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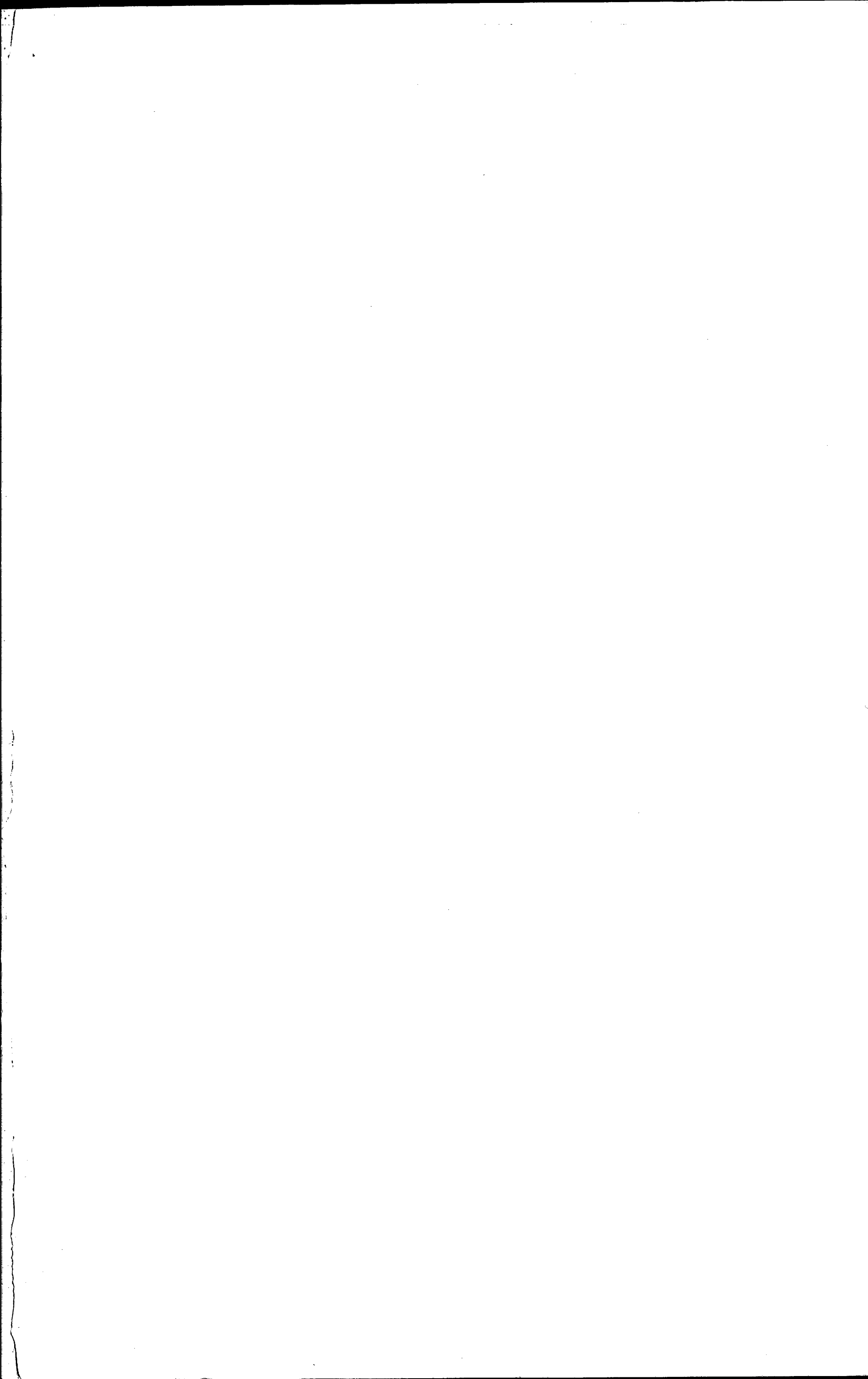
# Art Criticism



# Art Criticism

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# Historical Misrepresentation at the Guggenheim-B.M.W. The Art of the Motorcycle Exhibition

Dan Devine

Thomas Krens, director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the curator of the museum's "The Art of the Motorcycle" exhibition that opened in June 1998, writes in his preface to the accompanying catalog that this show "is part of that trajectory of exhibition programming at the Guggenheim that will broaden the museum's cultural reach." This beautiful exhibition is seemingly designed to seduce a large and diverse audience that may include many who are unaware of the accusations of bias and exclusion brought against museums in recent years. For this general public a museum as great as the Guggenheim has the power to write history. "The Art of the Motorcycle" is traveling from New York to Chicago and then to Bilbao, Spain, and would have been the perfect opportunity to bring the cultures of Eastern Europe into focus for a Western audience after a century of division, misinformation and paranoia. Modernism, of which the motorcycle is part, has many of its roots in Eastern Europe. Except for the manias and phobias of national leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, politics should not have mediated our friendly competition. Now with the Cold War over it would seem appropriate to celebrate our new found unity. Instead, with B.M.W. (Bavarian Motor Works) of Germany as its supporter, the Guggenheim has created an exhibition that deletes the aesthetic and technological triumphs of renowned Eastern European designers and manufacturers.

Of the 95 motorcycles entered into history by this exhibition, only one is from the Czech Republic, Austria or Saxony (a part of Germany that would find itself behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War). And to make this elimination even crueler, the curators have co-opted the sole eastern representatives, the Bohmerland/Cechie* from Czechoslovakia, and D.K.W. from Saxony, into the former West Germany. Their deception is so subtle that had there been equitable representation from these parts of the world, one might have considered it an innocent mistake. But to claim ignorance, the curators would have had to choose a less sharp knife when carving those countries and their cultures cleanly off the world they were shaping. It seems irresponsible for the Guggenheim Museum to mount a show encouraging this lop-sided and chauvinist view of history. Accompanied by a document in the form of a lavish 427 page catalog, this show clearly dismisses the stunning achievements of Eastern Europe.

One of "The Art of the Motorcycle" catalog essays, entitled "New World Orders: 1930-1944," written by associate curator for research Matthew Drutt, pictures a Europe whose only players are Germany, Italy and Russia. In this account, all of Germany's political problems, and financial instabilities, were based on having been "humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles." The Weimar Republic is only mentioned as having been "buried under the weight of inflation and unemployment." Drutt goes on to describe the rise of fascism and its battle for supremacy with communism. Few would argue with these facts, but the history of this period is far more complex and provocative. By focusing on political and military concerns, this essay dismisses the cultural and industrial design achievements of half of Europe. While Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin are important to the world's history, their vulgarity should not be allowed to steal glamour from countries whose ambitions were defined in the relatively peaceful sphere of modernist design excellence. By the shrewd co-option of two motorcycles of Saxon and Czech manufacture into West Germany (Bohmerland/Cechie of Czechoslovakia and D.K.W. of Saxon Germany) and by ignoring the many others from those regions as well as Austria, the curators have presented a history that seemingly starts and finishes with Bavaria.[1]

The curators have also hired motorcycling writers and historians to create many of the short synopsis essays that accompany the picture of each motorcycle in the catalog. These expert sources from outside the art museum world would appear to lend credibility to a show with such an unusual theme. One excellent choice is Mick Walker, a motorcycle historian who has published widely on the subject. He may be England's leading authority on continental European motorcycling and a wise choice to write on almost a third of the bikes in the show. But the cramped space available to these writers and probably considerable editing creates conditions ripe for uncompleted topics and innuendo. Walker has written all six of B.M.W.'s entries and therefore had ample space to present their history. But his one piece each for Bohmerland/Cechie and D.K.W. shows how even a writer of Walker's ability and integrity can be undermined.

