “I dressed dead sparrows in tiny knits, miming everyday actions: the walk, the nap, the punishment — these mimetic acts were vaguely redolent of the life of a young woman with her children. These crude fakes made the situation rather grotesque and morbid.”³⁷ Message treated her *Boarders* with the care that children give their dolls, enacting a ritual of motherhood with these inanimate creatures whose defenselessness in death appears to have evoked a desire in her to care for them. On one level, Message’s care for her *Boarders* seems to repetitively substitute a replacement for an absent, lost, or desired child. She has called these birds her fetishes. A fetish can be defined as an animate object treated as if it were endowed with human or divine characteristics. It can also be an object which evokes sexual feelings. In addition, one might think of the fetish in relation to the artist’s production of inanimate

objects endowed with meaning that transcend the materials with which they have been made.

Messenger created *Boarders at Rest* in the "studio" of her apartment, laying them out on tables or displaying them in display cases, as an artist. She thereby shifted a solitary, obsessive "female" activity into the public sphere. This work and its transposition into the public realm of art can be understood on different levels. It has been interpreted as a critique of the exhibition's sponsor Woolmark.³⁸ Or, according to Conkelton, as an ironic comment on the elevated status of art.³⁹ This suggests that Messenger intended to highlight the non-art character of the materials, to elicit a gendered interpretation at odds, one suspects, with the use of wool in other works in the exhibition for which she originally made this work. It also draws attention to what people ignore in the everyday, to what continually eludes them. Messenger has stated that sparrows are "things we all know very well, which are with us all the time, but which escape us completely."⁴⁰

On another level, Conkelton writes that, "the use of animals in tableaux suggests the often sadistic play of children, in which smaller things are made to act in imaginary situations."⁴¹ While the work seems anything but sadistic, one cannot help but ask why Messenger should have chosen to invoke such a model. She may be suggesting that artists are like sadistic children, manipulating life and its forms for their own narcissistic purposes. Significantly, Messenger has related that when she was a child her father showed her books of the art of the surrealist Hans Bellmer. "Those images are part of me," she states, "I am very close to Bellmer's doll universe."⁴² This seems a sadistic, even if veiled, act, to show one's daughter images of girl-sized dismembered dolls. It suggests an overly sexualized subtext to Messenger's childhood home that may have influenced her later work as an artist.

Messenger may also allude to how children sometimes treat those who are weaker and smaller than themselves in cruel and painful ways that reflect how they themselves have been treated. The birds seem as protected as they are manipulated. One might also consider them as little effigies, forced to act in death as they would not in life, to stand in for, and play the role of, an absent subject the artist *wishes to punish from afar*. The question of the identity of this absent subject is unclear. It could be an other person, or the artist herself, or both at once. In an interpretation that emphasizes gender, Rian writes, that "these macabre effigies foreshadowed her concern with the victimization of women and revealed her introspective feelings about the world at large."⁴³ For her part, Penelope Rowlands suggests that Messenger's work removes the dread and decay from death. Oddly, Rowlands finds the sparrows "cuddly and fun."⁴⁴

Such commentaries reveal an uneasiness with the art work and suggest efforts to contain its unsettling qualities within the critical categories of

subversion or resistance. They vacillate between views of the work as social commentary or as something enigmatic, uncanny, and fun. Messenger's work seems to call for and then defend itself against interpretation, making the viewer uncomfortable by evoking a sense of dread which one compensates for by distancing oneself through certain modes of intellectual response. Messenger evokes this kind of response on both conscious and unconscious levels. As a highly sophisticated artist she made decisions based upon ideas in terms of materials and subject matter, but on another level her decisions appear to have been inflected by something that could not be symbolized. Significantly, one finds in *Boarders at Rest*, as well as in her other works of the period, an interplay between revealing and hiding that suggests a content both seeking for and yet avoiding exposure. A content to some degree beyond the artist's control. In other words, even as Messenger chose to emphasize how an object or image can be simultaneously revealed and disguised, such a predilection and approach may also have been motivated by unconscious content, fears, and desires about which the artist may or may not have been aware.

In a highly suggestive statement made many years later when speaking about love, Messenger stated, "It can be found in making little dresses for stuffed birds . . . in mixing writing, photography and real spaces. There are all kinds of acts of love."⁴⁵ Love appears in *Boarders at Rest* most dramatically at the levels of the child who *loves and hurts* the dolls through which she learns to internalize feminine roles and of the woman without children who "completes" herself through a substitute or who with it reenacts her own treatment. Messenger envisages love in this work as a contradictory site of attraction and repulsion, fear and desire, and life and death. In it, love is dangerous but tempting. The dozens of small defenseless little sparrows in their differentiated and yet anonymous grouping suggest the perspective of a sensitive and hurt child who projects her own pain and sadness onto anthropomorphized objects; who tries to create order out of something beyond her understanding. Lost, dead, and left behind, the birds appear to reflect a fear of abandonment or of abuse and a corresponding desire for comfort and healing.

In their repetition they also evoke a sense of deadening monotony, of emotional death. Paradoxically perhaps, *Boarders at Rest* expresses both child-like sadness through the careful and monotonous distribution of the birds entombed in their glass vitrine and an odd sense of indifference or lack of affect that seems to signify a loss of the capacity to feel. A kind of non-action, or immobility, occupies the core of this work. This derives from the inanimate character of the sparrows as well as from the obsessive care with which they have been arranged. One gets the sense that something has ceased to grow and develop here, as if something has hardened within the self and become inaccessible to consciousness in anything but distorted or disguised forms to which the artist recurrently returns in an effort to recover what has been lost.

Messenger's repetitive, compulsive dressing and arranging of these birds may be an attempt to recover feeling, to heal from a personal trauma or from the day to day traumas of many women's daily lives. Each little sparrow may represent a repetitive return to the scene of a non-narrativized event from the past. They may soothe and yet reopen a wound, and retraumatize as they incessantly repeat.

II. Collections

In 1971, as Messenger was creating *Boarders at Rest* in her studio, she was also compiling collections in albums in her bedroom as "Annette Messenger, collector." Their form, as Conkelton points out, relates to the "non-art, commemorative tradition of marriage albums."⁴⁶ The fifty-six albums include texts, signatures, photographs, and images cut from newspapers and magazines, and embroideries of French folk sayings about women. Each album contains variations on one theme using a single medium. Calling attention to their non-mimetic character, Messenger has characterized these works as observations rather than creations.⁴⁷

Many of these albums reflect upon women, their traditional roles, fears, and desires, as well as how they are seen and understood by others in a patriarchal society. The first, *The Marriage of Mademoiselle Annette Messenger* (1972), contains wedding photos cut from newspapers. The unmarried artist has replaced the names and faces of the brides with her own, creating multiples and fragments of projected desire in her own image in a manner that is both ironically and yet plaintive. In a similar vein, *My Witness Clichés* (1972) groups photos of kissing couples. For *My Jealousies* (1972), on the other hand, Messenger took images of women from magazines and newspapers and aged them with crude dark lines, suggesting the desire to deface images of ideal models with which women are constantly and negatively compared, or her lovers' attractions and infidelities. They might also be considered reflective of Messenger's fears of aging and death. In another album, *How My Friends Would Do My Portrait* (1972) she assembled crudely drawn ink portraits of herself, that in their awkwardness reveal little about the subject. *Voluntary Tortures* (1972) shows women undergoing beauty treatments of many kinds, and reveals how internalized ideals of beauty cause women to undergo costly and painful self-deformation.

Other albums explicitly relate women to children in a manner that parallels *Boarders at Rest*, including *Annette Messenger During Nine Months* and *Everything About My Child*. These suggest an unrealized desire for maternity. The album, *Children With Their Eyes Scratched Out* (1971-1972), however, highlights the ambivalence of such desires. Messenger took photos of infants and children and roughly scratched out their eyes in a manner that

recalls how children deface books or photographs (figures 5 and 6). They also make one think of how a jealous sibling might respond to a rival, as well as to how a mother might screen the eyes of her child from seeing something unsuitable, or else, conversely, might punish the child for its looking. The artist may also have had secret personal motivations for “blinding” these children that relate to the desire *not* to see something she had seen in the past. This work may also represent a kind of exhibition of children who have been mistreated by those with greater power.

Another album refers to elicit sexual looking at men by women. In *My Approaches* (1972), Messenger took progressively enlarged photographs of the genital regions of men walking towards her which were revealed and yet obscured by loosely fitting pants. A text that accompanied the images read: “SHE’S HAD ENOUGH OF KEEPING QUIET . . . HERE’S PRECISELY WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE SAID TO HIM IF SHE COULD HAVE.”⁴⁸ Although this collection can be considered an act of taking on and subverting the way in which men gaze at parts of women’s bodies, it also implies the dangers of sexuality. These images have a menacing quality. They evoke a horror at the approach. One senses an ambivalent desire to look and yet avert the eyes. Such an effort to appropriate the male objectifying gaze begs for a contextualization with regards to the women’s movement, which by 1972 had become highly visible and influential. The highly charged critical sexuality of *My Approaches* calls into question Messenger’s purported disavowal of feminist content.

Dangerous sexuality also underpins *The Horrifying Adventures of Annette Messenger, Trickster* (1974-75), comprised of fragment-like drawings made from pornography that show naked women being subjected to tortures by men in dark clothes. These sadomasochistic images represent fears and fantasies of domination, as women are tied up, beaten, nailed down, and groped. In this album, similarly to the others, multiple readings can be layered upon each other, obscuring any true interpretation. These images both provoke and deny proprieties about “appropriate” female desire, even as they raise questions about how children and women are often forced to witness or endure highly inappropriate or traumatic situations.

All of Messenger’s album collections can be interpreted as investigations of the traditional roles of women, revealing the ambivalent relations of women to internalized patriarchal societal expectations that determine their fears and desires. Conkelton argues that,

Messenger defiantly appropriated images of male fantasy and pornography that were meant to be segregated from women. By copying such images exactly, she could capture them as her own and combine them at will — in her own words, ‘displace rather

than change, rather than submit.' Her own strategy began to evolve, not as a presentation of oppositional dogma but as a subversive, intensely personal resistance to categorization.⁴⁹

Although Conkelton's statement certainly seems relevant to Messenger's art work, and the artist's conscious and public intentions should certainly not be slighted, their content also exceeds such readings.

The character of Messenger's collections should be considered in relation to the multiplicity of roles and positions that they express. At this time she began to divide her activities into an increasing number of roles, even as she collected fragments for her album collections. From an initial division to "Annette Messenger, collector," and "Annette Messenger, artist," she would add "Annette Messenger, liar"; "Annette Messenger, handy-woman"; "Annette Messenger, peddler"; "Annette Messenger, trickster"; and "Annette-Messenger, faker." These roles corresponded with aspects of her daily life and artistic output. Significantly, Messenger's correlation of liar, trickster, faker, and artist emphasizes how each disguises, prevaricates, fabricates, and deals with the realm of the artificial and the symbolic. Similarly, the collector, peddler, and handy-woman are those who shuffle and deal in old objects; who like the trickster invest the parts and pieces of domestic life with new meaning by rearranging them. All together, these titles suggest the multiple roles of the artist, a kind of illicit amateur or bricoleur, who transforms the material and immaterial remains of private life into highly condensed symbols for presentation in the public sphere.

Stratagems, ruses, tricks, and artifice, that might be considered characteristic at least of the peddler, the faker, the trickster, the liar, and even the artist, are also a means of survival. Considered in this light, Messenger's multiplication of selves can be related to the fragmentation of self into personas that characterize the identity of those whose self unity has been shattered by trauma. Such an interpretation, however, perhaps should be prefaced by philosopher Ian Hacking's response to the multiple disorder movement which questions whether multiple disorder is a "real" illness or rather "a kind of behavior worked up by doctor and patient," an effect of diagnosis.⁵⁰ Hacking might well criticize an analysis that foregrounds fragmentation or the use of multiple titles as having been more greatly influenced by contemporary discourses of memory than by the art works themselves. In his view, the conflation of theories of trauma with those of memory represents a means of classifying that shapes and distorts interpretation.

When asked about them herself, Messenger stated, "I give myself many titles. I wanted to be someone important, and the more titles we have, the more important we are."⁵¹ She, it seems, desired titles to elevate her activities from banality into importance and seek equivalents to those held by men. But

such titles also screen Messenger from scrutiny. Significantly, she also states, that “they are titles of nobility that I have earned. They protect me from the time that passes by, from the outside, from you. It is like a collection of titles. Collecting is a form of protection, a way of fighting against death.”⁵² Elsewhere Messenger notes, “collecting is a struggle against time. You can collect everything; you can classify everything. Every classification is reassuring because you think there is some sense to it, but there is no sense.”⁵³

These statements imply that the artist needs protection from something painful or traumatic. The obsessive repetition of collecting paradoxically protects and reassures the subject but also retraumatizes him/her through substitute reenactments. Collecting may be a contained form of the acting out of traumatic experiences that have not been worked through. Role playing may also be a kind of collecting or serve as disguise or subterfuge. It may reflect the struggle of the self to integrate extremely painful memories and the necessity to seal off aspects of the self in order to survive. Messenger has cited a favorite literary passage, from Paul Morand’s novel *Green Shoots* that lends support to such an assertion:

To be in disguise is one of her joys. She paints her fabrics, dyes her carpets, bleaches her hair, tints her cats. She is surrounded by a thousand objects destined for other than their apparent uses, books which open into boxes, telescopic pen holders, chairs which become tables, tables which are transformed into screens.⁵⁴

This passage suggests that one may protect oneself by compartmentalizing different roles and personas through camouflage. Alternations between artificial and authentic become the means by which one attempts to avoid discovery, fragmenting in order to block out intrusive memories too painful to acknowledge directly. An original aspect of self is dissociated, deadened, killed. Messenger’s personages make her art vulnerable to comparison to the multiple selves of those who have responded to trauma by splitting, even while not asserting that this is the case for her personally.

Significantly, Messenger considers the self to be always fragmented. Her approach to art also emphasizes fragmentation in a variety of forms. She often uses photography, because “you can either repeat it, multiply it, cut it, or reuse it.”⁵⁵ She relates this characteristic to taxidermy:

For me, taxidermy and photography are the same thing: taxidermy takes an animal and freezes it, dead yet alive, forever. Photography also freezes — a sixtieth of a second — forever. The person being photographed is always killed in a way, fixed there for eternity. I think that photography has a lot to do with voyeurism. There is a kind of fetishism about photography that I find very compelling.⁵⁶

Messenger's focus on freezing, killing, fixing, and voyeurism and the implicit violence and inherent danger of her language refer to the frozen character of traumatic memories, and the sectioned off aspects of pain with which one cannot cope except symbolically and in a disguised form.

III. Discourse Of Trauma

Messenger's fragmented process and production point to some kind of trauma, real, imagined or referenced. Her artworks hide even as they reveal secrets that cannot be expressed or voluntarily recollected, but that insistently return to split the subject from herself. One can theorize Messenger's art works as codes suggesting secrets transposed from the private realm to the public. Stiles has argued that such silent, visual forms of communication derive from cultures of trauma imposed by various forms of oppression and terror, particularly in what she characterizes as the *age of trauma* that arose in the aftermath of the Holocaust.⁵⁷ The enigmatic silence of Messenger's works, their quality of holding back even as they unveil, seems to imply both conscious ambivalence about prevailing social relations and unconscious motivations that are self-protective reactions to trauma. Her fragmentation, role playing, and collecting can be interpreted as an effort to stabilize identity. Oliver Sachs, writing about neurological dysfunction, discusses how the patient in search of such stability, multiplies, "unable to maintain a genuine inner world, he is driven to the proliferation of pseudo-narratives, in a pseudo-continuity, pseudo worlds peopled by pseudo-people, phantoms."⁵⁸ Tragically, even as they multiply, these people reflect the absence of unitary identity in their very proliferancy. One can consider Messenger's multiplication of roles and her obsessive collecting of fragments as a related effort, and her work as an attempt to create a narrative out of a fractured past, to cohere a self from spaces of absence. Her artworks, as a form of testifying, may be a survival mechanism.