A combination of co-option and slurs directed toward the east is apparent throughout the entire exhibition. Take the case of the one Czech motorcycle included in the exhibit. As exhibited it is listed as a 1925 Bohmerland. This motorcycle was manufactured in Czechoslovakia as the *Cechie* but exported to Germany as the *Bohmerland*. It's clearly inappropriate to refer to this machine only by its German name when historically it is identified as the *Bohmerland/Cechie*. Without its full, hyphenated name the bike's Czech authorship is virtually obliterated in favor of German consumption. If the example on display is an export model, this fact could have been elucidated in the essay. But in this case the curators chose to ignore the facts, by merely mentioning in passing that, "in Czechoslovakia they were *called Cechie*." Even seventy

years ago the independent names were only roughly interchangeable. The first is German for Bohemia while the second is a Czech colloquial reference to what is now the Czech Republic (a Moravian could rightly question this implied equation because it includes industrially significant Moravia as Czech rather than Bohemian). In any case one might have expected the scholars of a great museum to understand this, which is after all no more complex than knowing when to say "Babylonian" and when "Mesopotamian." And while Bohmerland always appears intact with "umlaut," Cechie is allowed (even with the great computer capability of Guggenheim-B.M.W.) to lose much of its meaning as spelled without its proper diacritical "hacek." The catalog description also asserts that the motorcycle's designer, Albin Liebisch, "relied on bright color schemes—yellow and red, yellow and black or yellow and green—at a time when most vehicles were finished in a single shade and a conservative one at that." That year was 1925, when "Surrealism" and the "Roaring Twenties" were in full swing, typified by Michael Drutt in another of his essays, "The Machine Age," a time of "social liberation and an outburst of artistic creativity." It simply wasn't inconsistent with the times for a designer to have used bright colors. Is this to infer that this Bohemian designer was suspiciously out of step with the rest of our rational world? Fortunately Mr. Liebisch is hardly alone in his color choices: Also included in the show are the brightly colored (Bavarian) 1922 Megola, the Italian 1924 Moto-Guzzi, and the two-tone red and black 1929 Scott from England. The 1923 B.M.W. was finished in the sober black.

Just as insidiously subtle as the Cechie obfuscation is the apparent co-option (one could even say annexation) of D.K.W. Here the curators have chosen to highlight the RT 125 W. This particular motorcycle was manufactured at Ingolstadt, Bavaria (see footnote number one), in the former West Germany. But by choosing this 1952 machine as the sole representative the curators have shifted attention away from D.K.W.'s glorious past. This model was designed in 1939 at the Zschopau factory in what was to become East Germany. Conveniently, in the catalog essay no distinction was made between east and west when they declared this model "an instant hit with the German Army." That German Army was the Wehrmacht. Yet the curators have found it necessary to cut a company's design, engineering, and sporting credentials out of the exhibit apparently due to the political divisions present in 1952. Is this to imply that Germans are worthy to be called German when they are united through a totalitarian fascist military government, but when some of those same Germans are temporarily subjugated by a communist oppressor they are not? Rather than highlight D.K.W.'s remarkable history by exhibiting one of their extremely beautiful engineering marvels, a championship winning SS 250 or SS 350, Mick Walker breezes through their racing accomplishments of the late thirties in a mere dozen and a half words. The fact is, they were a leader in the development of supercharging (the use of an air compressor to raise an

engine's power by increasing the amount of gasoline/air mixture normally available to it) for racing motorcycles. Not mentioned is that most of Germany's best riders rode for D.K.W. and they won championships and set records equal to B.M.W. in the late thirties. Hitler's quest for German superiority in sporting events served both B.M.W.'s and D.K.W.'s racing departments well in terms of financial support unequaled in other countries. However before the Third Reich focused attention on racing success, D.K.W., established in 1905, had already become the world's largest producer of motorcycles. Their history had roots in peaceful modernist ideals long before B.M.W.'s forced retirement from war plane motor manufacturing under the terms of the 1918 Armistice. All this was achieved at Zschopau, Germany, previous to the partition. In Walker's own books he has clearly emphasized D.K.W.'s as well as other Saxon manufacturer's enormous importance to motorcycle design and history.

D.K.W.'s pre-war status is also made quite clear in "The German Motor Cycle Industry," a report produced by the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee after W.W.II.[2] Here, the investigators record, "It was not possible to visit the largest manufacturer of motor cycles, namely D.K.W." because they "were located in the Russian zone." But when interviewing other German motorcycle manufacturers they were informed, "The D.K.W. concern were known to have as much or more knowledge of two-stroke engines, than any of the other manufacturers, and, we were frequently informed that they had carried out an immense amount of important research work—in fact, frequent remarks were passed to us that certain two-stroke engines were 'as good as the D.K.W.' In other words, D.K.W. were held in very high esteem, and any information that could be possibly extracted by subsequent investigation, would be most useful." Regarding "Trend of Design," the committee reported that, "the Artist has been consulted in regard to the general 'line' of the machine." And on this theme it wrote, "see particularly the 350cc DKW design."

In displaying a particular motorcycle made after the partitioning of Germany in the short and comparatively undistinguished period in which D.K.W.'s factory relocated to the Western Sector, the curators have thus legitimized the co-opting of this famous eastern manufacturer into the west.

Furthermore it is briefly mentioned in the Guggenheim catalog that the former Zschopau factory "went on to make motorcycles for the Warsaw Pact countries". This gross understatement suggests that the new company created in the void by ex-D.K.W. employees could only duplicate a model left on their assembly line floor and ignores the fact that under a new name, M.Z. (Motorrad Zschopau), they once again made motorcycling history. Here we have another example of the Guggenheim's unwillingness to recognize the east. Considering M.Z.'s subsequent record it is impossible to justify their omission from "The Art of the Motorcycle." They were the company that won many World Championships and International Six Days Trials. M.Z. motor-

cycles put East Germany into winner's circles many years in a row. Under the guidance of engineer Walter Kaaden, that company revolutionized race engineering with the development of the disc-valve and tuned-exhaust. M.Z.'s top rider, Ernst Degner, won race after race for M.Z. until he defected from communist East Germany. In 1961 he left and took M.Z.'s revolutionary race tuning secrets with him. He was hired by Suzuki, of Japan, in 1962. Together they subsequently won Suzuki's first World Championship. M.Z.'s engineering innovations remain part of today's racing repertoire.