The characteristic themes of veiling, hiding, concealing, and netting, in Messenger's work may be considered an unconscious effort to testify to rupture and absence in the self in order to address others and heal. "I have always worked with things that are covered, half hidden, half revealed," Messenger states.⁵⁹ She also notes, that "I would prefer to talk about a net (by the way my name is a homonym: 'annette'), an object which is filled with holes, which is composed entirely of holes, and which at the same time imprisons and confines."⁶⁰ Knitting, while clearly a domestic "feminine" art, as seen in the sweaters with which Messenger has adorned the sparrows in *Boarders at Rest* is also an activity of concealment and also punctured with holes. This and others of Messenger's works are like secrets straining to be revealed and yet held back:

For me a work of art is directly linked to the secret. Art is like a secret, an epigraph. It is literally cut out of life. We must not try to show too much, to divulge everything, to unveil too much. We must give some small clues, even unnecessary clues.⁶¹

As a viewer of such art works, which resemble remnants of retraumatization, one bears witness to a secret which can neither be spoken nor evaded, to traumatic memory which must come to consciousness in order for the subject to begin the process of healing.

The nineteenth century French psychologist Pierre Janet first theorized how traumatic memories "exert their influence on current experience by means of the process of dissociation."⁶² For Janet, memory organizes the mind, integrating experiences within a narrative structure. He recognized that some traumatic events or situations are too terrifying for the subject to integrate; dissociated from consciousness they remain beyond voluntary recall.⁶³ Janet pointed out how situations or conditions that resemble the original trauma automatically trigger memories of it and thereby influence one's behavior and perceptions of the world.⁶⁴ Memories as well as similar experiences which one has "chosen" to subject oneself to similar to the originary situation provoke further dissociation.

Janet's understanding of dissociation differs from Freud's conception of repression. In contrast with Freud who theorized that traumatic memories have been repressed after they occur, Janet argued that dissociation occurs as events are happening.⁶⁵ In response to a situation beyond the subject's capacity to endure he/she splits — removing the event from his or her consciousness. Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart point out the fundamental difference between Freud and Janet's positions:

Repression reflects a vertically layered model of mind: what is repressed is pushed downward, into the unconscious. The subject no longer has access to it. Only symbolic indirect indications would point to its assumed existence. Dissociation reflects a horizontally layered model of mind: when a subject does not remember a trauma, its "memory" is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness, which may be subconscious or dominate consciousness, e.g., during traumatic enactments.⁶⁶

The split-off self remembers, while the original self forgets. Because the event cannot be narrated it emerges on a "somatosensory or iconic level."⁶⁷ Dissociated trauma may manifest itself as visual representations in the form of flashbacks or as reoccurring forms in art, as well as through more physical or somatic responses such as behavioral patterns, multiple personalities, or self-

destructive relations to one's body.

Traumatic memories hover beyond conscious control as a "persistent presence," even as they remain absent.⁶⁸ Because they are too painful and too shattering to be integrated into the subject's conscious narrative, the subject splits her/his identity in order to cope. Mieke Bal writes,

[t]raumatic memories remain present for the subject with particular vividness and/or totally resist integration. In both cases, they cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically reenacted as drama rather than synthetically narrated by the memorizing agent who 'masters' them, or because they remain 'outside' the subject.⁶⁹

Ernst Van Alphen argues that situations or events can only become *experiences* through discourse.⁷⁰ Only when they have been narrativized through language can situations be remembered. As experience they can be communicated and become collective because they can be shared. Addressing the "failed experience" of trauma, Van Alphen argues that this failure derives from the "impossibility of experiencing, and subsequently memorizing, an event."⁷¹ The connection between discourse and experience has been disrupted. Experience depends upon available symbolic terms to "transform living through the event into an experience of the event."⁷² Because the event cannot be expressed in language it remains outside of experience and therefore memory. The difficulty that survivors have of recounting derives, not so much from the extreme character of the traumatic events, but rather from the impossibility of representing something for which no language exists at a given time by which it can be expressed.

Splitting, Van Alphen argues, results from traumatic events in which subjects find themselves neither subject nor object of situations which they have had to endure or to watch others endure. For Van Alphen a "narrative vacuum" results when one does not have a narrative frame that can give meaning to a traumatic situation.⁷³ The available discursive frames that shape experience, making it meaningful and memorable, are inadequate, leaving traumatic memories outside of symbolic discourse. For example, the illusion of continuity between past, present, and future can cease to be acceptable or believable to a survivor whose sense of self which derives from such a temporal frame has been killed or obliterated by trauma. A dead person cannot narrate. And yet, inarticulate, mute, and insistent reminders of absence persistently return to retraumatize the subject.

Unable to narrativize traumatic events in a life "story," the survivor feels utterly solitary and set apart from others who have not shared in his/her experiences. "In contrast to narrative memory," Bal points out, "which is a

social construction, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic (non)memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary event, not even an activity."⁷⁴ The traumatized subject loses trust, feels vulnerable to disaster, and has a sense of loss of control.⁷⁵ Cathy Caruth evocatively expresses the tragic dimension of such a position: "The traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess."⁷⁶ They only remember through forgetting.⁷⁷

One must symbolize in order to unseat the hold of traumatic memory. Testifying can help the survivor to integrate traumatic memory into his or her narrative. A witness in the present is essential to this process. The other who bears witness participates in a process of relieving the survivor of his/her "radically unique, noninterchangeable, and solitary burden."⁷⁸ Through narration or symbolization the traumatic events of a survivor's life become public and thereby part of cultural memory. Testimony, as Felman writes, addresses others, and for the survivor is "the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*."⁷⁹

Messenger's obsessive collecting of fragments can be understood as an enigmatic form of visual discourse and testimony. By bearing witness, by receiving testimony, one assists in creating meaning. As a viewer of Messenger's art one observes material fragments representing memory fragments that have not been fully narrativized and that retain the quality of being "events in excess of our frames of reference."⁸⁰ These fragments attest to solitary obsessions, to the ways in which personal trauma and socially coercive forces may constrain and deform the subject.

IV. Memory

Understanding the gaps and absences of traumatic memory provides insights into memory in general. Clearly the extent and depth of losses of memory caused by trauma, and their effect upon the subject is not commensurate with the discontinuities of ordinary recollection. Lost memories of a non-traumatic nature can much more easily be recovered than those associated with extreme pain and distress, and the difficulty of accessing "normal" memories cannot be correlated with the dissociation associated with trauma. Nevertheless, as Patrick Hutton writes,

From the vantage point of consciousness, the past is only a discontinuous series of memory fragments, punctuated by countless gaps as it recedes towards the amnesia of life's earliest stages. In its unconscious domain, the psyche hordes its impressions of life's realities, while offering to the conscious mind only glimpses of its

efforts to cope with these.⁸¹

Stored unconsciously, memories give the subject a place in time, and therefore a frame of continuity that joins past, present, and future. This sense of continuity is essential to identity and its absence impoverishes life.⁸² The consequences of losing memory can be extreme under any circumstances. As Luis Buñuel so poignantly asserts, "You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all . . . Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing."⁸³ This evocative statement suggests the limitations of postmodern theories of self that appear to extol fragmentation. As Buñuel makes so clear, a sense of unity is integral to one's capacity to act in the world, to feel or to reason.

In his influential text, *Matter and Memory*, the French philosopher Henri Bergson argues that the body realizes the mind through memory.⁸⁴ Memory brings to consciousness recollections that assist the subject with choosing what is useful from perception, enriching present experience by embodying recollections in concrete perceptions.⁸⁵ Consciousness threads together a multiplicity of perceptions available in the present, choosing those which have a relation to past experience.⁸⁶ It fuses memory and present perception into duration by prolonging them into each other. Memory prolongs the past into the present and makes perception subjective. The past, as it acts through and upon the present, constitutes the self. "Practically," Bergson writes, "we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future."⁸⁷

Messenger's fragmentary art works, so much like silent sites of memory in the present, can be likened to concrete perceptions that reflect how the present is always informed by the past. Her frequent use of repetition might be theorized in relation to habit as well as to recollection. Bergson distinguished between recollections and habits, noting how the former can be voluntarily summoned up from where they are saved in unconsciousness. In contrast, habits are saved in the body, in its present actions, by mechanisms set up and replayed until they no longer need to be thought.⁸⁸ Habits are automatic, routine actions that Mieke Bal defines as, "Ur-narrative, learned in childhood, enforced by discipline, and carried along later in life."⁸⁹ Narrative memories, or recollections, on the other hand, "differ from routine or habitual memories in that they are affectively colored, surrounded by an emotional aura that, precisely, makes them memorable."⁹⁰ Individual memories are not reified, separate objects distinct onto themselves. Rather, they are nodes in larger networks that complexly interrelate with other memories as well as with the body's needs for action in the present. Bergson relates that memories are aspects of the totality of one's past. Those which are most relevant to the present situation

in which one finds oneself are brought forward into conscious recollection or habitual action.⁹¹ Some memories, he points out, dominate, while others extend out from these central memories in an ever-widening movement of expansion. Each nodal memory has numerous associational links with other memories. Messenger's works resemble dominant memories from which multiple associations radiate outward.

Despite major differences, Bergson's conception of dominant memories can be associated with Freud's theory of the *screen memory*. Freud understood the relation between memory and forgetting as an effect of repression. He conceived of the screen memory as a defense mechanism to prevent memories from coming to consciousness that cannot be tolerated by the ego.⁹² The screen memory stands in for repressed memories, desires, and psychic conflicts, condensing content from different times in the subject's life that are connected through symbolic associations that disguise latent content so that it may find expression in consciousness.⁹³ Patrick Hutton writes, that "memories of the most painful of these experiences are repressed and hence forgotten by the conscious mind. But repressed desires remain unrequited and continue to press the ego for expression."⁹⁴

The often sexual content of a repressed desire, Freud asserts, cannot develop into a "conscious fantasy but must be content to find its way allusively and under a flowery disguise into a childhood scene."⁹⁵ Screen memories allow the subject to forget traumatic memories from earlier life, as well as desires unacceptable to the conscious mind.⁹⁶ The originary content seeks expression but must do so through distortions and dislocations, coming to consciousness in apparently innocuous and yet highly vivid images. The motivating force behind their clarity and persistence is the hidden, latent content they shield and yet display, in a similar manner to the alternate veiling and revealing of Messenger's 'secrets.'

Screen memories provide enigmatic clues, accesses to associational paths that might be followed to arrive at latent content. The birds in Messenger's *Boarders at Rest* resemble both a screen memory as well as a habit. They are like distorted forms of repressed unconscious memories. Messenger consciously masked her content in complex ways, creating sites that call for associations. But I believe that she may also have unconsciously condensed and disguised content, in a manner that parallels how dreams condense and distort their material. The trajectories of association that Messenger's works evoke refuse to yield and expose an ultimate origin. She leaves the viewer feeling as if something has been missed or misunderstood; unsure if s/he has been duped or fooled into elaborating an exegesis that leads nowhere except back to the viewer him/herself.

Messenger's works participate in a kind of hermetic dialogue with a few "initiates" who either share her experience or understand her codes. Deeply

personal, and yet oddly detached, they engage the viewer in acts of projection onto their resistant surfaces. As art, and therefore communication, however, these works enter into dialogue with the viewer in a social space, even when their communication seems contradictorily mute in its visuality and tactility. By being in the world, art works as commemorative forms of memory in the present elicit responses from viewers and participate in creating social or collective memory. The secrets they contain are social secrets, as the following passage by Messenger explicitly conveys,

Art is a secret shared between the individual and the collective. In order to be touched by a work of art, it must first refer to the person who made it, a strong personality, and it must touch the collective, everyone must find something in this order . . . It is precisely this back and forth between the individual, between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, which makes a work of art stand out, because it touches both worlds at the same time.⁹⁷

In a manner that corresponds with Messenger's assertion that art serves as an interface between the individual and the collective, Maurice Halbwachs asserts the constructed and social character of individual memory. As a function of collective memory, individual memory cannot be considered an "isolated repository of personal experienced."⁹⁸ Halbwachs characterizes memories, according to Patrick Hutton, as "composite images in which personal reminiscences are woven into [a socially acquired] understanding of the past."⁹⁹ Personal and social identity are always interrelated and cannot be fully separated. We know ourselves in relation to others. To exclude someone from social memory, as Jonathan Crewe writes, is "tantamount to both social extinction and deprivation of identity."¹⁰⁰ Texts and art objects, can be theorized as commemorative relics or sites of memory that interrelate the personal and social even if they engage primarily on a visual level.

As visual and physical condensations, as poetic memory, the obsessive character of Messenger's *Boarders* and her collections seem to have been motivated by unconscious repetition as well as by the artist's conscious concerns. In their concrete materiality, Messenger's little birds in sweaters seem like a recurring response, resembling the obsessive collecting of fragments in her albums that stand as markings of repressed material. Hutton likens the psyche to a topological map, calling screen memories mnemonic images that "mark places in the life of the psyche that remain hidden from view."¹⁰¹ I consider these works emotionally charged points in such a mnemonic landscape.

Certainly, Messenger's mute stiff birds communicate in the visual language of contemporary art. Nevertheless, as sites of memory, they can be

considered tiny commemorative monuments to loss, and must be studied as texts that offer a symbolic visual truth even if that truth cannot be named linguistically. In the tradition of Vico, who mined ancient texts for poetic truth, enigmatic art works such as these might be viewed as sources for metaphoric truths that function similarly to how oral cultures linked ideas with expressive images to remember them.¹⁰² "Memory originated in the ontological act of creating images in order to give form and meaning to the phenomena of the world," Hutton maintains, "But as civilization advances, memory becomes identified with mimesis, that is, it mimics and repeats the creative act in order to discover its original meaning."¹⁰³ As if to counter this tendency to reduce all discourse to narrative, Messenger's works drawn from everyday experience resist mimesis by collecting and assembling fragments.

One might also consider such works to be sites of "counter-memory" that have not entered official discourse. If thought of as "anti-memory" or becoming, to follow Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, their refusal to be condensed to a single narrative, to speak a clear "truth," may be compared to visual rhizomic forms of writing becoming; resisting fixity, completion, and definition.¹⁰⁴ History subordinates the memories of minorities, finding them childish, sentimental, inconsequential, colonial, less relevant, or inaccurate; subjective as opposed to "objective." Deleuze and Guattari posit other frames of understanding: "forgetting as opposed to memory, geography as opposed to history, the map as opposed to the tracing, the rhizome as opposed to arborescence."¹⁰⁵ I believe that Messenger's variations and repetitions are types of assemblages that refuse the mirror of mimetic representation; as becomings they reorganize the world rather than imitate it.

By refusing to divulge a single true meaning, her art works create a distance from the viewer even as they call for interpretation and projection. This refusal to disclose such a meaning raises the question of whether such a strategy serves to defensively veil the artist from psychological probing or conversely to make a space for, what Kaja Silverman terms, heteropathic memory.¹⁰⁶ "Identification-at-a-distance" acknowledges spatial and cultural distances, even as it seeks to surmount such unbridgeable gaps to bear witness. This unconscious or conscious strategy raises a further point: if traumatic memory drives the fragmentation and splitting in Messenger's art works, one wonders if they can be considered to represent an ongoing effort to work through or rather a form of 'acting out' that retraumatizes their creator and perhaps even their viewers.

Dominick LaCapra, according to Marianne Hirsch, addresses the distinction between acting out and working through by considering two kinds of "memorial positions."¹⁰⁷ Acting out (or melancholia) is characterized by tragic identification, constitution of the self as a surrogate victim, and repetitive retraumatization that prevents wounds from healing. LaCapra draws from Freud

who considered identification a stage after the ego has adopted an object when it "wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic stage, is by devouring it."¹⁰⁸ The over-catheted subject reacts to loss with anger and sadism that he/she then turns against him/herself. In contrast, working through (or mourning) is characterized by self-reflexivity, assuming responsibility, and maintaining some distance. It is an ongoing process by which the ego slowly withdraws from the lost object.