The Guggenheim's oversight seems all the more incredible when you consider the enormous amount of information available from experts in the field and throughout motorcycle literature. Their catalog credits a 22-person "Technical and Historical Advisory Board." It was to the curators' advantage to have consulted Sammy Miller and Harry Lindsay, both of whom (if this Lindsay is the person I knew as Bultaco Importer to Ireland in the early 70's) would certainly have been great help in accurately locating historically, the Spanish motorcycle firm Bultaco. Likewise, Don Emde and Bud Ekins were wise choices for their intimate knowledge of post-war motorcycle sport. A puzzling omission from this list of experts, though, is John Penton. As a competitor and manufacturer, Mr. Penton would seem crucial to a comprehensive narrative of both American and European "off-road" competition for this same period. In the 50's and 60's, he rode B.M.W.'s to an impressive number of enduro wins and championships. At one point he even set the Pacific to Atlantic highway record on B.M.W. As America grew more proficient at the enduro competition it set its sights on the International Six Days Trial (the "Olympics" of motorcycling) held in Europe each year. Penton developed the American Team and was its Captain. He also designed and marketed the *Penton* motorcycle. The *Penton* was made in Austria by K.T.M. to John Penton's specification using their own motorcycle as a basis. The *Penton* became the American Team Bike and was the standard by which all enduro machines in the United States were judged. K.T.M., in business since 1953, have in their own right been an international success. Their machines have won both the U.S. and World Moto-Cross Championships many times in recent years and they continue to be a leader. By excluding John Penton and K.T.M. from its history, the Guggenheim have once again avoided a link to Eastern Europe. Sadly, in this case they have ignored a great leader of American motorcycling and the team that represented the U.S.A. year after year.

With its thirty-page bibliography, the catalog suggests a very high level of scholarship. Of these, seven pages are categorized "Historical." But it is impossible to know which of these books were used in shaping the exhibition. Sixteen of Mick Walker's books are listed. In addition to those, three other books alone, if actually read by the curators, would have improved veracity. *Motorcycles, 1885-1940* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1983), is an especially good

source. The author, Juraj Porazik, a well-respected motorcycle historian, has also produced (along with several other Slavic contributors) *Stare Motocycle* (2nd ed., Warsaw, 1991). His book offers detailed accounts of industrial, product and racing history through 1940, when relatively peaceful modernist era development was disrupted as the whole world was drawn into war. Another is *Racing Motor Cycles* (London: Hamlyn, 1973), by Mick Woolett, the renowned photo-journalist with a lifetime of motorcycle knowledge. In this book, he defines the international road-racing scene from 1907 to 1973. The third, Hugo Wilson's *The Ultimate Motorcycle Book* (London, 1993), ends with the year of the first "The Art of the Motorcycle" curatorial meetings.

Mr. Porazik's account of history acknowledges many of the same motorcycles presented by the Guggenheim, but equally presents the great achievements of other companies exiled beyond the borders defined by this exhibition. Companies like C.Z. of Strakonice, the B.D. from Prague, Premier, at Eger (all in Czechoslovakia), and Diamant, in the Saxon town of Nevoigt. One manufacturer of especial interest is Wanderer, of Schonau near Chemnitz, an early industrialized city along the Elbe river in what would later be East Germany. Starting motorcycle production in 1902, they immediately set standards for others to follow, first with the V-twin motor as far back as 1903, then later with the telescopic spring rear and link front suspension and the electric horn. They were considered the leading German motorcycle designers for the first quarter-century. Wanderer motorcycles were imported into Czechoslovakia by a firm that employed the renowned engineer Frantisek Janecek. In 1929 Janacek bought the rights to the 500cc overhead-valve, shaft-drive model. He re-named it JAWA (JA=Janecek and WA=Wanderer). In 1932 Wanderer joined with D.K.W., Audi and Horch to form Auto Union. Wanderer produced automobile frames until they closed shop at the beginning of World War II. JAWA, of Prague, under the guidance of Janecek became an industry leader. From the smaller two-strokes to big overhead-cam twins, their technical advantage was apparent both in sales to the public and on the race track. JAWA's were sold in every part of the world. Their successes in Grand Prix racing, at the prestigious Isle of Man race, on speedway circuits and in the International Six Days Trials, are all part of company's illustrious history.

Porazik's book is crucial to understanding the seriousness of the Guggenheim's omissions. One learns of the 1902 Walter of Prague, an early motorcycle with two-wheel braking, and of the 1903 Laurin & Klement Slavia, made at Mlada Boleslav, in the now Czech Republic, with it's 600cc V-twin motor. This company also anticipated the gender revolution by creating a specifically woman's model a full fifteen years before the woman's movement would force its way into the pubic conscience. Puch from Graz, Austria, was by 1903 already producing machines with motors mounted low in the frame, an innovation which would become the industry's convention in future years.

While no one would challenge the relevance of the1902 Indian included by the Guggenheim, the bikes I've mentioned are its equal in every way and make clear the importance of Austrian, Czech and Saxon contributions to motorcycle history.

Porazik's publication also demonstrates how the 1934 Gnome et Rhone from France, lauded by the Guggenheim for its stamped-metal frame, was technically overshadowed by D.K.W., Wanderer and JAWA who had accomplished this feat nearly ten years earlier. Also, when describing the Gnome et Rhone, the Guggenheim's seeming apology, "There is nothing remarkable in the side-valve" 306cc motor, and for it being "chain driven," would have been unnecessary if the curators had chosen to exhibit a Wanderer or JAWA instead. These bikes were at the forefront of motorcycle design with 500cc over-head valve engines and shaft-drives.

For information concerning the post-war years the curators could have consulted the books by either Mr. Wilson or Mr. Woolett. Both give positive accounts of Eastern Europe's motorcycling accomplishments. Wilson gives M.Z. a full two-page spread including a photograph of their gas cap listing their sporting titles: "World Trophy Winners, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1969." In the section entitled "Austria," he includes a picture of the 1979 K.T.M., and writes of the company's 250 Moto-Cross bike, ridden by Russia's Gennady Moiseyev to the 1974 World Championship.[3] As for post-war Czechoslovakia, Wilson notes that: "During the 1960's C.Z. produced excellent motocross bikes that won world championships several times." Wilson also mentions the Eso(-JAWA) Speedway motorcycle. These remarkable machines were first built in 1949 and became part of JAWA in 1966. It must be noted here that while the Guggenheim's 1949 Jackson-Rotrax Speedway racer is certainly a classic with its JAP engine dating back to the thirties, it was eclipsed by the technologically advanced Eso-JAWA as word of its dominance on speedway and ice-racing courses spread west over the Iron Curtain and south from Scandanavia.

Other surprising omissions from the Guggenheim show include Germany's Horex from Bad Homburg and Freidl Munch's early "superbike," the Mammoth, Sweden's Husqvarna and the Danish Nimbus, to only mention a few. These are great motorcycles with significant historical value, although in this essay I am concentrating on the East-West issue.

Of the many Eastern manufacturers, it is impossible to justify the omission of Adler and Puch. Adler, from Saxony, was established in 1886 as a bicycle manufacturer, it entered the motorcycle market briefly from 1902 to 1909. Then in 1949 they resumed motorcycle manufacture with revolutionary two-stroke machines. The 1952 MB250 was the beginning of a truly pre-eminent line. This motorcycle was fast, reliable and handsome. In his book *Classic Motorcycles* (Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books; Greenwich, CT: Brompton Books,

1991), Mick Walker says, it "became a trendsetter, influencing designers in both Britain and Japan." These influences can easily be seen in early Yamaha twins. Adlers are prized by collectors and are as important to German motorcycle design during the mid-fifties as NSU and BMW. Puch, from Austria, has a long, worldwide reputation. Starting as a bicycle manufacturer in 1899, their first motorcycles four years later, were an immediate success. With motors mounted low in the frame, they were very stable and good handling machines for their day. In 1916, they were early to develop the flat-twin or boxer motor, a design that later became a hallmark of B.M.W. They went on to produce very successful four cylinder motors of this same design. In 1929 they introduced their world-renowned double-piston single cylinder model, that in 1931 won the German Grand Prix. This design provided Puch a competitive position, with powerful touring bikes well into the 1960's. Following World War II, the popular American company Sears-Roebuck marketed the bike under their tradename Allstate. Puch continues to produce high quality motorcycles distributed throughout the world.