Do Messenger's works work through or act out personal trauma? A statement she made in 1995 seems to give one answer:

Everything in the world today is totally pathetic and vulnerable, I am no longer able to make a series of works. I have always worked in bits and pieces, ripping, cutting, and pasting, but today I can no longer consider working in series and this is a dramatic change for me . . . Vulnerability is so much greater in the world than in any art work that it is impossible to create anything that is more obscene than reality. Bosnia, Algeria . . .¹⁰⁹

While Messenger's comment certainly accurately assesses the tragic extent of vulnerability and suffering in the world, it also suggests a depressed perspective that might be considered reflective of melancholia. But Messenger's long term process of "bits and pieces, ripping, cutting and pasting" was also an active mode of testifying that allowed her to move beyond herself towards a new way of working and being.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to borrow Paul Gilroy's particular use of du Bois's theorization of 'double-consciousness' to understand the position of the survivor. Gilroy, discussing Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, calls "the relationship between terror and memory, sublimity and the impossible desire to forget the unforgettable," inextricably interlinked.¹¹⁰ While Gilroy refers to slavery and racial violence, his conception of double-consciousness, being both inside and outside of modernity, and its fundamental relation to a profoundly traumatic event (or centuries of events as in slavery), may be relevant to understanding art works such as Messenger's that even as they participate in contemporary art discourse seem driven by hidden trauma. For Gilroy double-consciousness constitutes the modern condition, but it is most notably expressed by those who have been positioned by social forces simultaneously on the inside and the outside. He argues that one could compare the black diaspora and slavery with the Holocaust to "learn something valuable about

the way that modernity operates, about the scope and status of rational human conduct, about the claims of science, and perhaps most importantly about the ideologies of humanism with which these brutal histories can be shown to be complicit."¹¹¹ The point is that various forms of abuse unrecognized by official discourses can have similar repercussions on the personal level. As victims of violence in both physical and psychological ways, many women and children have been similarly placed outside of official discourse and their traumas have been hidden, unresolved, and unacknowledged.

While one cannot assert with certainty that Messenger's art works from the early 1970s testify to personal trauma, it seems reasonable to apply the discourse of traumatic memory to their interpretation. And not to settle for overly simplistic short-hand references to postmodern fragmentation. As commemorative sites of secret memory they allude to the ways in which societal norms and violence traumatize women over time, and as Stiles' has suggested in another context may "denote traumatic circumstance that is manifest in culture, discernible at the intersection of aesthetic, political, and social experience."¹¹² Following Stiles, Messenger's works can be considered to participate in bearing visible witness to individual or social trauma. In particular, *Boarders at Rest* lends itself to be theorized as motivated, in part, by unconscious memories that recur compulsively and yet evade narrative. As sites of memory and of projection, the vulnerable and pathetic sparrows in this work represent both the voids of amnesiac spaces and visual discourses and the tragic position of the survivor. In this work, one senses a profound emptiness that exceeds any intellectual discourse on post-modernist fragmentation that eulogizes the decentered self.

Despite their pathos, however, Messenger's art works also open towards other people as an address that calls for witnessing. Robert Jay Lifton has noted the importance of the image as a means to "recover the importance of the flow of experience."¹¹³ Symbolizing, in his view, forms narrative and thereby heals. Art works can be sites where memory is concretized and visualized. They can be considered a form of commemorative practice that calls attention to forgetting, by concretizing how trauma stills time and resists integration. Messenger's collections appear to respond to lack or absence by substituting something in its place. Her art objects, that call for and yet resist narrative, can be considered like acts of reconstructing identity, as active efforts at integration. If, as Janet theorized, "memory is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story," then these objects are like actions, silent and yet potent forms of testifying through visual language.¹¹⁴ Immobile in their concreteness, Messenger's art objects reveal what Felman calls, "an experience of suspension" of knowledge.¹¹⁵ They reflect how language must go through "its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech."¹¹⁶

Messenger's art works of the early 1970s can be likened to the "accidents" of which Felman writes when analyzing Mallarmé's poetic "accident of verse."¹⁷ By evoking the unknown, they offer a means to intuitively grasp the silent absences at the heart of the survivor's narrative. Just as Felman remained silent about her inclusion of the photograph of Menachem S. in her chapter in *Testimony*, allowing it to perform the function of an accident and communicate a crisis non-verbally, Messenger's birds suggest such an accident. "The image," Hirsch writes, "projects the viewer, the subject of 'heteropathic' memory, into the position of the child witness, and thus into speechlessness."¹⁸ It functions as a silent witness and a reminder of horror. In the midst of the narrative it remains inarticulate, representing what cannot be worked through, but what must be said. What remains is disembodied, a wound. Annette Messenger's sparrows, or boarders, childish images of pathos, similarly produce a sense of woundedness that gives a place to memories that cannot be spoken. Messenger's often abstruse works suggest that the sculptural object may be considered an interactive site where self and other, repressed memory and conscious recollection, trauma and testimony, refusal of the past and its commemoration, and artist and spectator pass but never quite connect.

This paper came out of a graduate seminar on "Art and Memory" with Professor Kristine Stiles at Duke University in the spring of 2000. Class discussions and conversations were invaluable in grappling with theories of memory and trauma. I wish to particularly thank Kristine Stiles for her guidance, critical comments, and immeasurable feedback on revisions, as well as for her inspiration and support.

Notes

- 1 This work is part of the permanent collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.
- 2 Juan Vicente Aliaga, "Annette Messenger: Palacio de Velásquez, Museo de Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía." *Artforum* 37/9 (May 1999): 184.
- 3 Kristine Stiles, "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma." *Strategie II: Peoples Mediterraneans* 64-65 (July-December 1993), pp. 95-117; excerpted in *Lusitania*. 6 (1994): 23-39; reprinted in full with a new "Afterword," in *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques*, Eds. Jean O'Barr, Nancy Hewitt, Nancy Rosebaugh. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 36-64

- 4 Cathy Caruth, "Introduction." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 4.
- 5 I would like to acknowledge the influence of Patrick H. Hutton's text, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1993) on my conception of the *site of memory*. In his analysis of the relation of memory to history, Hutton makes use of several spatial metaphors, most significantly that of memory as a crossroads. Most importantly for the development of my thinking about the art work as a site of memory, however, are his descriptions of the *architectures of place* created by Renaissance mnemonists to remember, Wordsworth's poetic *spots of time*, as well as Hutton's use of an analogy of fragmentary mnemonic images that punctuate the surface of a mental topographical map to describe Freud's notion of memory.
- 6 Stiles, "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions." *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), pp. 241-243.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 8 See, for example, Annelie Pohlen, "The Utopian Adventures of Annette Messenger," *Artforum* 19/1 (September 1990): 113.
- 9 Penelope Rowlands, "Art that Annoys," *ARTnews*, 94/8 (October 1995): 134.
- 10 Sheryl Conkelton, "Annette Messenger's Carnival of Dread and Desire," in *Annette Messenger* Exhibition catalog. (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), p. 10.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 14 Annelie Pohlen, "The Utopian Adventures of Annette Messenger." *Artforum* 19/1 (September 1990): 116.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 20 Jeff Rian, "Annette Messenger." *Flash Art* 28/183 (Summer 1995): 125.
- 21 Eric Troncy, "Annette Messenger: From Statements on a Life of Mediocrity to the Wondrous Postulates of Fiction." *Flash Art* 24:159 (Summer 1991): 103.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 23 Conklin, Jo-Ann, ed. *Annette Messenger: Map of Temper. Map of Tenderness.* Exhibition catalog. (Providence, R. I.: David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 1998).
- 24 Bernard Marcade, "Annette Messenger," translated by Catherine Liu, *Bomb* 26 (Winter 1988/1989): 32.
- 25 Conkelton, p. 11.
- 26 Carol S. Eliel, "'Nourishment You Take': Annette Messenger, Influence, and the Subversion of Images." In *Annette Messenger*. Exhibition catalog. (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern

- Art, 1995), pp. 51-87.
- 27 See Kristine Stiles, "Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies," 52-53, for a provoking challenge to monolithic postmodernist theories of decentered fragmentation as forms of resistance when compared to the actual individual debilitating fragmentation of those who have been traumatized.
- 28 Conkelton, p. 9.
- 29 Natasha Leoff, "Annette Messenger." *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 7/2 (1995): 9. Annette Messenger was born in Pas de Calais on the north coast of France in 1943. In the 1960s she attended the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, preferring this school to the École des Beaux Arts because she found the former more open and less tradition bound. The student uprisings of May 1968 influenced her approach to art. "Grand paintings, all the pictures of the Louvre," Messenger recalls, "we were ready to burn them . . . I wanted to work on the everyday, the ordinary, things from the street, from magazines. That was my '68." Carol S. Eliel, "'Nourishment You Take': Annette Messenger, Influence, and the Subversion of Images," in *Annette Messenger*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 53.
- 30 Mo Gourmelon, "Arbitrated Dissections: The Art of Annette Messenger." *Arts Magazine* 65 (November 1990): 67.
- 31 Leoff, p. 8.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Hutton, p. 48.
- 34 Eliel, p. 55.
- 35 Rowlands, p. 135.
- 36 Eliel, p. 55.
- 37 Annette Messenger, *Annette Messenger: Faire Parade 1971-95*. Exh. cat. (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1995), p. 112.
- 38 Eliel, p. 69.
- 39 Conkelton, p. 12.
- 40 Marcade, p. 32.
- 41 Conkelton, p. 12.
- 42 Leoff, p. 7.
- 43 Rian, p. 125.
- 44 Rowlands, p. 135.
- 45 Leoff, p. 11.
- 46 Conkelton, p. 12.
- 47 Gourmelon, p. 68.
- 48 Ibid., p. 69.
- 49 Conkelton, p. 18.
- 50 Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 11.
- 51 Messenger, p. 48.
- 52 Leoff, p. 9.
- 53 Rowlands, p. 134.
- 54 Eliel, p. 56.
- 55 Messenger, p. 48.

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- 57 See Stiles 1993.
- 58 Oliver Sachs, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. (New York: Picador, 1985), p. 106.
- 59 Leoff, p. 5.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., p. 8.
- 62 Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 159.
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- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Ernst Van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 24
- 71 Ibid., p. 26.
- 72 Ibid., p. 27.
- 73 Ibid., p. 33.
- 74 Bal, p. x.
- 75 Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 194.
- 76 Caruth, p. 5.
- 77 Ibid., p. 8.
- 78 Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, p. 15.
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- 100 Crewe, p. 75.
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- 104 Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 105 Ibid., p. 296.
- 106 Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy." In *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, p. 9.
- 107 Ibid., p. 16.
- 108 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff, (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan, 1963), p. 171.
- 109 Leoff, p. 11.
- 110 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 217.
- 111 Ibid.
- 112 Stiles, p. 36.
- 113 Robert Jay Lifton quoted in Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 133.
- 114 Van der Kolk, p. 175.
- 115 Felman, p. 52.
- 116 Ibid., p. 53.
- 117 Ibid., p. 29.
- 118 Hirsch, p. 20.

The Dialectical Potato: Potato in Art, Art in Potato

Jeffrey Price

“Man is only truly alive when he realizes he is a creative, artistic being...even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act.”

-Joseph Beuys

“My favorite dinner is turkey and mashed potatoes—it looks clean.”

-Andy Warhol

“That’s not a solar system. It is a potato.”

-Painter Joan Miró to surrealist poet Paul Éluard

Preface: A Brief Note on Early Potato Art Ancestors

The foremost potato artists were certainly those who first discovered it growing in the South American Andes Mountain region 10,000 years ago or more. If potatoes and humans are indeed involved in a symbiotic “coevolutionary¹” process as posited by Michael Pollen in *Botany of Desire* (2001) then this is when and where the relationship began. By 6500 B.C. the Peruvian Indians had already harnessed the power of their *papas*² to grow in very harsh and diverse climates of the *altiplano*, developing potato agriculture. These early potatoologists experimented with many of the 5,000 varieties (and 8 species) of potatoes that existed and developed a wide range of peripheral innovations influenced or inspired by the potato.

Among these innovations was the making of *chuño*, a form of naturally freeze-drying and preserving potatoes. The process of *chuño* making could be described as a kind of ritual dance (Potato Dance) where all the moisture is squeezed out the potato by means of rhythmic feet movement.³ This development made the potato more portable and storable, allowing the Peruvians to use it for trade and commerce (Potato Money). The necessity for potato farming led to the invention of *tacllas* (Potato Digging Tools), and

inspired an elaborate system of terracing the mountainous land (Potato Earth/Land Art) for maximizing and compartmentalizing their potato plots. These early potatoists also employed alchemical methods, transforming the potato into *chicha* (Potato Beer), and also converting the potato into human energy and consciousness by eating it. These potato artists developed a sophisticated pottery technology in which they created various potato tributes (Potato Effigy Pots) including human/potato and animal/potato forms. The slow process of boiling water in the high altitudes of the Andes also suggested to them a system of telling time by measuring how long it took to cook potatoes (Potato Clocks). Using the potato, they also concocted many folk remedies used in healing and personal hygiene (Potato Medicine). They even adopted a method of fortune telling by counting potatoes to presage the next harvest (Potato Augurism/Potato Divination) and believed the potato could be used for purposes of magic or voodoo (Potato Witchcraft). These foremost potato peoples worshipped the great animating spirit of the potato, the *Axo-mama*⁴ (Potato Mother) and organized seasonal fetes to celebrate her energy and propitiate her abundance (Potato Festivals).

Introduction

This essay proposes to illuminate and examine major works of art of in which the common potato, *Solanum tuberosum*, appears as symbol or subject matter, since its arrival in Europe and consider particular philosophies behind its presence there. It will be shown that the potato has surfaced as an image, symbol, ideology, and philosophy in a number of artworks of the modern era, whereby a particular dialectic has developed. The potato has played an increasingly paradoxical role in Art History just as it has in the annals of human History, which makes for an interesting investigation. Deliberating on the immense importance and reliance that humans have had, and still have on the potato as a valuable source of nourishment, is not the direction of this paper—but it is useful to keep this in mind when focusing on the presence and meaning of the symbol and dialectic of Potato Art works.

It is also not the intention of this paper to persuade the potato's position as a major genre in Modern Art. The presence of the potato, as a theme or subject does, however, make some several curious appearances in the works of modern "masters." The point then is to highlight specific occurrences of the potato that do exist, and examine how the potato functions as a symbol "and ideology in these works. The works which I will be examining can fairly easily be placed within an "art world" milieu, and will be discussed in this context. I have tried to provide as extensive a list of Potato Art works as possible, knowing that I have missed many along the way. This initial attempt at narrowing the search for these artworks has revealed much to this author,

and has provoked a desire for further research. By deciding to focus on the potato as theme or motif as an area of research in art, I am consciously taking an Anthropological-Art Historical approach in analyzing these works. Hopefully, this attempt to discover a strand of "Modern Potato Artists" reveals a Potato-Art Lineage-continuum, which has existed since humans first encountered potatoes around 8,500 B.C., opening up the possibilities for what Potato Art means.

Many are indebted, and I am no exception, to the voluminous work *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (1946) by Radcliffe N. Salaman, which has provided much knowledge about all aspects of the potato from its paradoxical role in history, its important nutritional value, and detailed analysis of art objects based on the potato. This tome has been the impetus for many later books on many different facets of the potato. It has been an important source and starting point for this paper as well.

For the archaeological art record Salaman has provided an enormous wealth of data and speculations about early Moche and Inca Potato Effigy Pots. In his chapter on "Potato and Art," however, he only discusses Vincent Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* as a major work of 'fine art' in which the potato has been a theme or subject matter. Of course, he died in 1955 before many of the works I present here were made, but he does leave out a few early key works that I would like to add. Therefore, I am interested in continuing this investigation into the history of the potato in art, and what its presence there means.

Indirectly, this essay will also shed some light on one of the symbols/sources of my own inspiration, as well as reveal some human artistic influences; pronouncing kindred spirits in a lineage of Potato Artists I now find myself encompassed. By examining the potato as it has appeared and been used in works of art from the beginning to the present, it has helped me to evaluate, re-think and in many cases validate my own philosophical ideology behind making Potato Art.

In first reading Martin Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*, which also discusses Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*, I began to ruminate on my own theories about the potato. I began to articulate the formulation of a new Potato Philosophy—the *potato* as the origin of the work of art; the potato *as the work of art*; and the potato as also representing a kind of *origin* for the artist and the work of art. I further realized that in the eyes of certain artists, the potato gleams for them a certain Truth. That was another locus of this written paper, a Potato Chapter trying to decode the philosophy and Truth of the potato dialectic as found in works of the modern age.

Potato Art in the West

The potato as depicted in works of "fine art" since its arrival in Western Europe in the mid-16th century has been very limited and was almost non-

existent until the mid-19th century. Before that, the potato had only found immortality in woodcut illustrations appearing in Herbals. The evidence of the potato in these Herbals became very important in trying to pinpoint the exact time and place in which the potato actually entered the Old World.

The very first known graphic depiction of the potato-as-image in Europe, as represented in the herbal literature, is in an Aquarelle from 1588, of a potato branch, which illustrates important taxonomical information about the evolutionary stage, or look of the potato of that time. The next major appearance of the potato in print exists in the frontispiece for John Gerard's *Herball* (1597) in which Gerard himself is holding in his left hand a leaf and flower of the potato plant. There is also a whole chapter in *Herball* devoted to the potato and a stylized woodcut of the "Potatoes from Virginia," which to this day has led to the erroneous historical assumption that potatoes were brought to Europe from Virginia by Sir Francis Drake. Other notable potato plant woodcuts can be found illustrated in Clusius' *Historia* (1601), Gaspard Bauhin's *Prodromus* (1620), Parkinson's *Herbal* (1629), and Jean Bauhin's *Historia* (1651).

Throughout Western history, the potato can be said to have inspired many concomitant utilitarian art forms as well. These include the invention of tools, plows and sorters for potato agriculture and the development of culinary wares such as potato cauldrons, potato mashers and potato forks. There also exist many potato tributes in poems, literature, songs, games, and stories and most recently in cartoons, movies and television.

Perhaps the most notable of the diversity of creativity based around the potato has been the outgrowth of alchemical innovations in the form of gasohol (Potato Gas/Ethyl Alcohol), and fermentation processes producing alcoholic spirits such as potato beer, potato wine, and potato vodka. This does not even include the very basic and very important alchemy involved in the seemingly endless transmuting possibilities of cooking and preparing the potato as a food. Through chemical processes, the potato provides sustenance and produces energy for man, whose body converts this energy into consciousness. Recently, the potato has entered the realm of science and technology with extensive bioengineering projects and potato-growing experiments in space.

Although it is the focus of this paper to discuss Potato Art within an "Art" context, there is a point of convergence with the so-called "fine art" potato work examples, with the aforementioned anthropological/utilitarian potato art works. The dialectical potato found in the following works relies on a certain connection and knowledge of these practical, traditional associations surrounding the potato.

Millet's Potato

The ostensible birth of Potato Iconography in Western Art emerged

in unison with the birth of the avant-garde and Modernism. In 1857, Realist master Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) gave us the first major potato painting incarnation—*Angelus*—originally entitled *Prayer for the Potato Crop*. This image of a man and woman solemnly bowing their heads in prayer in the middle of a potato field at dusk with a steeple on the distant horizon quickly became a widely known symbol of provincial piety. The humble crop, a pile of potatoes, plays a primary and definitive role in the picture, serving as a truly supporting character, a miracle of sustenance and a reward for hard work.

This now-eternal image began as a commission from the wealthy American Thomas Gold Appleton (who never ended up owning the piece). After sitting aside for about two years in his studio, the work was transformed into a more profound metaphor by Millet with his adding the little steeple to the picture and changing the title of the painting to *Angelus*. *Angelus* refers to prayers—reminded by ringing steeple bells, to stop and recite together or alone, for use in meditation or for focusing away the busy and hard aspects of life. By changing the title from *Prayer for the Potato Crop* to *Angelus*, he thus transformed the prayer for the banal potato into a universal prayer. The prayer is a giving-thanks for the success of the potato crop that will give them nourishment and life, and a paean to the potato to continue its rejuvenation and abundance.

It is interesting to note that this image of potato-humbleness quickly became an object of considerable desire and value. After it left Millet's possession for the price of 1000 Francs in 1859, the painting was endlessly bid on, changing many hands (even across the Atlantic), was exhibited widely (including a Barnum-like tent tour across the United States), until it was finally won back over for France and the Louvre in 1890 by Alfred Chauchard with 800,000 Francs and much media hoopla. Thus this Potato Prayer image was ironically transformed into a high-priced commodity and icon of Nationalist pride for the bourgeoisie. Is this the beginning of a paradoxical revolutionary artwork in which the potato is at once a spiritual metaphor, a simple banality, as well as a commercial commodity?

Millet's very first visual depiction of the potato was actually in an earlier drawing in 1851, *Potato Planters*, showing a man digging holes for seed potatoes which are then buried by a woman and child. Possibly, this was the very first intentionally potato-based work of art to be found on the European continent. The only other known painted depiction of potatoes prior to Millet's *Angelus* was from another Realist, Gustave Brion and his *Potato Harvest during the Flooding of the Rhine* of 1852.

Millet's early drawing of the *Potato Planters* later found its culmination in another painting with a typical Milletian humanistic depiction of simple peasants sowing seed potatoes in his *Potato Planting* of 1862. This painting shows a husband and wife planting humble tubers in a luminous provincial

field, with infant and mule resting in the background, under the shade of a nearby tree. This painting represents an idealized bucolic vision of a Golden Age of Agriculture and emphasizes the close relationship of man to nature, focusing on the reality and necessity of the potato as a source of sustenance and survival. Several critics of the day denounced this work as a banal colloquial vulgarity. Millet drafted a defense of his potato-political ideology:

Why should the work of a potato planter or a bean planter be less interesting or less noble than any other activity? It ought to be recognized that there isn't any nobility or baseness except in the manner of understanding or representing such things, and not in the things themselves.⁵

Van Gogh's Potato

Millet's most pronounced successor to the potato vernacular is of course, the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh. Soon after giving up ministry, Van Gogh became obsessed with the potato as a theme, creating dozens of studies for the work that would become the Potato Art apotheosis, *Potato Eaters* (1885). *Potato Eaters* is a definitive potato-socio-politico-religioso-anthropo-philosophical idiom.

This first masterwork of Van Gogh is a culmination of his early period and has been widely written about and analyzed. Therefore, I will not have to describe the occurrence in much detail. In this case, it is instead important to focus on Van Gogh's own thought and philosophy behind the painting of the *Potato Eaters*, which is illuminated particularly well by a letter to his brother Theo dated April 30, 1885:

I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people.

Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once...And It might prove to be a true peasant picture. I know that's what it is. But if someone prefers a sentimental view of peasants, they're welcome to it. As for myself, I'm convinced you get better results by painting them in their roughness than by bringing conventional charm into it.⁶

For Vincent Van Gogh, *Potato Eaters* is a "peasant picture"—a painting of "uncivilized" and dirty potato eaters—and represents a kind of plebian primitivism. He seems to see a certain Truth in their "roughness" and interprets this into a kind of self-reliant, ascetic-based spirituality. The potato

object-symbol has now become a sacrament—the sustenante incarnate of the *Axo-mama*, or potato spirit, as life-giver and sustainer—and is being taken in, in an act of transubstantiation. However, the potato here denotes a low social status, reminding them of the poverty and hardship that the object of their labor—the potato—causes. But because it provides them with life and self-sufficiency and humbleness, it allows them a chance at spiritual redemption.

With Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* there is a development of the dialectic of the symbol of the potato in painting—it is at once a “poor picture” and a symbol of spirituality. Like Millet before him, Van Gogh was not appealing to the popular taste of the masses to “like it or admire it,” but rather presented it as a kind of Truth—against the current philosophical ideology of the time—about painting and art, and Truth for that matter. It is well known from Van Gogh's writings that he attributed Biblical significance to many of the figures and symbols in his paintings and drawings, so it is easy to assume that this image of a humble, communal repast represented for him a kind of religiosity. The potato for the artist has now grown into a philosophy of “revolution-in-painting,” as well as a symbol of the poor, the natural and the spiritual.

In addition to the many studies for the *Potato Eaters*, Van Gogh included the potato theme in many works of farmers digging, plowing, and lifting potatoes, as well as drawings of women peeling potatoes at home by the window. After the *Potato Eaters*, potatoes as a symbol can also be found in no less than six other still-life paintings by Van Gogh which elucidates him as an important developer of this potato-symbol and dialect.

Miró's Potato

Chronologically, the next manifestation of the potato in art is found in an enigmatic painting by the Spanish painter Joan Miró entitled *Potato* (1928). It is curious that this self-proclaimed ‘anti-painter’ is also woven (however loosely) into the lineage tapestry of the potato-symbolists, as it lends credibility to the theory of a revolutionary-potato-art idiomatic philosophy existing in Art History in the employment of “master” artists.

However, Miró's mysterious surrealistic image, under the auspice of the title *Potato*, is not entirely a straightforward statement supporting the potato-as-symbol idea. This image came into being with a series of paintings directly interpreting and eschewing Dutch Master interiors. Is he adding insult to injury by naming the painting *Potato*, summarily reducing the Dutch painters to a *You are What you Eat/ You Paint what you are!* context? I don't think so. Miró's *Potato* is not directly based on a specific Dutch Master image, but rather on the image of a Spanish Dancer found in a magazine. Miró named the painting in French, *Pomme-de-Terre*, meaning “apple of the earth,” so here the potato becomes a symbol of the feminine/fertility principle. This image represents a creator/destroyer image as a potato woman deity—the personification

of the *Axo-mama*.

Beuys' Potato

From the German artist/teacher/philosopher Joseph Beuys we get the first direct potato-as-art paradigm. Beuys took an art-as-life stance, demanding a human revolution/evolution through art and action. His theory of Social Sculpture is exemplified in his own statement: "even the act of peeling a potato can be considered a work of art if it is a conscious act." By this, he was suggesting we should use and look at materials and consciousness in a whole new way. Using the staple potato as a pedagogical model/tool works well within Beuys' lesson plan—Germany's dependence on the potato made it a very real symbol of their survival.

Potato Action/Potato Planting (3/15/1977-11/6/1977) takes the idea of potatoes back to its original agrarian beginning—one man, one plot. Beuys took an empty lot in the middle of Berlin located next to the Rene Block Gallery, and transformed it into a potato garden. Using simple and traditional tools and techniques, he planted, maintained, and harvested a season's crop of potatoes. This potato activity bespeaks of support for farming and agriculture, reminding us that a small plot of land has the potential to yield a tremendous bounty of potatoes. Beuys' planting of potatoes also demonstrates the idea of freedom through self-sufficiency, strength derived from physical activity and the need for man to continue a direct relationship with the earth. This potato-as-art/potato-as-life action was a time-based performance, dependent on and in rhythm with, the cycles of nature. With *Potato Planting*, the potato itself takes on the role of artist, reproducing and multiplying in a creative act of growing and forming. This self-manifesting process relates to the theory of the potato as the origin of the work of art.

Overall, in the oeuvre of Joseph Beuys, the use of the potato has been a more conceptual than physical gesture. One exception however is the vitrine-sculpture *Dust Painting with Dried Potato Plant* (1981). This display houses a *Dustpainting* (1962) leaning in the back, *Bones and Knife* (1973) placed vigilantly in the center of the display, and two *Sculptures of Dried Potato Plants* (1977) (from his *Potato Action?*). These two dried-out bundles, one on the right, larger and more square-ish with hay—the other on the left, a smaller pile of withered potatoes with dead dry sprouts. The potato is not empowered in this piece, but instead slowly withers away in the showcase in a condition of dried-out, crumbly shriveled putrescence—a state in which the potato is seldom seen. In this exhibit Beuys employs his typical method of juxtaposing old materials and creations from different periods of his creative output, and arranging them to create a new meaning. The potatoes and other elements carry on a dialogue together, while continuously transforming in time. The potato here is not life, but death—a transmutation of material to an

original state, a return to dust.

Pölke's Potato

In the mid-to-late Sixties, Sigmar Pölke, a German artist and student of Joseph Beuys, was also deeply entrenched in quixotic potato-art dialectic—incorporating the potato into drawings, sculpture, scientific investigations and philosophy. The potato first surfaced in Pölke 's work in the early series dubbed with the Rhenish colloquialism *Potato Heads* (1965). This suite of crude but cute works-on-paper consist of two tuber-shaped head-forms juxtaposed opposite one another, surrounded and in some cases engulfed, by a negative space of Pölke 's colored polka dots. Two of the works, *Potato Heads: Nixon and Khrushchev* and *Potato Heads: Mao and LBJ* take on a decidedly ambiguous political tone by approximating heads of state as lowly tubers. Pölke begins to present us with a paradoxical potato vernacular: "Some people eat magic mushrooms to expand their awareness, what can you expect from people who eat potatoes?"⁷ With this statement years after making the *Potato Heads*, Pölke presents us with disparaging associations related to eaters of the common potato.

Pölke, however, believes in plant power—specifically psilocybin (magic mushrooms)—and forthrightly declares that higher beings have told him what to paint. But, he also reveals in an early writing that the potato has played a significantly large part in his scientific experiments, which have led him to understanding that the potato is a living, breathing, creative being. It is important again to focus on what the artist himself has said, at length, concerning the potato and art and inspiration:

On the verge of giving up my planned [scientific] investigation [of inspiration] in the apparent absence of a suitable object of study, I happened to go into my cellar one day, where I finally found what I was looking for —the very incarnation of everything art critics and teachers imagine when they think of a spontaneously creative subject with a love of innovation: the potato!

Of course — if there is anything at all that embodies every aspect of the artist that has ever come under discussion — love of innovation, creativity, spontaneity, productivity, creation completely from within oneself, etc.— it is the potato. One need only watch it as it as it lies in a dark cellar and begins to sprout spontaneously, innovating sprout by sprout in a virtual torrent of creativity; and then as it disappears beneath its teeming sprouts—retreating totally behind its work—and brings forth the most amazing forms. And what colours! The practically shivering frozen lilac in the tips of its sprouts, the spaceless pale white of the sprouts themselves, with an occasional hint of morose, earthless

green—and finally the timeless, maternal wrinkled brown of the self-consuming fruit that sacrifices itself entirely in the perfection of its work... Yes, what we see at work here is true creativity; it is genuine perfection!

In short: everything the public is accustomed to expect from the artist and every expectation the artist is so rarely able to fulfill—the potato provides it in overabundance! Why, then, doesn't the public turn its attention to the potato, where ultimate fulfillment awaits?⁸

Gaining 'practical benefits from the insights' of Pölke's investigations, he put them to good use in a constructed large scale-sculpture, *Potato House* (1967). Pölke has explained the science behind the work, a kind of potato-healing-magic. This piece consists of a walk-in, house-shaped lattice-work with living potatoes affixed around the outside at all the structural crossings:

Expanding on the basic technologies found in the potato chest and Wilhelm Reich's Orgon Box, I constructed a device, the so-called Potato House which, in keeping with the principle of Faraday's Cage, forms an enclosed innovation space protected against the effects of external field forces. Inside an innovation potential builds up on the horizontally inserted potato, which precipitates its activity directly via the Medulla oblongata of the contents. And I make no secret of the fact that I have the potato to thank for providing essential impulses for my work as an artist.⁹

With *Potato House* Pölke developed a particularly ironic, pseudo-scientific, self-admitting potato-based dialectic. He is invoking the reality of hidden energies, and placing himself and the potato in the realm of radicality by following in Reich's controversial ideological footsteps. The idea of a *Potato House* experiment where potatoes collect orogones and transfer them to humans, hints at the potato's biological similarity with humans; biorhythmically in sinc and symbiotically dependent. Pölke's *Potato House* becomes linked to the physiological, the scientific and the mystical and evinces the existence of a pro-magico-potato ideology.

Sigmar Pölke created a similar potato architectural structure for Rudolf Zwirner's gallery basement, in the work *Potato Pyramid in Zwirner's Cellar* (1969). Continuing his experiments with potato energy and regenerative powers, this time he produced a pyramidal form, using an actual trellis to attach potatoes together using the principles of a peg game.