As a racer of JAWA, C.Z. and Eso from Czechoslovakia during the 1960's, I was continually reminded by my fellow competitors, "those machines are made by the Reds." My many interactions with the proud Czechs at the importer of Motokov (the state owned motor industry) products in New York City confirmed that Communism was not the happiest time in their history. But neither was it when the Germans were there. An article published in the January 1946 issue of *Motorcyclist* magazine (Los Angeles), expresses the Czechs' enthusiasm for motor sport and their love of America. Just months after the close of the war the writer Ervin Trajac,[4] declares proudly, "Six years of occupation and war had little influence on the activities of the Czechoslovak racing men." He goes on to describe a great National speedway race held at Strahov Stadium in Prague with 100,000 (this great a number may have been a typo) in attendance, and a road race in Moravia. The international field of bikes included B.M.W., D.K.W., JAWA, as well as Harley-Davidson from America and England's Norton, Douglas, and Rudge. The same article announces new models from Czechoslovakia's big three, JAWA, C.Z. and Ogar. 1946 was the year that JAWA finally could make public their innovative 250 with automatic clutch action, enclosed headlight casing (very similar to the types incorporated into England's Ariel, B.S.A. and Triumph lines in the 50's) and electric gear indicator for the rider's convenience (because of the severe tire shortages throughout Europe at that time, new bikes were being delivered without them). At one point Mr. Trajac lists the names of famous racers who were "killed in the battle for liberation or by the enemy during the occupation." He goes on to declare the Czechoslovak people's respect for American motorcycles and racers: they "have great affection for Americans, and an exchange of riders" (and race venues with America) "would go a long way toward furthering the friendly

relations of our two countries." Our feelings for them must have been warm as well, because a photo from the Strahov race comprised the cover of that month's issue.

Surely in 1998 it would be unreasonable to accuse Ford Motor Company employees of anti-Semitism on the grounds that Henry Ford had railed against Jews in his *Dearborn Independent* newspaper during the 1920's, and for the same reason it would be unjust to suggest that all Germans are xenophobics bent on world domination. And at the end of the twentieth-century, an appropriate time to be celebrating a hundred years of motorcycle history, we are also witness to a newly-powerful Germany, symbolically throwing off its World War II mantle of guilt by restoring Berlin as its capital. But we also see "ethnic cleansing" is still active as a means of controlling populations in many parts of the world. "The Art of the Motorcycle" is an exhibition that could have done a great deal to correct the kind of narrow-mindedness that permits national leaders to wreak destruction on entire cultures. In addition to honestly educating a public in terms of politics and history, the Guggenheim should have enthusiastically joined the rest of the world in celebrating the remarkable engineering, design and sporting achievements of all of Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria.

Whether the misrepresentation of history as exhibited in "The Art of the Motorcycle" is a result of corporate zeal, cultural bias or curatorial ignorance is a matter of opinion. But the injustice resonates at many levels. Here we see, once again, the peoples who have struggled and succeeded in freeing themselves from oppression being kicked with a mean boot as they board the train to freedom. We witness the achievements of worthy engineers, designers and sporting competitors dismissed with callous disregard. While the hurt to these individuals and their heirs cannot be undone now that the blow has been dealt, history can be revised with an eye toward equity. But the greatest danger may be for the future, as the real scholarship one expects from cultural institutions this large takes the seat in the sidecar, and corporations with vested interests assume the sponsorship of big shows with popular themes.

*Due to computer limitations, the term *Cechie* is reproduced in this article without the proper diacritical "hacek."

**Notes**

1 The Hildebrand and Wolfmuller of Munich in Bavaria is universally recognized as the world's first production motorcycle. This coincidence and B.M.W.'s current high profile presents an opportunity for overstatement. There seems to be an attempt by the Guggenheim curators to shift attention away from Germany during the first quarter century when Wanderer of Saxony was clearly that nation's best. Then the Guggenheim reinstates German motorcycle history

with the 1922 Megola, then an Imme, a Kreidler, a Zundapp, and six BMW's (all Bavarian). Of the13 German bikes exhibited, only N.S.U. and the co-opted D.K.W. are not Bavarian. However, D.K.W.'s move to Bavaria after the partitioning of Germany and their later (1969) corporate link with N.S.U. through Auto Union at Ingolstadt completes a solid 13 to 0 for Bavaria. In Germany, as in most other countries, motorcycles were produced in many regions. This same Bavarian chauvinism is apparent in the catalog's two cover versions. While discretely avoiding criticism by not featuring BMW, the museum chose to glorify Megola on one and Kreidler on the other.

2 "The German Motor Cycle Industry" was republished in *Deutsches Motorrad Register* (vol. 17, no. 3), a journal of the Vintage German Motorcycle Owner's Association, based in Shreveport, Louisiana, U.S.A.

3 The 1974 International 250c.c. Moto-Cross season was dominated by eastern Europeans. Both the Russian, Gennady Moiseyev, riding a K.T.M. of Austria and the Czechoslovak, Jaroslav Falta, riding his nation's C.Z., were contenders for the title at the end of the Championship series. On August 25, 1974 in Switzerland at the final Grand Prix event, Falta easily beat all the other riders. After the race winner had been determined, the Russians filed a formal protest claiming Falta had started the race an instant before the starting signal. The Russians were so determined in their protesting that the race officials acquiesced and penalized Falta. This penalty allowed Moiseyev to edge out Falta on accumulated points for the year. Popular sentiment rides with Jaroslav Falta as 1974 Champion. Without taking a stand for either rider it is clear that K.T.M. and C.Z were the best the world could offer.

4 Irvin Trajac may be the Czech spelling of Irwin Tragatsch. If so, he is also the author of five very important books on motorcycle history. These books are listed in the Guggenheim's Bibliography but neither name appears on the advisory board.

# British Installation of the '90s (Self-Deprecating Strategies)

Johanna Burton

*This article was written as part of a special seminar on art practice in the 1990s taught by Donald B. Kuspit in the fall of 1997.*

Installation art is an elusive animal, one which holds no common rules or common materials. Closely related to contemporary society's call for hybridity, installation assumes a Situationist stance allowing, sometimes encouraging, a move away from aesthetics. Many artists go on the hunt for "newness," hoping to satisfy their own and their audience's desire for novelty. Installation has become a ground for experimentation, and mediums are used interchangeably. Greenberg's assertion that art is particular to a medium comes to mind, and the question as to what type of art installation might be should remain active throughout this paper.