Pölke's next quizzical potato work, *Apparatus to Cause One Potato to Orbit Another or Potato Machine* (1969), further demonstrates Pölke's use of the potato as an idiosyncratic sculptural material. In this Neo-Duchampian

work, a modified stool is transformed into its own solar system, when the pressing of a button on the top, causes a small potato beneath the stool, to orbit around a larger potato as if it were the center of the universe. This piece could represent the idea of a microcosm/macrocosm parallelism existing, with the potato becoming at once the Earth and *axis mundi*. Perhaps, however, this is the seed of an iconoclastic potato-as-nonsense, or potato-as-madness idea—an idiom that manifests itself in the work of the later-generation German artist John Bock.

Above all, Pölke's Potato Art methodological principles are completely based on deferring creativity and imagination to the potato, and not himself. He vehemently explains that, "... what appears to be something I have conceived has actually felt its way inside me. In the same way, something that I appear to have felt my way inside has really conceived itself in me!"¹⁰ The basis for Pölke's potato-methodological concerns is commensurate with the theory put forth by this paper, that the potato is the origin of the work of art.

Immendorf's Potato

In the work of Jorg Immendorf, another German artist and also a student of Joseph Beuys, the potato-symbol develops a distinctly German meaning and vernacular. The potato is overtly present in several paintings by Immendorf beginning with *Meal* (1978). In this painting of a plate labeled 'Meal' there is a pile of steaming baked potatoes, and a tuber-shaped message in the bottom right hand corner reading: *Painting Must Assume the Function of the Potato*. This is the beginning of a potato-political doctrine that will become more prevalent later in Immendorf's paintings. His radical belief is manifest in a painting also using the potato-rallying call as its title, *Painting Must Assume the Function of the Potato* (1988). This has now progressed into a full-fledged potato-philosophical paradigm with Immendorf introducing the potato as a leading character with political motivations. The proclamation 'Painting [Art] must assume the function of the potato' takes a grassroots stance, attempting to bring art back to the people by making it understandable instead of semantically ambiguous.

In another potato apogee, Immendorf presents a self-portrait of himself seated behind and presenting to us—a full basket of potatoes—and calls it *This is All I Have For You* (1990). Immendorf continues to use the potato dialect, equating himself and his capabilities with the Truth of the potato. This basket of potatoes makes many appearances in subsequent paintings, and potatoes as food-on-plates of the proletariat become overtly present symbols throughout Immendorf's body of work. With Immendorf, the potato evolves into a symbol of Germanness—a symbol of the common people, fueling the revolution—a common but practical weapon.

This particularly German-type potato dialectical strand is found con-

tinued in the work of Jerome Witkin, in a painting entitled *The German Girl* (1997). In this painting of Holocaust memories, a scared German girl cowers in the corner of her home as one of a cavalcade of hungry concentration-camp refugees reaches through the window to grab a handful of potatoes. In this painting, Witkin symbolizes the potato as an agent of rejuvenation, a 'real' thing that the reeling Germans could hold on to and use as a restorer of vitality, health and strength. As a recent example of potato-symbolist painting, it helps elucidate the development of a potato dialect—specifically a German flavored potato vernacular.

Bock's Potato

The potato art-continuum is now being further cultivated by another German, the young artist, lecturer and raconteur John Bock. Bock's clownish, ersatz-Beuysian works are usually based around a lecture with accompanying diagrams, actions, and props. The potato is a familiar accouterment within Bock's rich pantheon of performance materials, which also includes gooey substances like toothpaste, shaving cream, and glues, in addition to the multifarious found objects he uses to build makeshift pseudo-devices.

The potato literally takes a front-seat in *MolkeMeMindVehikl* (1999), a lecture/aktion in which Bock drives around a Berlin block in an altered compact car filled-to-the-brim with potatoes. In this humorous potato lesson, Bock acts as a "foodstuff-coefficient," simultaneously communing and commuting with the familiar potato. While slowly motoring along with his co-pilots, he postures, poses, and interacts with various "anti-form" potato specimens. In one of the vignettes during the five-hour tour, Bock grips a plastic egg in his mouth while nudging it against a real potato skewered with a safety-pin and swaying from the car's ceiling by a string. In this comic juxtaposition of organic to artificial, Bock reaffirms the "realness" of the potato and also demonstrates a useful analogy: the potato, like the egg, represents Origin.

In another potato lecture/performance from 1999, *Deutsche Bank*, Bock alludes to the idea of potatoes as an economic system of potato currency. In the chaotic interior installation space of Deutsche Bank, piles of potatoes line the entrance. Visitors have to crouch and navigate under hanging stalactites of stuffed and reconfigured thrift-store clothing-sculptures. The walls inside are messily dotted with blue and red potato-shaped potato stamps, creating a childlike decorating solution. Upon entering, each visitor is then to trustingly "deposit" his or her clean, unsuspecting arms, into a hole in the wall. Hidden on the other side of the wall, inside the bank, the mad-artist makes a mess of their exposed extremities, essentially tar-and-feathering them with various cremes, goops and cotton balls. When participants make a "withdrawal" of their arms from Deutsche Bank they discovered a dripping sticky result all over them.

Witnessing this debacle, from inside Deutsche Bank, is an austere, yet silly, potato-effigy statute, meant to represent Adam Smith, the 18th century economist and philosopher. Among his writings on free trade, Smith espoused the virtues of the nutritious potato. Referring to the healthy beneficence of the potato upon the poor “low ranking” Irish (in *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776), Smith wrote, “No food can afford a more decisive proof of its nourishing quality, or of its being peculiarly suitable to the health of the human constitution.”

Jon Bock’s potato works are illustratively dialectical. Although playful and seemingly nonsensical on the surface, Bock’s potato is revealed to be a serious intellectual political ideology—the potato as a total system. An economic/philosophic system where the potato acts as a commodity, a partner, and a way of life. Bock, who grew up on a farm, uses the potato because he knows it well, and knows his audience will also understand the potato, because it is “easy.”¹¹ Bock’s potato is *materia prima*. It comes from the earth, it smells of earth, it is variously earth-shaped, and represents a microcosmic parable of planet earth.

Fluxus’ Potato

Amongst the group of artists loosely classified under the heading of Fluxus, I have found a few simple works using a Potato Art argot. First, in the work by the under-appreciated Danish artist Arthur “Addi” Kopcke, *Potato Crate or Potato Box* (1963). This piece transforms a common cigar box into a treasure chest. This simple piece was originally made with fresh potatoes, which in time shrank to their current condition, and were then translated into silver or bronze. Here the potato-transmutation metaphor is similar to Beuys’—drying potatoes—but in this case, the potatoes beautifully intricate mutations have been emphasized and preserved into a new precious element.

Several Fluxus Festivals incorporated the unpretentious potato into their “art amusement” events and games. One such event was *New Year’s Eve Flux-Feast (Food Event)* in 1969, where artist Geoff Hendricks contribution was *Potatoes in 10 Flavors*. This practical potato performance exemplifies the versatile culinary possibilities inherent in the common spud. It also relates to the Fluxus ideology of potato-as-non-art

Ray Johnson, another Fluxus-related American artist, presented *Famous People’s Mother’s Potato Mashers*, in Milano, Italy in 1972. His use of a potato reference is a more indirect, less-organic, and humorous approach, which corresponds to a particularly American colloquial brand of potato-icography sensibility examined later.

Penone’s Potato

The potato’s original magical agricultural potentials are restored in

the poetic work *Patates* (1977) by Giuseppe Penone. Penone made plaster molds of his own sensory organs—eyes, nose, ears, mouth—and planted them in the ground with young growing potatoes which eventually incorporated these shapes onto their own potato bodies. The potatoes were then cast into bronze to resemble gold, and exhibited humbly amongst large piles or crates of potatoes. Penone explains, “One tends to separate the action of man from nature as if he were not taking part in it. I wanted to fossilize one of the gestures that culture has produced.”¹²

The image of man and potato become one, reminding us that they are made of the same elements. It is not surprising that the potato finds its way into the works of the Arte Povera movement, the artists involved with transforming the simplest, most ordinary, mundane materials into extraordinary objects.

Grippo's Potato

An extremely important artist in the potato dialectical tradition, across the Atlantic, is Argentine artist Víctor Grippo (1936-2002). The potato figured prominently in his work, particularly in his *Analogies* Series of the seventies (1970-77). In *Analogía I* he created an installation consisting of an extensive configuration of forty potatoes arranged on tables, platforms and chairs, connected to electrodes, cables and a voltmeter. In measuring the electrical charge they generated, he presented an analogy of physical to psychic energies. This also announces a desire to reconnect art and science, with the potato as mediator, toward a transformation of consciousness.

In *Analogía II*, a comparison is established using the element of stone as a compared to the vegetable potato. In *Analogía IV*, Grippo compares nature and artifice, using authentic and synthetic potatoes. This piece consists of a small table sectioned off by a white tablecloth on one side, with a setting consisting of a glass, old-fashioned cutlery, and a plate of fresh potatoes. The other side is sectioned off with black velvet covering, with a glass, silverware, and a plate of transparent acrylic potatoes. The real and fake potatoes create a dialectical opposition, one is natural, earthy, useful and edible—the other artificial, colorless, useless, inedible.

Victor Grippo's potato experiments emphasize transmutation and a move toward new potentials, turning the humble spud into a symbol of latent energy. His intention was to “achieve a changed consciousness through a changed material.”¹³ In his work with potatoes and other nourishing materials, Grippo emphasizes various metaphorical states, such as nature, food, consciousness and spiritual energy.

Grippo's use of the potato also references history and colonization by the Europeans. The potato also acts as a kind of personal symbol and relates to the larger metaphor of community—Grippo and the potato are both

native to the South American Andes region. By invoking the potato he thereby makes a connection to the ancestral, and the everyday. He also re-establishes a metaphysical communion with the *Axo-mama*, the potato's living force.

Oldenburg's Potato

The modern North American potato art dialectic reveals itself to be at times a much less organic gesture than that of their European counterparts. Two major of the American artists with works that can be categorized under the rubric of Potato Art come out of a Pop sensibility, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol.

The baked potato specifically figures prominently in the early work of Claes Oldenburg, emerging first in two proposal drawings, *Proposed Colossal Monument for Grand Army Plaza, New York: Baked Potato* and *Baked Potato Thrown Version* (1965). Oldenburg enjoys the sculptural implications of baked potatoes:

The pleasure of the baked potato, apart from its mass, is the slitting of the potato—east, west, north and south—compressing its sides and then laying into the slit a geometrical shape of butter and watching it melt... The baked potato is... a soft sack that registers what is done to it, where it is placed. Its form can be molded and returned to its original position. The baked potato is a construction that, in the course of use, displays its insides like the banana and the tube.¹⁴

In *Pantry Case: Baked Potato, Sundae, Banana—Transformed by Eating* (1965), Oldenburg created a series of plaster baked potatoes (and bananas and sundaes) in four stages illustrating the sculptural changes in the food forms over the course of being devoured.

For his first commercial multiples, Claus Oldenburg created *Baked Potato* (1966), a series made from a soft-sewn version that was later translated into cast resin. This *Baked Potato* sculpture was included in the collaborative edition *7 Objects in a Box*, containing small editions from six other Pop artists including Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

Claes Oldenburg later transformed the potato into a larger soft sculpture, *Soft Baked Potato, Open and Thrown* (1970), made into an inviting bed-like effigy, with pats of butter becoming pillows. The idea of a potato-sensuality becomes present here, with the slit-open baked potato taking on a vagina-like presence—a steamy receptacle for the cream and butter. The rumors of Oldenburg and his first-wife romping away on some of their newly finished soft sculptures lends sexual innuendo to the image of a giant baked potato.

In another decidedly American-potato gesture, *French Fries Spill-*

ing Out (1977), Claes Oldenburg uses the Fast Food version of the potato for dizzying effect. These enormous French Fries are represented as active, pouring out in all their deep-fried golden glory. Oldenburg's potato works involve translating the organic potato into synthetic materials, but focuses on the active aspects of the potato—rendering them all in loving detail.

Warhol's Potato

The potato makes a somewhat dubious appearance in the last major series of work by Andy Warhol, called *Last Supper* (1986). The suite of paintings comes from a commission by the Milan bank Credito-Valtellinese, located across the street from the Church of Santa Maria della Grazie, where Leonardo da Vinci's original exists. Most of the suite of paintings based on Leonardo's original are repetitions of the Christ image, or representations of the Last Supper image covered in patterns or doused with corporate logos, including Camel cigarettes, Dove soap, and most notably Wise Potato Chips.

The Wise Potato Chips Last Supper is a very large-scale canvas with the image having been vacuously rendered in black outline on blank canvas. To the left of Jesus, much larger and overlaying the image, is a not-quite finished Wise Potato Chip's logo—the Wise owl's eye. With this fringe-potato piece, Warhol has emphasized the commercial over the spiritual with a pun of the 'Wise' eye winking at us, overpowering the original image. The potato itself becomes a metaphor of estrangement and disconnect—potato chips are highly processed, salty, preserved entities transformed far away from their natural state. Warhol's potato is hardly a potato; it is a greasy shadow of its former self.

Warhol's coldness is exemplified by his use of the potato in this piece; it is a disassociation, or unattachment, with the natural potato. This dislocation, or lack of desire for a one-to-one relationship with the potato, becomes a decidedly Warholian potato colloquialism.

Barney's Potato

With the recent Cremaster exhibition at the Guggenheim, which unveiled all five of Matthew Barney's Cremaster films and props together for the first time, the potato is elevated once again to the mythic realm. Barney's elevated status from Art Star to Modern Master, also interestingly reinforces the potato's importance as an object-symbol in art.

Potatoes appear in Cremaster 3, the third episode and middle episode of Barney's hermetic personal mythology. This allegorical reenactment of the Masonic myth of the Architect and the Entered Apprentice, focuses on the construction of the Chrysler building. During this installment the Apprentice cheats, "circumventing the carving process of the creating the perfect ashlar, or perfectly hewn stone"¹³ (representing moral rectitude), which causes the

foundation of the tower to become compromised.

Potatoes are employed for comedic effect to echo the corrupted state of the tower. Potatoes become parody when a provocatively dressed woman, in an adjoining room to the action, slices potatoes with blades on the bottom of her shoes and crams them under the bar, causing the structure to become unlevelled.

These potato props from Barney's films, like many of his props, became residues and artifacts. In this case, potatoes are represented didactically in two sculptural works, as piles of real potatoes, propping up the leg of a cement-laden grand piano in *The Cloud Club* (2002), and cast thermoplastic ones made to look like freshly peeled potatoes, these stuffed under the uneven bar counter in *Partition* (2002).

The Cremaster Cycle's dominant concept is the idea of masculine development, and all of the films and many of the related sculptures are laden with ovoid forms, which overtly refer to testicles. In this case it is difficult not to associate Barney's potatoes with testes and masculinity. However, in this potato scene, the room has been intentionally been partitioned, the opposite side reflecting femininity, with the woman stuffing piles of sexy potatoes under the partition. Here Barney's oval potatoes are dually functioning as ovaries.

Matthew Barney's connection with potatoes relates to his own personal mythology—he grew up in Idaho, the land of potatoes-a-plenty. Barney's sees his hometown potatoes as ambiguous hermaphrodites, perfect metaphors for what is the obsessive tenant of the Cremaster cycle—sexual differentiation during the embryonic stage of development.

Conclusion

With the preceding examples, I have tried to provide a broad overview of potato occurrences found in the Western art world since Modernism. This is by no means an exhaustive list of representatives, but provides a fairly significant first attempt to find and call-out curiously themed potato artworks. There are a few other works I would have liked to introduce to the analysis, but time constraints have limited this first draft. By unfolding and revealing works of art with a potato-based theme or subject matter within an historical continuum, a minor theme in art has emerged. This potato theme has created a dialectic in which the potato appears variously as humble and noble, yet also banal and vulgar. Invoking the potato can connote quasi-mystical and pseudo-scientific associations, but at the same time represent a very down-to-earth, no-bones-about-it realism. As has been shown, the use of the potato has played a paradoxical role in the history of art. Does the potato stand as a symbol of the spiritual, the prosaic, and the crazed—or is it just food?

Hopefully this earnest attempt to trace a potato-art-historical-sym-

bolic continuum will prompt additions, corrections and insight into the theory. This course of action—finding every trace of the potato in works of art—has proved a more substantial task than I had first anticipated, leading me on in a seemingly endless investigation. Even I am amazed by the amount of discreetly copious examples of potato works that do exist. My own discoveries have led me to consider the larger historical situations in which these certain pieces were created, and have increasingly allowed me to view the whole expanse of human artistic endeavors as one cohesive strand. It has also revealed the potato to be a distinct philosophical and ideological object/symbol signifier.

Potatoes must be speaking to humans on a level we can hardly acknowledge. They must have been talking to those early Potato Artists—convincing them to open up the earth and pull them out, to propagate and experiment with them. The potato certainly seems to be manipulating humans as much as we are them. They have managed to curry our favor to grow them and develop them, into the most important, versatile, nutritious vegetable in the world. Little wonder then that the potato should be given such tribute in the arts. Many artists throughout history have been inspired by the potato, representing it as a subject, symbol and philosophical idea. The potato has again lured another artist into its mysterious and ubiquitous nature, coaxing him into making another potato artwork—this essay and me.

Notes

- 1 The entire book is based on the fact that plants, specifically potatoes, use humans as much as we use them, for mutual biological survival.
- 2 Interesting to note the double meaning of papa in Spanish—it means 'Pope' as well as potato. Also, there is a connection to the term of endearment, papa that is found in many Latin based languages.
- 3 Chuno making is still practiced in the region today. Harvested potatoes are left outside and arranged in small piles of equal size and similar varieties. The potato dance begins after a series of frosty nights has partially freeze-dried the potatoes. The potatoes are then rhythmically smashed or ground down by the chuno-maker's shoeless feet, hatted-heads focusing downward toward rolled-up pant legs, and the task at hand—removing the rest of the element water from the potatoes—reducing the potatoes to 20% of their former volume, rendering them more portable, storable, and reconstitutable.
- 4 Radcliffe N. Salman's *History and Social Influence of the Potato*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 25, 28
- 5 Alexandra Murphy, *Jean-François Millet*, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1984), p. 142.
- 6 Ronald De Leeuw, *Van Gogh Museum*, (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 1997), p.

107.

- 7 Margit Rowell, *Sigmar Polke, Works on Paper 1963-1974*, found in Rowell's essay "Sigmar Polke, Strategems of Subversion" pp. 13-14, which was originally taken from Friedrich W. Heubach's "Sigmar Polke," in *Bilder, Tücher, Objekte*, exh. cat., Tübingen, 1976, p. 133, and translated by Lawrence Shapiro. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 8 Sigmar Polke, "Early Influences, Later Consequences or *How Did the Monkey Get into my Work?* and other icono-biographical questions," *The Three Lies of Painting*, (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1997). , pp. 286-294.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Jeffrey Price, "Interview with John Bock," November 29, 2003.
- 12 Ida Gianelli, *Arte Povera in Collection*, (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2000), p. 236.
- 13 <http://www.artnexus.com/servlet/releaseDocument?document=8257>
- 14 Claes Oldenburg, *Claes Oldenburg: Object into Monument*, (Pasadena, California: Pasadena Art Museum, 1971), p.15.
- 15 From Cremaster 3 synopsis.

Santa's Fecal Gift:
Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Paul McCarthy's
Santa's Chocolate Shop

Robert R. Shane

Santa's Chocolate Shop (1997)

In a darkened gallery¹ sits a two-story plywood house, minus a roof, turned on its side. Inside it is the residue from a chocolate syrup orgy: empty syrup cans, wooden spoons, and props stained in chocolate syrup including several giant candy canes suggesting penises sheathed in feces. Projecting through the windows onto the walls of the gallery are three video projections of the lubricious performance that took place within the set. In a ritual orchestrated by Santa, elves and reindeer crawl through tight spaces, suspend themselves in disorienting positions, and virtually inhale excruciating quantities of syrup pouring from each others crotches. Every so often the camera catches a shot of pale buttocks whose hairs are saturated with brown syrup.

There is a system of logic and a hierarchy that structures the salacious *Santa's Chocolate Shop*. Santa, played by the artist, is the ringleader barking orders to his elves and reindeer. The two elves are female, they do not take their clothes off, and apart from the phallic noses they are sporting, we can clearly see their faces. The two reindeer on the other hand, played by males, are anonymous. While belting out a jolly "Ho! Ho! Ho!," Santa cuts into their costumes with a pair of scissors exposing one of the performer's genitals and the other's buttocks. The logic is similar to Sade's: since libertine libido is rendered impotent at the sight of female genitalia, the penis and anus are put at a premium; misogyny merely becomes a prelude to the more delightful humiliation of males.

There is no reference to vaginal intercourse. There is only scatology. Fluids are dispensed from one performer to the next via a funnel placed in the crotch: the recipient sits below and drinks the chocolate syrup that pours seemingly from the anus. The reindeer, when not being subjected to Santa's libertine whims, crawl around sniffing each other's anuses. The reindeer with his genitals exposed is allowed to masturbate while lubricating his penis with chocolate syrup.

Perversion and Omnipotence

How can one make sense of the scatological mess described above? What is happening in McCarthy's work and why he is compelled to combine juvenile, scatological, and sexual imagery, and to repeat this combination decade after decade? This paper looks at the intrapsychic motivations of McCarthy's work. His patterns of perversion are discussed in light of psychoanalytic theories developed through the clinical observations of Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Robert Stoller. McCarthy's work consistently erodes the differences we use to order the world, specifically gender and age, so that he can create what Chasseguet-Smirgel calls the "anal-sadistic universe." In this universe the pervert maintains a sense of omnipotence like a narcissistic infant. Stoller argues perversion is an "erotic form of hatred." According to Stoller, the pervert needs to rescript personal traumas and place himself in the role of the aggressor in order to experience erotic excitement. Through interviews with McCarthy we can gain insight into the specific childhood traumas he experienced and see how they are "rescripted" in his work in such a way that he becomes the aggressor rather than the victim.

The respective theories on perversion developed by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Robert Stoller are not always compatible with each other. However, both are based on clinical experience with similar patients, and thus both recognize patterns of behavior mutually shared in perversion. Chasseguet-Smirgel's theory of the anal-sadistic universe can explain the erosion of the double difference between sexes and generations in *Santa's Chocolate Shop*. Stoller's theories on the pervert's hostility towards other people give meaning to McCarthy's relations with other performers within this anal-sadistic universe. In the case of both theories, perversion is developed in response to a trauma induced by the outside world.

For Chasseguet-Smirgel, the trauma erupts from the Oedipal conflict. Perversion occurs when the child "skips" the conflict believing that he can remain cathected to his own pregenital, specifically anal-sadistic, sexuality. The pervert is always in need of idealizing his anality in order to maintain the conviction for himself and to others that he does not need to mature towards genital sexuality. Using Chasseguet-Smirgel's psychoanalysis, McCarthy's decades of perverse artwork, of which *Santa's Chocolate Shop* is but one example, can be understood as an immature reaction to the Oedipal situation and castration anxiety. In this reaction maintaining anality is chosen over actual resolving the conflict.

The pervert in Stoller's view is also compelled into the same repetition as Chasseguet-Smirgel's pervert. Stoller's pervert repeatedly performs his rituals in order to temporarily alleviate his psychic pain, but he never actually heals. In response to childhood trauma, though not necessarily Oedipal trauma in Stoller's view, the pervert rescripts the traumatic event so that he can replay

it while putting himself in a triumphant position, rather than remain in the traumatic position he experienced the first time. The pervert takes revenge for the humiliation he felt as a child by dehumanizing and degrading others. This hostility is essential for the pervert to experience erotic excitement. *Santa's Chocolate Shop* is a way for McCarthy to rescript childhood traumas, specifically his breech birth, from a point of view that puts him in control, so that he is no longer the victim. Instead, he victimizes others.

In using these psychoanalytic theories to analyze *Santa's Chocolate Shop*, it will be necessary whenever possible to incorporate biographical information as well as data collected from interviews with the artist. Other works from his oeuvre can be helpful for elucidating points made about the work in question. Since the pervert is always driven to the same repetitious action, the same pattern of behavior can be seen taking various forms throughout McCarthy's oeuvre.

Destroying the Father, Creating the Anal-Sadistic Universe

According to Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, the pervert confuses the distinctions between sexes and generations in an attempt to create his own new narcissistic world which she calls the anal-sadistic universe.² An understanding of the differences between genders and generations is developed during the Oedipal phase. In the Oedipal phase the male child comes to recognize the complementary nature of his parents' genitality, and he has feelings of inadequacy because of his inability to compete with the father. In the case of perversion, the subject believes that pregenital desires and satisfactions are equal to or even superior to the mature genital desires and satisfactions of the parents.³ Chasseguet-Smirgel claims that in general perversion is aided by the mother: through her seductive attitude towards the child, and her corresponding rejection of the father, the child is led to believe that he neither has to grow up nor does he have to reach maturity in order to have unity with her.⁴

Difference is how individuals and societies order the universe. As a child, separation and individuation are crucial for distinguishing the "me" from the "not-me," that is, for reality testing or an understanding that there is a world outside of the subject which does not conform to his desires. Language theorists tell us that semiotic systems are built on a system of difference: the word 'dog' means "dog" because it does not mean "house" or "cat"; the differences of words from one another others makes it possible for them to work. The pervert attempts to erode the double difference between the sexes and generations and regresses to the anal-sadistic phase.⁵ Here the pervert tries to create a new universe: this new anal-sadistic universe is one in which all differences are abolished; erotogenic zones are no longer distinct from one another.⁶ This erosion of difference is specifically anal because it implies "that all things must revert to chaos, the original chaos that may be identified with

excrement.”⁷

The major motivation for the abolition of differences, aside from the pleasure the pervert gains from creating his own universe (and thus regressing to the infantile belief in his omnipotence), is to build a defense against all types of psychic suffering. Feelings of inadequacy, castration, loss, absence and death no longer exist in the anal-sadistic universe.⁸ For example, if the child believes pregenital sexuality is sufficient to satisfy himself and his mother, then he has no reason to fear inadequacy or castration by the father.

However, despite the fact that the child believes his pregenital sexuality is sufficient for the mother, perversion is not connected to a deep longing for the Oedipal object, that is, the child is not actually trying to recapture his infantile relationship with the mother. Rather, perversion destroys categories such as mother and child so that the pervert can create a new narcissistic universe.⁹ In short, a longing for omnipotence is a stronger driving force behind perversion than a longing for the mother.¹⁰

Furthermore, despite the rivalry with the father in the Oedipal conflict and the pervert's rejection of the Law of the Father in favor of pregenital sexuality, the pervert's world is in fact a parody of the father's world, that is, it is a parody of mature genital sexuality.¹¹ For example, Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that feces, or the fecal stick, substitute as a phallus.¹² In order to regain a sense of infantile omnipotence the pervert rejects the father's world, that is, he rejects reality, in favor of his own anal-sadistic universe. The pervert wants to dethrone the father, and create his own world. He is a destroyer and a creator.¹³

A perfect example of this destroyer/creator activity is seen in Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) in which he defaces a reproduction of Leonardo's canonical painting, *The Mona Lisa*. Like so much of his work, this piece is an irreverent gesture against the traditions and authority of art history. He is trying to destroy the father, one's first authority figure, and he is trying to destroy the father's world. This destruction is carried out so that Duchamp can place himself in the position of the creator, or more precisely, believe that he is a creator. The nature of his irreverent gesture itself is significant: he draws a mustache and goatee on a female figure, that is, he collapses the difference between sexes, one of Chasseguet-Smirgel's criterion for perversion. Similarly, the title for his new creation, "L.H.O.O.Q.," when spoken in French, is a pun meaning "She has a hot ass." The "Q" sounds like the French word "cul" meaning "bottom" (as in a *cul de sac*). Duchamp places importance on the anus, which is neither male nor female. This bearded Mona Lisa is no longer a man or a woman, and this new creature's sexuality and sexual appeal is specifically anal and not genital.

Paul McCarthy goes through an analogous process in creating his own anal-sadistic universe in *Santa's Chocolate Shop*. To arrive at this piece

he first has to destroy the father, the tradition of art before him. This destruction is manifest in the development of his œuvre. McCarthy was originally a painter. In the hierarchy of mediums throughout art history, painting has been granted primacy. Thus, when he begins to set his paintings on fire in the 1960s he shows his contempt for tradition and for the authority of art history.¹⁴ This destruction of painting, of art's tradition (specifically the legacy of Abstract Expressionism), and of specific father figures in art history continues into his early conceptual pieces. Abstract Expressionism is arguably when American art begins to dominate the world art scene. At that time the center of the art world moves from Europe to New York City. This is the legacy that McCarthy, a young California based American artist, inherits in the following decade. The Abstract Expressionists are the fathers of the art world into which he is born. In an act of patricide, a performance titled *Whipping a Wall with Paint* (1974), McCarthy irreverently mimics the action painting of Jackson Pollock as he hurls buckets of dark paint around an empty gallery, brazenly splashing it on the walls and windows. The work is violent: he is not painting or dancing, or dripping as Pollock did. Rather, he is a sadist who is "whipping" the gallery. He is rejecting and destroying the world of the father, clearing the slate for himself so that he can create his own universe of anal food performances.

However, this destruction is not a once and for all event. As Chasseguet-Smirgel explains, the pervert needs to continually reassert himself and constantly idealize his actions, so that he can convince himself and others that his pregenital sexuality is as good as, if not better than, the father's genitality.¹⁵ Therefore, as late as 1995, McCarthy still attacks specific New York School artists. In *Painter* (1995), McCarthy wears a blonde wig styled similar to Willem de Kooning's hair, a giant bulbous nose, painter's gloves enlarged to look like a cartoon character's hands, and a painter's smock. He paints with paint and mayonnaise on giant canvases with oversized brushes and phallic objects pivoted against his crotch. Later he mutilates himself by cutting off his cartoon gloves with a meat cleaver, and he has a second performer wearing a similar bulbous nose smell his bare anus. He is mocking the painter's world: the brushes mock the father painter's mature brushstroke; he likens the smell of paint (Duchamp used to call painting "olfactory masturbation") to the smell of a dirty anus. Harold Rosenberg described an Abstract Expressionist's canvas "as an arena in which to act...what [is] to go on the canvas is not a picture but an event."¹⁶ McCarthy transforms this "sacred" arena (Rosenberg calls Abstract Expressionism "essentially a religious movement"¹⁷) into a play pen for his juvenile activities. He is, as Chasseguet-Smirgel would explain, making a world is always at once a rejection and perverted parody of the father's world.¹⁸

Chasseguet-Smirgel observes this same pattern in the writings of the Marquis de Sade. She insists that Sade can only be understood in relation to

his negation of Judeo-Christian traditions. Sade's writings create a universe that is the inverse of Old Testament commandments and a desecration of the Catholic Eucharist. She notes that the Biblical prohibitions against adultery, infanticide, homosexuality, and bestiality correspond almost exactly to the catalogue of transgressions contained in a work like Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, a story about four wealthy and powerful libertines that have scores of adolescents abducted and taken to their chateau to be sodomized and tortured.¹⁹ She quotes one instance in which one of Sade's characters tries to combine as many sins as possible: "In order to combine incest, adultery, sodomy and sacrilege he embuggers his married daughter with a host."²⁰ This character is trying to overturn the world ordered by God; he needs to dethrone God the Father so that he can become his own god and creator.²¹ Despite the pervert's illusion of creativity and originality, he is in a "perverse dialectical relationship"²² with the world he is negating. He needs to negate that world in order to create his own. The anal-universe of the pervert must always be understood in relation to the other half of the binary pair to which it belongs, because it is in fact dialectically dependent up on it.