Through looking at many artists, this broad survey hopes to give a loose overview of installation of the 1990s in Europe. The paper concentrates primarily on Britain but includes artists from other areas to give a wider idea of a whole. This seems especially necessary because it is possible to group an entire collection of the British artists into one persona, that of the "YBA" or Young British Artist. This group will be especially important to this essay because it is such a prominent part of the anti-aesthetic movement discussed above.

The "YBA" or "Brit Pack" phenomenon began with Damien Hirst's 1988 "Freeze" exhibition in an east London warehouse. Hirst and his Goldsmith comrades utilized the old idea of coming together in an effort to "buck the gallery system," ultimately achieving the absolute attention and recognition of that very system. Savvy in their own marketing strategies, the "Brit Pack" quickly moved from showing in London galleries to spaces in America. The "Brilliant!" exhibition curated in 1995 by Richard Flood at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis was the culmination of the hype surrounding the "YBA" group. Flood selected twenty-two artists, the oldest of whom began exhibiting in the late eighties. Of the twenty-two selected, all had post-graduate degrees; fifteen received these degrees from Goldsmith's.

Richard Flood's curatorial concerns exemplify the essence of the Brit-

movement, at least on a general level. In an article published in Art in America (April 1996) detailing the exhibition, one particular passage revealed the curatorial expectations of "Brilliant!":

> Flood's liking for London and his desire to reflect the gritty side of its urban life both in the work selected and, more controversially, in the exhibition publicity and catalogue, set up a certain edge of expectation—that the work would be shocking, outrageous, the exhibition a kind of wild party—which the show itself did not deliver.[1]

Even after "Brilliant!" was afforded a somewhat flat reception, the hype for "Brit Pack" infested shows continued, the most recent of which was "Sensation," a "YBA" invasion of the Royal Academy in the fall of 1997. Publicity surrounding this exhibition, as well, had little to do with the work shown, but focused instead on the spectacular nature of the artists themselves. The works hardly stand a chance, for when the insatiable desire for fame on the part of the artist and the insatiable desire for novelty on the part of the viewer come together, there is disappointment: an anti-climactic moment of anxious reality.

Because it is meant to serve as an overview, this paper will detail quickly many works by many different artists. Though the manner in which this is done may not do justice to some of the pieces, it seems apropos that many of them can be described with some accuracy in just a sentence or two. The highly narrative structure generated by many artists here functions as a dressing-up of the work, using theory, personal history, or philosophy as adornment. Though the works will be segmented into one of three categories, this should not be seen as a strict or even correct configuration, rather a way of setting works adjacent to one another. The three categories discussed are:

1) *The Poor, The Banal, and The Weak at Heart (Self-Deprecating Strategies)*
2) *Predetermined Spontaneity (The Cult of Personality)*
3) *Spontaneous Predetermination (Paratactic Patterns)*

The first two terms may be dealt with using some degree of interchangeability, as they relate more often than not to the identity of the artist. The work created is often the second thing taken into account, and it becomes hard, if not impossible, to judge the quality of a work on a formal level, since so much of its success with viewers relies on a crossing between personality and work. Without the assertive persistent presence of the artist behind and inside each piece, there is literally no body of work. Referencing pop culture and

hipster thinking, the work is often a direct link to fashion, music, and media.

**The Poor, the Banal and the Weak at Heart (Self-Deprecating Strategies)**
British artist Damien Hirst is fascinated with dead things, preservation, colors, and shock value. *In and Out of Love (Butterfly Paintings and Ashtrays)* (1991) was a two-room installation exhibiting the life cycle of butterflies. The dead insects were then embedded into monochrome paintings.

Michael Landy, also British, exposes his private fears through constructing them. In *Scrapheap Services* (1995) Landy invents a cleaning company which rids the world of people made obsolete in the course of economic progress. He creates a video to illustrate the workings of the made-up corporation, then positions life-size mannequins in red uniforms to sweep away hundreds of paper dolls.

The British duo Jake and Dinos Chapman utilize high-production contemporary technology to produce manipulated mannequins with discomforting themes. In *Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994) a sculpture reproduction of Goya's work is made life-size. The figures are jointed mannequins with wigs, airbrushed skin, and a noticeable lack of blood. The piece stands on a base reminiscent of 1950's toy soldiers, with molded green grass forming a too-small scenario.

Tracey Emin, Georgina Starr, and Gillian Wearing, all British artists, produce confessional works. Emin's work usually focuses on her own sexual encounters of both the past and the present. *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995* (1995) displays a large igloo-shaped tent inside which cut-out letters spell the names of everyone she has spent a night with. Starr exposes her own feelings of inadequacy and boredom as an artist by videotaping, photographing, or writing about herself as alternately working or just "being." In *Georgina Starr, Crying* (1993) the artist has taped herself sobbing in the corner of her studio. The tape is looped and plays over and over for the audience. Wearing exposes other peoples' anxieties by winning their trust and then extracting their stories. In the series *Signs That Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1993) Wearing asks strangers to write something secret on a large card. One man in a business suit smiling queerly holds a sign with the words "I'm desperate." Emin, Starr, and Wearing also impersonate one another, sometimes creating scenarios where the work of art is simply a circular parody exposing each member of the trio's fixation on fame, sex, or success.

Another British artist Sarah Lucas makes visual puns which refer to the mistreatment of women. By using materials like "snooker balls" and pairing them with collages and homemade figures created from old nylons and rags, Lucas hopes for the "maximum impact at the least expense, with no

pretensions to any kind of formal considerations."[2] Richard Flood felt that Lucas' presence in "Brilliant!" would provide the emotional "glue" the show needed because of the rawness of her techniques.

**Predetermined Spontaneity (The Cult of Personality)**

Jane and Louise Wilson, British, use photographic and film installations which attempt to transform the banal through a dramatization of the involved elements. Their work is both theatrical and forensic in nature. Through taking LSD or using hypnotism to heighten their own awareness they hope to transpose these experiences into their works. *Red Room* (1995) shows such a space lit dramatically, theatrically rendered, and photographed.

Sophie Calle, British, questions the interrelations between museums, patrons, exhibitions, and artists. She hopes to invade the sterile environment of art spaces with her own objects and desires. In *Personal Museum* (1997) Calle situates objects and images from her past in such a way that the absence of a body is noticeable, implying intimate narrative without players.

Rachel Whiteread, another well-known British artist, casts the negative spaces of such domestic objects as sinks, rooms, floors, beds. Her techniques and their effects strongly recall Bruce Nauman and Eva Hesse. One of her poured objects, *Untitled (amber floor)* (1993), is a cast of the volume of space that occupies the inches above the floor. Her most spectacular piece, *House* (1993), is a cast of the negative space of an entire house which received both affirmative and condemning global attention.

Liam Gillick, also British, constructs installations which can be viewed on a purely formal level. Gillick imposes layers of text which introduce narration and theory to otherwise minimalist structures. *Discussion Island* (1997) refers to an ancient Celtic island which served as a site for negotiation during disputes. The installation includes aluminum floor constructions with plexiglas and ceiling constructions of similar materials.

British artist Adam Chodzko creates small unobtrusive sculptures that emit a thick syrupy liquid. These are placed in public scenes to disrupt day-to-day, taken-for-granted normalcy. *3358 km/hr. secretor* (1995) has been placed on sets during live interviews with politicians and other public figures.