Therefore, McCarthy's childhood, specifically his religious environment, is crucial for understanding the universe he creates in *Santa's Chocolate Shop* and why he selects, consciously or not, certain imagery and actions. In an interview in which McCarthy is asked about the connection between personal history and sexual imagery, and what his childhood was like in relation to sexuality, he responds:

I came from a pretty repressed sexual environment. It was religious and isolated. I didn't know what sex was. It was a taboo subject. I grew up not talking about it. It was a Mormon community. My grandfather was Irish Catholic. My parents weren't particularly religious, but the environment was. The whole community was Mormon. I went to a Mormon church. The church was very youth-oriented. It was a town outside Salt Lake City, a kind of rural farm environment. They were beginning to build suburbs and tract houses, and now it is just like the San Fernando Valley—all tract houses.²³

Santa's Chocolate Shop takes place on a set that resembles a suburban home such as a tract house. The world of the tract house is the world of the father, that is, the real world outside of his infantile relation with his mother. Santa's gift, his chocolate excrement, is given from one floor to the next. Santa sits in a hole cut in the second story floor of the ad hoc, plywood house. He pours the chocolate syrup through the funnel in his crotch and the female elf on the first floor receives it in her mouth. In giving his gift to the female (the mother), he renders the entire house into a toilet. The second story floor is the

toilet seat, the first floor the basin, the female elf becomes the sewer pipes. The house, which is a parody of the kind of suburban home McCarthy experienced as a child, is reduced to a latrine in his act of defecation.

"A man's home is his castle" goes the old adage. To McCarthy the house is the father's throne. McCarthy's act is analogous to Daumier's "Gargantua" cartoon (1930) criticizing the July Monarchy. In the cartoon, the poor and the sick are giving up their goods and wages to Louis-Philippe who is portrayed as Gargantua. He digests the tribute and excretes a fresh load of rewards and spoils to his officials sitting under his chair. The throne (a symbol of authority) is transformed into a toilet.²⁴ McCarthy is similarly destroying his father's throne. The house, which is the father's seat of authority, is reduced to an outhouse. Simultaneously, McCarthy is not only defacing the throne of his father, he also usurps the throne. He becomes Louis-Philippe, the gluttonous despot defecating on his officials. He is the portly Santa excreting his chocolate treats on his elves and reindeer.

The transgression of sexual taboos must also be understood in relation to a Mormon and Catholic upbringing. Before a child in a suburban, American, Christian home understands his catechism, he understands that Santa brings him gifts on baby Jesus' birthday. McCarthy's confusion about sex, "I didn't know what sex was," is a humiliating trauma resulting from his repressive upbringing. This trauma is acted out again and again in his adult art. Decades after childhood, in Santa's Chocolate Shop, McCarthy acts as if he still has no clear knowledge about sex. He desecrates the Santa story, which is his immature or "pregenital" understanding of Christianity. At the same time, he discovers he does not need a mature knowledge of religion or sex: he does not need to mature in order to take his father's place by mother's side. He has found that he can behave like a child and still be the omnipotent head of his home, ruling his plywood castle as a tyrannical Santa. He is content to live in his world of make-believe.

One may look at McCarthy's early work, his paintings, conceptual works, and early performances and say that he is working through different styles of art trying to find his own individual gesture which he finally discovers in the 1970s with the food performance pieces. However, this break is not so clean. There is a psychic continuity from the early works to the "original" works: in every case he is tearing down the father's universe so he can create his own anal universe. This dead father never completely rests: rather the father is always resurrecting himself from McCarthy's unconscious (the infamous "return of the repressed"). Thus, McCarthy needs to reaffirm his own superior world by reattacking the father's world even in his later work, as shown by the case of Painter.

Santa's Fecal Gift

What exactly is happening in the anal universe McCarthy creates? First of all there is an erosion of difference between sexes and generations. In his performance *Sailor's Meat* (1975), McCarthy wears a wig, women's make-up, and ladies' panties as he squeezes his "breasts" and humps a mattress saturated with mayonnaise, ketchup, and raw meat. In another performance, *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma* (1994), he combines childhood storybook imagery with sexual perversion. McCarthy, in the guise of Disney's Pinocchio, has mock sexual intercourse with a dummy that looks identical to his Pinocchio costume; both have long phallic noses. In most of his sculptures he combines figures that resemble children's characters with some sort sexually explicit imagery as he does *Pinocchio Pipenose Household dilemma. Spaghetti Man* (1993) is a slightly larger than life-size, pantless, plastic doll with a giant plush rabbit's head that could be a child's stuffed animal if it were not so gigantic. This figure has a long, limp penis that is piled on the floor like a giant piece of spaghetti.

Often this blurring of difference is intentional; describing the use of a mayonnaise jar in one performance McCarthy says: "The bottle of mayonnaise within the action is no longer a bottle of mayonnaise; it is now a woman's genitals. Or it is now a phallus."²⁵ Ambiguous imagery is meant to disturb the viewer, as he explains his choice of ketchup: "...even though they [the audience] cling to the conscious interpretation that ketchup is ketchup, I suspect that they're disturbed when ketchup is blood."²⁶

McCarthy's perverted imagery functions like that of Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil*. Roland Barthes uncovers two simultaneous metaphors, or rather, chains of signifiers, structuring the story: the metaphor of the "eye," or white globular objects, and the metaphor of "tears," or fluids that flow from the objects in the first metaphor.²⁷ These two chains have a contiguity between themselves; their terms can be exchanged: an eye weeps, a broken egg runs. A disturbance occurs when Bataille disrupts traditional contiguities and crosses terms: to break an eye, or poke out an egg. Barthes points out this is the law of the Surrealist image, the uncanny pairing of two separate realities (like the umbrella and the sewing machine).²⁸ McCarthy's performance suggest actions like bleeding ketchup, and drinking blood; excreting chocolate, and eating feces.

This collapse of difference, typical of both Bataille's and McCarthy's œuvres, is repeated again in *Santa's Chocolate Shop* (1997). According to Chasseguet-Smirgel, erosion of difference "means that all things must revert to chaos, the original chaos that may be identified with excrement."²⁹ Excrement is what one is left with in McCarthy's piece after sex has been collapsed with children's tales. Chocolate syrup pours profusely from funnels in the actor's crotches, so that it looks like oozing feces.

Traditionally, Santa's job is to bring gifts to good Christian children on Christmas. In opposition to his Mormon and Catholic upbringing, McCarthy perverts the Santa story and creates his own version. Santa's gift in Santa's Chocolate Shop is his excrement. He pours his liquid, chocolate feces on the other performers (and has them pour it on him). Freud writes that for an infant feces "are clearly treated as a part of the infant's own body and represent his first 'gift': by producing them he can express his active compliance with his environment and, by withholding them, his disobedience."³⁰ The gift of this Santa has not changed since he was born. He still offers his excrement as a gift to the world: the pervert never matures. Chasseguet-Smirgel suggests a pampering mother leads the pervert to believe that he does not need to mature: her affection causes him to believe his pregenitality is sufficient for pleasing the mother. In his own mind, Santa is being a good boy for mother by defecating profusely, he is showing his "active compliance with his environment."

Freud also writes that this association of excrement with "gift" leads children to believe that babies are born from the mother's bowels.³¹ Santa's Chocolate Shop takes place during Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, who is God's gift to the world. In McCarthy's inverted world, the anal-universe where the pervert dethrones the father to create a parody world in the image of the father's, Santa is trying to be God the Father giving gifts to his children. The streaming flow of chocolate feces gushes down their faces and overflows from their mouths; the Psalmist once wrote in gratitude to God: "...thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."³² (As usual in perversion there is also a blurring of the distinction between sexes: Santa does not just play God the Father, he also plays the Virgin Mary. Santa is the creator of the gift as well as the body that gives birth to it. There is once again also a collapse of generations: Santa is God the Father, but he is also his son, Jesus, the Good Shepherd watching over his reindeer.)

Castration Anxiety and Idealization in Santa's Chocolate Shop

A contradiction seems to be developing: if the females are mother figures that he is trying to please with his fecal gift, why does he also harm them, humiliate them, reduce them to virtual sewer pipes in the house he constructs? The reason is since they are mother figures he wants to please, they are also, as all mothers are, manifestations of the male child's fears of castration. The mother's genitals are proof that there really are people in this world without penises. An understanding of the pervert's response to the Oedipal conflict, will explain the misogyny and the use of fetish objects in Santa's Chocolate Shop. The pervert's goal is always to reassert a sense of omnipotence, not to build an understanding of the mother as a individual.

To arrive at a discussion of the pervert's "ingenious solution" to the Oedipal conflict, Chasseguet-Smirgel begins by citing "Ego splitting in the

process of defense," an unfinished 1938 article in which Freud explains how ego splitting works. The child has a strong instinctual desire, but also has an experience which teaches him that continuing to satisfy it will result in an almost intolerable real danger.³³ For example, the child desires to have incestuous relations with the mother, but there is the fear of castration or reprimand from the father. The child's ego must decide to recognize the danger and give up instinctual gratification or else make believe there is no danger and try to attain satisfaction. There is a conflict between the demand of the instinct and the prohibition by reality. However, through splitting, the child is able to take both (and neither) courses of action simultaneously.³⁴

Freud gives an example of a three year old boy who was seduced by an older girl and given the opportunity to view her genitals. When the relationship came to an end the boy began to masturbate to continue the sexual stimulation he previously obtained from watching her. Then came the threat of castration proffered by the governess but to be carried out by the father. The boy was horrified. The once harmless perception of the girl's genitals now acquired a new meaning: the threat that there are human beings with no penises.³⁵

For a normal person masturbation usually ceases at this point. It is an activity connected with unconscious incestuous fantasies which take the mother as object. The child forfeits instinctual gratification to preserve his penis, and simultaneously internalizes the incest prohibition establishing his own seat of morality, forming the Superego.³⁶ However, the child in Freud's example found another way out of the conflict: he created a fetish, which according to Freud is a substitute for the mother's missing penis. This allows him to disavow the reality of castration, because he gives mother (or the girl) a penis. Thus, he saves his penis and preserves his instinctual satisfaction at the same time. The masturbation does not cease.³⁷

In sum, perversion, in this case fetishism, is a way to elude the fatal character of the Oedipus complex. The alternative of either losing one's penis or renouncing the incestuous wish is "skipped" by what Freud calls the "ingenious solution" that constitutes perversion.³⁸ Of course, this solution comes with the price of having to turn away from reality.³⁹ The pervert succeeds in escaping typical human fate since he preserves his genitals and at the same time, their sexual function. (Freud actually writes "This way of dealing with reality...almost deserves to be described as artful.")⁴⁰ It conjures up the lost or lacking elements between mother and son which, thanks to the fetish, are reunited. Omnipotent control is carried out with the fetish: the subject can bring it close to him just as he can reject it, thus he can master all kinds of loss.⁴¹

McCarthy, like Freud's patient, uses fetishes as a way to elude the Oedipal situation. Santa's Chocolate Shop uses innumerable fetish objects

including oversized candy canes smeared with chocolate, wooden spoons of assorted sizes used to stir the syrup, funnels, and the elves' elongated noses, all of which are overtly phallic. Furthermore, his castration fears are revealed in his suppression of the females' genitalia in the performance. The women have to keep their clothes on at all times. The sight of the female's "lack" would be too unnerving. The fetishes are used to relieve the anxiety. For extra reassurance, Santa cuts a hole in one of the reindeer's costumes to reveal the performer's penis. Of course, the reindeer is humiliated in the act of having his genitals exposed by force. This is his punishment for being a male and thereby intruding on the relationship between Santa and his mother figures. In destroying the father's world the pervert puts himself in the place of the creator; Santa must be the head of his plywood household.

The use of phalluses and the exposed penis do not imply any sort of mature genitality. *Santa's Chocolate Shop* is an anal-sadistic universe. All of the phalluses (which are inanimate penises for the mother, and not the father's mature, organic penis) are covered in chocolate feces. Anality is a way to avoid genital sexuality, and the anxiety of the mother's "lack."

The logic is similar to Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. Despite its misogynist imagery, misogyny in Sade is only a precursor to the more delightful humiliation of males. Almost all of the sexual acts in *120 Days of Sodom* refer to anal intercourse. Libertine libido is often rendered impotent at the sight of female genitalia. The Duc will "fuck cunt," but only to inflict pain; and so will the Président.⁴² The Duc's brother, the Bishop, goes limp if he sees a vagina. (He had vaginal intercourse only once, and that was to procreate for the sole purpose of being able to molest his own child.)⁴³ Durcet has the same anal obsessions as the Duc and "idolized the ass with as much fervor."⁴⁴ Throughout the novel there is an emphasis on scatological imagery. The libertines' refined taste for depravity is revealed by their connoisseurship of mucous, vomit, urine, menstrual blood, bodily gases, and most of all feces. They eat each other's feces, eat their victims' feces, and force their victims to do likewise.

In both cases, *Santa's Chocolate Shop* and *120 Days of Sodom*, there is intense anxiety caused by seeing female genitalia, and the response is to turn away from mature sexuality and create an anal universe. Their reaction to the female void, that is their reaction to the castration threat introduced in the Oedipal conflict, is a turn to anality. The world of pregenital anality is easier to access than the fearful world of genitality. There is a collapse of difference: feces are edible in both cases, the distinction between oral and anal is blurred and pregenital, make-believe worlds are created. The libertines cloister themselves in their château; McCarthy creates a narcissistic world structured by Santa's anal whims. In both worlds the anal is idealized: the libertine "idolizes the ass;" McCarthy exhibits his anality as "art."

This compulsion the pervert has to idealize his feces, is also linked to the function of the fetish. Unlike Freud, Chasseguet-Smirgel points out that the fetish is not just the mother's missing penis, it is also the anal phallus, the fecal stick which is the destruction of and the substitute for the father's mature penis.⁴⁵ A fetish is usually anal and shiny: smelly and shiny. That is to say the fetish is anal and idealized.⁴⁶

Chasseguet-Smirgel explains idealization through a clinical example of one of her patient's dreams. The patient engaged in a number of perverse activities, he was an exhibitionist and he also liked to fondle women at the movies while they were sitting next to their dates. After communicating to Chasseguet-Smirgel that he had a desire to start writing, he recalled a forgotten dream. In the dream, he saw himself in a saw mill. There was a huge pile of logs and he was supposed to paint them all silver. He had to be very meticulous carefully covering each of the logs with silver paint. This reminded him that once as a child he had put some excrement on the logs at the sawmill next to his house. The creation imagined by the patient in his dream, which he associates with his wish to write, consists in covering the logs (anal phalluses) with silver paint in order to idealize them.⁴⁷ She writes "one has only to scratch the surface and the excremental nature of the phallus will reappear under the shiny coating."⁴⁸

The fetishes, the fecal sticks: candy canes, wooden spoons, funnels, and the elves' elongated noses, all get coated in chocolate syrup at some point during the performance. The chocolate is anal and shiny: it idealizes the feces to which it is meant to refer. Santa's excrement is shiny like gold or silver; it is also tasty and sweet. Piero Manzoni did a similar thing in 1961 when he canned his feces in shiny metal containers and sold them for their weight in gold (gold is shiny and valuable: it is called a "precious" metal. New born babies are often referred to as precious). The pervert must idealize his anality so he can pretend to himself and to others that his pregenital sexuality is equal if not superior to genitality.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, "One has only to scratch the surface and the excremental nature of the phallus will reappear under the shiny coating," Chasseguet-Smirgel says. In Manzoni's case, all one needs is a can opener to reveal the excrement that is masquerading beneath. Looking at the set of *Santa's Chocolate Shop* littered with empty gallon Hershey's Syrup cans, it appears McCarthy has done just that.

Scripting the Anal Universe

Usually a child wants to be grown up: when he plays he imitates what he knows of the lives of adults. However, in the case of the pervert, the mother's seduction may destroy her child's wish to be grown up like his father, and the child therefore remains cathected to pregenital sexuality, believing it is equal to or superior to genitality.⁵⁰ Chasseguet-Smirgel describes the pervert as being

akin to a student who wants to graduate without having to pass exams, as opposed to the neurotic who wants to take the exams again and again for fear of having obtained a diploma without deserving it. The neurotic attempts to conciliate his being with his seeming, whereas the pervert contents himself with make-believe.⁵¹ This world of make-believe is what Chasseguet-Smirgel calls the anal-sadistic universe. Robert Stoller's theories on perversion can be used to further explain how this universe is structured and used by the pervert, and to explain the nature of the pervert's relations to others within this universe.