Nina Saunders, British, works with furniture and upholstery materials. She is often labeled feminist as the works she produces are meant to destabilize notions of comfort and home-keeping. Her installations are often filled with mutated furniture, beautifully crafted yet completely useless. In *Are You Sitting Comfortably?* (1990) Saunders has impregnated the seat of a richly upholstered armchair with a huge round globe.

Another British artist Mona Hatoum also uses items "domestic" items but then turns them dangerous. *Short Space* (1992) is made of motors, bedsprings, and a pulley system that lends itself easily to a torture-device reading.

Other works by Hatoum involve large amounts of electricity which pose a potential threat to both the installation itself and viewers in its proximity, thereby rendering the domestic space less comforting.

**Spontaneous Predetermination (Paratactic Patterns)**

This last category is a more material-oriented and less personality-infused way of dealing with installation. The works contain fewer references to contemporary "hip" knowledge, and the artists' labor-intensive strategies yield miraculously banal products of surprising quietness. This type of spectacle voices some degree of longing and values the aesthetic over the narrative.

The Swiss team Fischli and Weiss have worked together since the seventies. They explore everyday environments, sometimes re-creating them, sometimes leaving them as they are. Works like *Room at the Hardturmstrasse* (1990-92) involve exact replicas of unextraordinary objects. Fischli and Weiss hand-craft these pieces from polyurethane and paint, rendering the invaluable either even more value-free or spectacularly decadent. *Kanalvideo* (1992) is a color manipulation of found film that has traversed the sewers of Zurich.

Russian artist Ilya Kabakov formulates works that comment on society, utopias, and constructed fantasies of escape and flight. *The Civilization of Flies* (1991) included a cupola formation constructed from 500 plastic flies hung from the ceiling. Andrew Sabin, British, also works with formal constructions that can be read with infusions of history. *The Open Sea* (1997) is an example of an openwork grid which facilitates investigation on the part of the viewer. The work changes as the observer moves through it, imposing interaction and awareness.

British artist Rose Finn-Kelcey builds atmospheres which suggest psychological states rather than personal narratives. In *Steam Installation* (1992) a metal tank with steam generated from heated water and a fan creates a thick wall tenuously bound by hot and cold air. *The Royal Box* (1992) is a U-shaped pillar constructed from ice cubes and kept at minus 24 degrees centigrade, cold enough to freeze human blood in two minutes. Finn-Kelcey calls this a "landscape for the modern age."

Wolfgang Laib, German, produces time-intensive installations as he laboriously collects various types of pollen and redistributes it in simple geometrical forms on the gallery floor. The finished work is tenuous in its rigid patttern, always in danger of dissolution from a slight breeze or a misplaced step. The square of pollen evokes meditation and labor coupled with formal aestheticism.

British artist Steven Pippin explores the dichotomy of outside and inside. In *Introduction* (1995) a large trailer was hung suspended off the floor. The interior was lined with paper negatives and then used as a pinhole camera, allowing the outside images to seep inside. Viewers were asked to duck under

and into the trailer, thus placing themselves in two places at once.

Annette Messager, French, plays with images of femininity, choosing for herself a role which blurs traditions of womanhood. She refuses to be bound to feminist rhetoric, exploring instead every avenue of sorcery and motherhood and then placing them dangerously close together. In *Penetration* (1993-94) Messager hangs fifty sewn and stuffed fabric pieces from the ceiling of a gallery. Puffy pillow-like organs, dead animals, and doll-parts are familiar elements in her work that conjure up tales of black magic and spells. Messager is decadent, desirous, and demanding.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the works abbreviated above, an obvious trend which cannot be denied shows itself. Older artists continue to follow certain creative paths which they have pursued for many years. The "Brit Pack" is less patient, scurrying to avoid boredom and to hold the attention of its viewers. The need to remain new is paradoxically a constant. Richard Flood described the content of the YBAs:

> the dialogue between knowing esthetic commentary and trashy extracts from life is the key dialectic of the show and is, indeed, one of the most vital forces in the work of many of this generation of British artists. For these young people are sophisticates in the reading and decoding of images, from Cézanne in the gallery to Roseanne on TV. They treat the artifacts of today's mass culture as Duchampian ready-mades.[3]

Ironically, in another article, Flood explains his choice of the title for "Brilliant!" saying, "'Brilliant' is a word that is used so much in London that it has no value whatsoever."[4] This statement seriously places Flood's own judgment of the YBAs and their art into question.

Taking into account the wide range of European artists and techniques, the work accounted for in this article serves as only a small indicator of the genre. Applying the notion of Debord's "spectacle" is tricky. Installation art might adhere almost too readily to the realm of the "spectacular," for it is certainly the most flexible and elusive of art forms. Adhering to no rules of form, content, material or size, installation is easily spectacular simply for its slipperiness. So much engagement with personal tidbits as source material provides an instantly aggressive intimacy between the spectator and the work. The artist attempts to build an allegiance with the viewer by suggesting that the artist and viewer are somehow similar, that they share experiences or emotions, and ultimately demanding that the viewer feel empathy in viewing the work. This technique relies almost completely on simplistic narrative, building

stories and dialogue that the viewer can quickly apprehend but can hardly view objectively. If the viewer does not identify with the artist, he/she cannot really interact with the work.

When applying the standards of the spectacle to the genre of installation, the grandiosity of the work multiplies. The construction of a site-specific oeuvre builds outward, additively, forming a literal and figurative space of engulfment. These elements call to mind Debord's warning that spectacle erases the dividing line between the self and the world, the true and the false. This is not to say that installation lives *only* within the realm of the spectacle. It merely treads an extremely tenuous line between constructed realities and personas that become increasingly more difficult to tell apart.

**Notes**

1 Lynn MacRitchie, "Their Brilliant Careers," *Art in America* (April 1996): 80-85.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 "Smashing! *frieze* Talks to Richard Flood," *frieze* (November/December 1995): 32-36.

# The African-American Self-Portrait: A Crisis in Identity and Modernity

James Smalls

Portraiture constitutes a significant genre within African-American visual production, finding utility as a form of subject-formation in a history beginning in the optimistic days of the Harlem Renaissance and continuing as subversive cultural practice into our contemporary moment. As a mode of subject-production occurring in and against history, where social and cultural conditions do matter, the African-American self-portrait genre is equally important in its operation as a method of social and psychic negotiation, adjustment, and intervention. However, unlike the portrait, the effectiveness of the self-portrait as a site of actualization is debatable.

Upon cursory reflection, one would assume that the subject of the self-portrait has the ability to act in her/his own process of interpellation and that the primary operative purpose of the self-portrait is to empower the artist, giving her/him direct power of surveillance—power as the constructor and holder of the gaze. In this sense, then, the self-portrait should constitute a self-conscious construction of identity and the ultimate expression of control over it. But the question of what constitutes identity and what kinds of identities are being represented (produced) by and with the African-American self-portrait remain problematic issues that I will address in the following pages.

Generally speaking, Western philosophical tradition has established that "identity" forms one of the most naturalized cultural categories each of us inhabits. More recently, identity has been reconceptualized as a sustaining and persistent cultural fantasy or myth. In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes posited the observation that our understanding of ourselves as coherent, unified, and self-determining is an effect of those representational codes commonly used to describe the self (the self-portrait is a collected visualization of such descriptive codes) and through which, consequently, identity comes to be understood.[1] At the same time, claims to identity as self-determining, rational, and coherent have been problematized on a number of theoretical fronts by thinkers as diverse as Louis Althusser, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and Frantz Fanon. Collectively, the ideas of these men about ways of being and knowing have, in the erudite words of Stuart Hall, "effected the final de-centring of the Cartesian subject."[2]

In this paper, I want to first ask a series of questions and then use

selected examples of African-American self-portraiture to address complicated issues that arise from these interrogations. The African-American self-portrait poses a host of critical and theoretical questions that, if not satisfactorily answered, at least need to be posited. The major question to be asked is: in what ways does race complicate matters of identity formation and self-imaging? What are the ways in which the self-portrait can serve as an instrument of historical disruption/intervention and empowerment? What "self" is the African-American artist attempting to produce and locate given that the black self has been, according to W. E. B. Du Bois and echoed years later by Frantz Fanon, torn asunder, fragmented, left in pieces after the trauma of modernism, slavery, and transatlantic transplantation?[3] Is the self-portrait an adequate or effective "glue" for piecing together the fragmented African-American self? If not, what are the alternatives?

The crisis of the African-American self-portrait begins with "race," a volatile term and idea. Race is a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon and is the product of historical processes and not of genetically determined physical differences. "When a person of color asks, 'Who am I?' or 'Who Are We?' (these are the questions evoked and described through the self-portrait and portrait, respectively) she or he has already posed a question about race."[4] The most important "fact" about race, as Fanon was to notice, was that "however lacking in objective reality racist ideas such as 'blackness' are, the psychological force of their construction of self means that they acquired an objective existence in and through the behavior of people."[5] The self-images and self-construction methods that such social pressure exerts is transmitted from and through generations, and thus the "'fact of blackness' came to have an objective determination not only in racist behavior and institutional practices, but more insidiously in the psychological behavior of the peoples so constructed."[6]

Understanding Fanon, the black Martiniquan theorist and psychiatrist, is critical to any discussion of African-American self-representation. Unlike Du Bois, Fanon challenged race essentialism or "an ideology of authenticity" in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In the book, he exposed how essentialism, an instrument of colonial power, forces blacks into "'a crushing objecthood' that weighs...[them]...down with a triple burden of responsibility—for [their]...body, [their] race, and [their] ancestors."[7] Fanon's book was an attempt at a psychoanalytic accounting of "race" set in conjunction with the "self," carrying further and forward what Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan had neglected to do in their musings over the formations of subjectivity. In his psychoanalytical work, Freud attempted to set out and set straight the relations of identification and desire through the complicated understanding of the way unconscious identifications form and are continually transforming the character of the ego. Both Freud and Lacan managed to successfully elide

racial distinction from the drama and trauma of psychoanalysis and both concentrated instead on gender difference.

The self-portrait, a visual reconstruction of the self in relationship with the other, assumes that there exists an inevitable dialogue between the two. The "in-between" spaces between identification and self-identity offer the possibility of glimpsing the other in the same and the same in the other. In this in-between space, one travels from self to other and back again. It is a space that is unstable, unfixed, and incoherent. Self-portraiture, in its attempts to recognize and construct the "whole" person, visualizes this in-between space and its inherent accompanying dialogic exchanges. Unlike Freud and Lacan, Fanon engaged both race and gender in the identificatory and disidentificatory crossings between colonizer and colonized. He not only broadened the individualistic focus of psychoanalysis, but in doing so, as Homi Bhabha observes, "conceptually challenged and enlarged the sphere of the political."[8]

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon posed an alternative theory of (non)alterity, positing that "colonialism may inflict its greatest psychical violence precisely by attempting to exclude blacks from the very self-other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible."[9] Fanon was interested in the internalization and epidermalization of black inferiority. In his view, the liberation of peoples of African descent in the world must be carried out on two fronts: the psychical (within) and the socio-economic (without). He attempted to diagnose the conditions under which collective consciousness or group identity overwhelmed the achievement of an I-ness.[10] To attain full personhood, Fanon believed, black subjects had to transcend not only their self-hating identification with whiteness, but also their "positive" identification with blackness.[11] It was a battle between individual and group identities—a hard-fought battle waged in America during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond in both art and literature. If we accept the notion that self-portraiture is the ultimate access to individuality and to unbiased representation, then this struggle between individual and group identities is what the self-portrait should attempt to resolve.

For Fanon, it was the white man who monopolized otherness in order to secure an illusion of unfettered access to subjectivity. The black man, disenfranchised from his very subjectivity, is sealed into a "crushing objecthood." Both racism and racialization (the process of being raced from without) constitute "a system of cultural power [having] profound effects on subjectivity." As a system of meaning, racism and racialization often "foreground the body of the other—as object of ridicule or admiration, as object for domination or commodification."[12] The self-portraitist must work through this system of meaning before she/he can get to that essential, yet elusive, "I."[13] Racialization produces the black subject as incomplete, continually in process and as a locus of ambiguous and constantly shifting meaning. The construction of

what Patricia J. Williams calls "raciality" is at once self-affirming and self-negating:

> I think my raciality is socially constructed, and I experience it as such. I feel my black self as an eddy of conflicted meanings—and meaninglessness—in which my self can get lost, in which agency and consent are tumbled in constant motion. This sense of motion... is a reminder of society's constant construction of my blackness.[14]

Williams' statement comes from the point of view of someone "from the inside." It is the condition of the subject experiencing disunity, split into pieces, shattered, identified from without within the (post)colonial context. The experience provides the basis for the self-portrait as a therapeutic and theatrical gesture for bonding the public racial self with the private inner self (if indeed such a self exists). Clearly, with the self-portrait, there is a distinction between the public and private self as object of awareness. It has been observed that when one is conscious of one's private self, one is attentive to one's inner thoughts and feelings, and when one is conscious of one's public self, one is aware of one's self as a social object.[15] Unfortunately, persistent attentiveness to the public self at the expense of the private self seems to almost always inevitably overwhelm the African-American self-portraitist.

Between 1895 and 1925, the urgency for the exploitation of African-American self-imaging strategies was prompted by an old idea—the "New Negro," a new racial self, or, the "Public Negro." The New Negro was an ideal, "a full overhaul of African-American character, physical appearance, social and political affiliations, and native culture."[16] The movement sought to propel African-Americans toward "progress" and "respectability" in the modern era. African-American physiognomy became the focus of intense description in art and literature. During the period, African-American artists produced lots of work intended to reverse the barrage of stereotyped racial representations proliferating in American culture. Portraits and self-portraits offered to the public cleaned up images of blacks that stressed demure carriage and restrained emotions. The newly-defined black head and body were signifiers of education and class, confidence, and moral conviction. As a mode of social thinking and being, the New Negro existed as, what literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has called, a "credible fiction...a coded system of signs, complete with masks and mythology."[17] The New Negro was an individual speaking for a group so as to re-create the public face of the African-American through private pursuit. He constituted "a non sequitur abstraction" and "a willed, ideal state of being that offered a form of neological utopia and renewal."[18] He defined a movement that exemplified the power and the necessity of (re)naming

the Self.