Since these two analysts' theories are used to talk about the same work of art, the question of their compatibility must be addressed. There are, for instance, a number of major differences between Chasseguet-Smirgel's psychoanalytic theories and those of Stoller. Chasseguet-Smirgel builds on Freud's ideas. Stoller, on the other hand, is critical of the Freudian model of perversion. Though he does not dismiss Freud's drive theory completely, he places more emphasis on object-relations. However, since both Chasseguet-Smirgel and Stoller are working from clinical evidence, and both are working with patients having similar disorders, they often discover the same patterns of behavior in their perverted patients, though they describe them in different terms. Chasseguet-Smirgel sees perversion as a problem of a lack of maturation and development (based on a biological model), whereas Stoller sees it as a problem of avoiding intimacy with another person (based on an object-relational model). In one sense, both are saying the same thing: one needs to be psychologically mature in order to have intimate relations with another person. Their different diagnosis would probably prescribe different modes of therapy. However, that is not of concern here where the purpose is to understand how the pervert's patterned behavior, described by both Chasseguet-Smirgel and Stoller, is played out in *Santa's Chocolate Shop*.

Stoller does not like that Freud calls all aberrations perversions. Stoller claims this assumes there is a common dynamic underlying all perversion when there is none.⁵² Stoller thus creates his own definitions for terms like aberration and perversion. An aberration, according to Stoller is an erotic technique outside one's own culture's definition of normality.⁵³ A variant, or deviation, is an aberration that is not primarily the staging of forbidden fantasies. It is often a sexual experiment done out of curiosity and is not necessarily repeated by the subject.⁵⁴ Perversion, according to Stoller, is the erotic form of hatred. Perversion is a fantasy, usually acted out, but occasionally restricted to a daydream. It is a habitual aberration and is necessary for the subject's satisfaction.⁵⁵ Perversion is primarily motivated by hostility. By "hostility" he means "a state in which one wishes to harm an object; that differentiates it from 'aggression,' which often implies only forcefulness."⁵⁶ Hostility, unlike aggression, necessarily implies a victim.

These distinctions show Stoller's thinking in terms of object-relations, that is, how the subject relates to other people, rather than focusing on the drives. What is important for Stoller is the pervert's relation to others. Aberrations are defined in terms of the subject's culture, that is to say his sexual actions are considered in relation to the actions of those around him. The problem in cases of perversion, Stoller claims, is that its dehumanizing nature prevents the subject from having intimate relationships. This is unlike Chasseguet-Smirgel's theory which says the problem in perversion is that the subject cannot reach mature genital sexuality since he has cathected, that is, he has invested drive energy into, his pregenitality.

Stoller claims that perversion is a response to a humiliating and traumatic event. This trauma is not necessarily related to the Oedipal situation, as Chasseguet-Smirgel claims. However, the Oedipal trauma is also likely to be rescripted later in life. In their daydreams, people take traumatic events and reconstruct them into scripts "...the principle purpose of which is to undo childhood traumas, conflicts, and frustrations by converting these earlier painful experiences to present (fantasized) triumphs. To build these daydreams, the patients make use of mystery, secrets, risk running, revenge, and dehumanizing (fetishizing) of their objects. In all these qualities, hatred is a manifest or latent presence."⁵⁷ Perversion is a case in which hatred is necessary for erotic excitement.

Perversion preserves the structure of the trauma with which the subject cannot cope,⁵⁸ much the way the anal-universe parodies the father's world that the child is rejecting in response to the castration threat. The script must always be replayed over and over, because each performance is only a quick fix to the trauma: "...all perverse acts...are instant cures, magic bullets. That, even beyond body pleasure, is reason enough to repeat them. The sad part is that, without insight into what he does, the perverse person must repeat his destructive acts endlessly—aspirin for a brain tumor."⁵⁹ Similarly, Chasseguet-Smirgel also notes the pervert's drive to repetition. She says the pervert constantly needs to affirm his conviction to himself and others that his pregenitality is equal to or even superior to the father's genitality. McCarthy's oeuvre is a constant repetition of his anality. For decades he has been smothering himself and others in ketchup, chocolate, and mayonnaise while simulating pregenital sex acts. There is never any maturation, because it is an instant cure that does not alter the structure of the problem. McCarthy's work is like "aspirin for a brain tumor."

McCarthy's Erotic Form of Hatred

The connection between erotic excitement and hatred is manifest in a statement McCarthy gave during an interview. When asked when he started using sexual imagery in his work, he responds with the following:

The paintings I did in 1966 had sexual imagery. They were triptychs with a machine beast or a tree beast in the center, surrounded on both sides by nude females...I also started painting with my hands....The paintings were laid flat on the ground. The act of painting itself was sexual, was a sensual act. The last one was almost black, no figures. This was in 1968. I always lit the paintings on fire. I poured gasoline on them and threw a match. I let them burn until they became charred.⁶⁰

There is a lot happening in this statement from a psychoanalytic perspective. First of all, McCarthy is making a connection between machines and women. This is a dehumanizing and destructive view of women, all too typical of modern art.⁶¹ As Stoller says, the pervert "dehumanizes his object to feel safe enough to get excited."⁶² As seen earlier in Sade and McCarthy's suppression of the female genitalia, the threat of castration is again present; a person without a penis is proof that this threat is real. In order to feel safe the pervert must dehumanize the woman: either he can give her a penis, that is, an inanimate fetish object, or he can reduce her to a machine, effectively resolving the problem by saying that there are no humans without penises since women are machines, not humans.

Secondly, he calls the act of painting "sexual" (a statement which he can make only after he has safely dehumanized the objects within his painting). With his canvas on the ground he reaches down like Narcissus touching his reflection in order to paint with his hands. A solitary act with an inanimate materials does not involve intimate contact with another human. Calling such a gesture "sexual" is, as Stoller describes perversion, "a detour that leads asymptotically to intimacy: it never arrives."⁶³

Finally, he was asked a question about sexual imagery, but after a few sentences he begins talking about destroying his canvases by igniting them on fire. Though he is probably unaware of the associations he is making as he speaks (just as Narcissus was at first unaware that the image he fell in love with was his own), he is revealing the hostility that is necessary in order for him to have his so-called "sexual" experience with painting. He needs to destroy the object in order to have an erotic experience with it.

Santa's "Swollen Feet"

The pervert scripts a traumatic event. He dehumanizes his actors in order to make them feel the same humiliation he once felt. In McCarthy's past there is one particular trauma he recalls that still bothers him. Later in the interview cited above he is asked why he uses such powerful imagery, and if he has traced it to anything:

You mean trauma? I was a breech birth. I came out ass first and bent over. It was a difficult delivery. Maybe I have physical memories of it. I have done a series of performances that involve the act of being bent over grabbing my toes. I asked my mother about being breech birth. She made light of it, made some joke. They'd put her to sleep anyway. Using sex in my work has a lot to do with anxiety. For the most part it is directed at myself and objects.⁶⁴

This is obviously an event that is unresolved and very sensitive for him. When he asks his mother about it, she jokes around. She laughs in his face. He is humiliated at her expense. He came to her with a concern, with a need to be nurtured, but he is rejected like Oedipus, forlorn in the middle of the desert. His world has been turned upside down as he hangs by those cursed feet: the feet he was clutching the first time he was rejected from mother "ass first and bent over."

Stoller explains that humor always involves hostility in varying degrees, like the man slipping on a banana peel. One person's humor is another person's humiliation.⁶⁵ McCarthy falls victim to his mother's laugh. A victim must rescript the humiliation: preserving the structure of the trauma, he must humiliate someone else so that he can put himself in the position to laugh. This way he can master, for at least a brief period, the situation in which he was once so helpless.⁶⁶ For the pervert erotic excitement depends on this humiliation of someone else.⁶⁷

However, rescripting the trauma does not change the trauma. It only covers it in silver paint, as Chasseguet-Smirgel would say. The situation is not sublimated or transformed. Therefore, it only provides a "quick fix" that must be repeated over and over "like aspirin for a brain tumor" as Stoller says. McCarthy recalls that he has done many performances where he grabs his feet. In an early video performance called *Mooning* (1973), McCarthy, standing with his back to the camera, simply drops his pants and shoves his bare bottom into the lens. Just like when he was born, he introduces himself to his spectators with only his naked buttocks. However, this time he has control over the situation. This time he is not the one being violated, rather he is violating the spectators, offending them with his vulgar performance. (He often tries to bring the audience down to his level. For example, the sculptures, such as Spaghetti Man, are so big that they make the viewer feel infantile by comparison, infantile like the sexuality of McCarthy embodied in the sculptures.)

He has also done performances where he simulates giving birth. In *Baby Boy* (1982) McCarthy is lying on his back on a table: his legs are spread open, his crotch is covered in ketchup, and out of his hospital gown he pushes a baby doll. The baby's head is the last thing to come out and it gets stuck under the gown (appearing to be still trapped in the womb). In this perfor-

mance McCarthy can play the mother, the one who gets to quietly sleep under anesthesia while the baby suffers his humiliating entry into the world.

Santa's Chocolate Shop once again rescripts the trauma of his breech birth and the humiliation of his mother's response to his inquiry. The performance is happening on Christmas, the day celebrating Christ's humiliating birth in a stable full of animals and their feces. Santa, like McCarthy coming out of the womb, comes down the chimney "ass first" bringing his fecal gifts. To make others share in his former humiliation, Santa dehumanizes his elves and reindeer. The women are made to crawl like animals through tight, disorienting passageways constructed in the plywood house. Getting themselves into the right position to receive Santa's gift is often an arduous process. They must recreate McCarthy's difficult birth experience, and after they do, Santa's bare anus is ready to expel a funnel full of chocolate excrement in their faces. Could anything be more humiliating than to be defecated on by someone else?

The men are also humiliated. This time McCarthy, not his mother, gets to laugh. While belting out a jolly, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Santa cuts into the one of the reindeer's costumes with a pair of scissors so that the performer's buttocks are exposed. McCarthy is effectively saying, "How do you like it, having your ass being the first thing a crowd of people sees of you?" Thus, by scripting the trauma of his breech birth, he is once again able to displace his own feelings of humiliation onto someone else, and preserve his immature feeling of omnipotence.

Conclusion

McCarthy's work, like all perversion, is a quick fix for his trauma. It structures itself on the very trauma against which it is reacting against. Therefore, he is never able to mature out of his anal-sadistic universe. He is in a constant fight to keep idealizing his anality, fetishizing it, making it shiny and edible, calling it "art" so that its true excremental nature is not exposed. For decades he has been playing the same script.

Is this art a dead end? Not from the pervert's point of view. The pervert is content in his world of make-believe. He feels no need to mature, nor to form intimate relations with other people. At the same time, Stoller argues that perversion, when directed at inanimate objects, is actually necessary for society. He writes, "...since its central dynamic is hostility, perversion serves to channel murderous hatred out into calmer currents of the imagination, such as religion, art, pornography, and daydreams."⁶⁸ By acting out rage in socially acceptable ways, such as performance art, perversion "lowers the murder rate in families"⁶⁹ as Stoller says. McCarthy does not have to kill his father real father, he can poke fun at the Abstract Expressionists. He does not have to murder his mother, he can simply pay models and act out his hostility towards women in a safe manner. He can act out his hostility by destroying art objects

and not people.

Psychoanalyst Michael Balint agrees there are some benefits to this tendency to destroy objects. The modern artist's narcissism, his tendency to destroy objects, to leave them in a discordant state "has made an immense contribution to human maturity by demonstrating that we do not need to repress the fact that in and around us such discordant features exist."⁷⁰ When McCarthy performs his deepest childhood traumas he is proclaiming that there is no need to repress them. Furthermore, McCarthy's sadism is reserved for the arena of art, not for everyday life. Despite its repulsion, despite the objectionable subject matter, McCarthy has transformed his potentially harmful traumas into a socially safe form. However, as Balint continues, this kind of narcissistic state in the modern artist is unstable, and it can spontaneously disintegrate,⁷¹ and Stoller rightly observes that when the pervert dehumanizes others he is also dehumanizing himself. The question that remains is how long can work like this go on before it reaches psychological exhaustion as the shiny silver paint begins to wear away?

I wish to thank Dr. Lucy Bowditch for her help reading parts of this paper.

Notes

1 Lühring Augustine Gallery, April 2001

2 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 2.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., pp. 28-29.

5 Ibid., p. 2.

6 Ibid., pp. 2-6.

7 Ibid., p. 4.

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 Ibid., p. 3.

10 Ibid., p. 27.

11 Ibid., p. 11.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 4-5.

14 Paul McCarthy, "Interview with Linda Montano," in *Performance: Artists Talking in the Eighties*, compiled by Linda M. Montano. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 97.

15 Chasseguet-Smirgel, pp. 91-93.

16 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," in *The Tradition of the New*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), p. 25.

17 Ibid., p. 31.

18 Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 11.

- 19 Ibid., p. 8.
- 20 Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*, quoted in Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 8.
- 21 Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 4.
- 22 A term borrowed from Donald Kuspit's *The Dialectic of Decadence: Between Advance and Decline in Art*. (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), p.25. The pervers's logic is similar to Kuspit's description of the avant-garde artist's logic: "Advanced art needs inauthentic, decadent art as an enemy in order to declare its own authentic, advanced character....The repression of decadent art in the mind of the advanced artist...sustains the advanced artist's self-belief....The repression is a kind of narcissistic displacement; in castrating an art by declaring it to be decadent or bankrupt the artist avoids self-castration, that is, represses the self-undermining feeling of possible impotence" (pp. 24-25).
- 23 McCarthy, "Interview with Linda Montano," p. 97.
- 24 Elizabeth C. Childs, "Big Trouble: Daumier, *Gargantua*, and the Censorship of Political Caricature," *Art Journal* vol. 51, (Spring 1992), p. 29-31.
- 25 Paul McCarthy, "Interview with Kristine Stiles," in *Paul McCarthy* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 14.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye" (1963), *Critical Essays*, Trans. Richard Howard. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 242-243.
- 28 Ibid., p. 243.
- 29 Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 4
- 30 Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) Trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 52.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Psalm 23:5b, King James Version.
- 33 Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 25.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 25-26.
- 36 Ibid., p. 26.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., p. 88.
- 42 Marquis de Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*, in *The 120 Days of Sodom and Other Writings*, Trans. Wainhouse and Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 211.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Chasseguet-Smirgel, p. 82.
- 46 Ibid., p. 88.
- 47 Ibid., pp. 92-93.
- 48 Ibid., p. 93.
- 49 Ibid., p. 91.
- 50 Ibid., p. 29.
- 51 Ibid., p. 34.

- 52 Robert J. Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 7.
- 53 Stoller, *Perversion: the Erotic Form of Hatred* (London: Karnac Books, 1975), p. 3.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid., p. 4.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, p. vii.
- 58 Ibid., p. 28-29.
- 59 Ibid., p. 20.
- 60 McCarthy, "Interview with Linda Montano," p. 97.
- 61 In a paper delivered at the New Museum April 18, 2002, Donald Kuspit described *Cloaca* as yet another example of this disturbing characteristic of modern art. The cloaca fantasy is a child's fantasy of the mother's opening, usually associated with her anus. Thus *Cloaca* is female, but a female that has been dehumanized, transformed into a shit-producing machine.
- 62 Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination*, p. 32
- 63 Ibid., p. 31.
- 64 McCarthy, "Interview with Linda Montano," p. 97.
- 65 Stoller, "Observing the Erotic Imagination," p. 26.
- 66 Ibid., pp. 18, 26, 28-29.
- 67 Ibid., p. 7.
- 68 Stoller, *Perversion: the Erotic Form of Hatred*, p. 218.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 Michael Balint, "The Dissolution of Object-Representation in Modern Art," *JAAC*, 10 (1952), p. 326.
- 71 Ibid., p. 325.

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