One of the goals of the New Negro movement was to mobilize artists to create black self-representations and self-presentations to reverse the barrage of negative racist stereotypes that were part of what has been termed the "coon craze" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which African-Americans and their physiognomies were caricatured and disseminated in various venues of popular culture.[19] Some artists heeded the call to reverse the trend and produced imagery that tackled fanciful and racist versions of black identity through presentations that were dignified and pleasing within the confines of a Western artistic and aesthetic tradition. According to Gates, these black artists and writers erred on the side of classism and allegiance to elite nobility that posited only fictional black archetypes to replace the negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes could not be corrected by idealization alone because the newly-created archetypes were based, as were stereotypes, on exaggerations and mythologies of selfhood.

The definitions of the New Negro, as they had been offered by the legitimizing intellectual voices of Du Bois and Alain Locke, split the New Negro into a political self and a racial self as if the two were mutually exclusive. The self-portrait operated as a viable means for the New Negro to correlate the specific characteristics of an individual with the larger characteristics of a race. The self-portrait exemplified the extent racial politics and identity politics were perceived as inseparable and cast in the public domain for public scrutiny.

The New Negro concept and movement attempted to bring into being, or interpellate the individual as ideology and considered that one's identity was both already constituted and additionally formed by resistance to racist ideology. The failure or refusal to recognize that "identity is relational, irrational, and incomplete…a process rather than a property,"[20] particularly in the context of modernity, was, and Gates would concur, the major flaw of New Negro ideology. Individuality and concepts of the self, as revealed in autobiography, are historically determined and culturally-specific. Although a visual form of autobiography, self-creation, self-invention, and fiction, the New Negro constituted part of a collective consciousness with the unintentional result of silencing the individual.[21] The self-portraitist set out, in effect, to redress this situation. However, under the pressure of New Negro ideology and early American modernism, the African-American self-portrait remained overly concerned with self-invention rather than with self-reflection.

As previously mentioned, the African-American self-portrait is, as it was fashioned both during and after New Negro ideology, part and parcel of identity politics. Identity politics are disrupted "not only by the differences *between* subjects but the irresolvable differences *within* subjects."[22] As Diana Fuss argues, "theories of 'multiple identities' fail to challenge effectively the traditional metaphysical understanding of identity as unity."[23] It is

by moving through and from sites of fragmentation and disunity in the production of the self that the African-American self-portrait receives its relevance and import. I want to suggest that the function of the self-portrait within the context of the historical reconstruction of public and private identity for the African-American underscores that inescapable and inevitable "double consciousness" described so eloquently by Du Bois in his long essay, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois's prose centered on the identity crisis of the African-American—a crisis articulated in his oft-quoted passage:

> [B]orn with a veil...[in] a world which yields him no true self-consciousness...[the Negro] ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.[24]

Du Bois viewed double consciousness as a by-product of black and white cultural differences and irreconcilability that produced psychological and emotional angst for African-Americans.[25] Du Bois's essentialism, as far as subject formation is concerned, "attests to the presiding ideology of authenticity...[an ideology that] anchors identity to an immutable race or category..."[26] However, it has been pointed out that Du Bois never sought to dissolve the "double self" but was more concerned with resolving "the paralysis of black agency."[27] But the question of whether the black individual is truly free and autonomous to initiate action is the crucial issue here, for his identity has already been constructed and regulated by (white) others from without. That is, the African-American's subjectivity—his active presence in the world—has been predetermined by set racial and racist ideology and discourse imposed upon him.[28]

The African-American self-portrait clearly forces psychoanalytic and philosophical questions of the ontological and epistemological sort to the surface that relativize the universalizing claims made in the name of the Lacanian "mirror phase." Drawing on Freud's theory of narcissism, Lacan perceived infant identity in the realm of what he called the Imaginary, to be based on a reflected image. Lacan used the metaphor of the mirror to describe how the baby, at around the age of six months, first comes to perceive itself as an integrated coherent image of a "self" in the mirror. Like the reflection from a mirror, the self is reflected back from someone else. This enabler of primary identification is usually the mother. Although it seems real, this sense of identity is imaginary because it unconsciously depends on someone or something outside the self.[29] The baby narcissistically achieves a sense of "I" only by

finding an "I" reflected back by something outside itself. The mother is a love object and thus acts as a mirror. Through the mother as love-object, the baby falls in love with its own image reflected back from the other, outside itself. The mirror image splits us in two. We perceive both an internal and external sense of self. Fanon and Homi Bhabha picked up on Lacan and carried his ideas further by focusing on race and racial difference as part of this process of narcissistic subject formation. As Ann Pellegrini has pointed out, any "positive" self-image of blackness secured in early identifications with parental imagos contrasts sharply and automatically with the distortion-effects of racism and the white gaze.[30] As "always already" object of the patriarchal white gaze, African-Americans see themselves split between perception from within black culture and from without by white culture. It is the condition of the subject to be split into pieces, to be identified from without, that becomes the basis for the formation and deformation of identity. The "watchful eye/I of the other reflects a new and terrible sense of what blackness means."[31] Thus, the racial dimensions of the fantasy of mastery encoded in the normative privilege of the (white) male gaze unhinge Lacanian perceptions of identity and call them into question.

So, who or what is the subject identifying with in the African-American self-portrait? Is it the self or a mere reflection or shadow of the self filtered through others located outside the self? As a racialized subject, the African-American self-portraitist constantly struggles to disavow alterity, radical otherness and inferiority as s/he is bred within the contexts of colonialism, imperialism, and modernism, and reflected in the white gaze.[32]

**The African-American Self-Portrait at the Crossroads of Modernity and Afrocentrism**

According to Richard Brilliant, portraits in general tend to stifle the analysis of representation and the relationship between the presentation of the self in the world and its analogue in the world of art.[33] This is the case with the self-portraits of William H. Johnson (1901-1970) who, of all the African-American artists of the early twentieth century, left behind the largest body of works that exhibit an interest in and mastery over a variety of subjects and styles.[34] His prolific nature and his preoccupation with the self-portrait as a means of intense discovery remind me of Rembrandt, who is perhaps the most famous Western artist to dedicate a substantial portion of his oeuvre to self-imaging. H. Perry Chapman tells us that Rembrandt painted, drew, and etched his own likeness at least seventy-five times over more than forty years. He shaped his identity by assuming many guises—by participating in forms of masquerade and performance.[35]

Although I parallel Johnson and Rembrandt in terms of exhibiting a preoccupation with investigating constructive and deconstructive self-

identificatory strategies through the self-portrait genre, clearly both are very different practitioners in self-imaging not only in terms of their different historical contexts, but in their respective goals. Johnson's obsession with self-portraiture not only suggests an individual prone to intense self-reflection, self-scrutiny, and sensitive to tensions in his social and cultural environment, but also reveals a struggle to reconcile his artistic and racial allegiances—both of which he viewed as one and the same and with which Rembrandt never had to contend. Johnson, unlike Rembrandt, was acutely aware of his construction as a "race" man in the world.

Johnson journeyed through numerous stylistic shifts in order to arrive at what he termed his "modern primitive self." This was an expression Johnson himself applied to what he was seeking through art—an artistic style and a life in which he could "embrace his own African-American 'folk'" and "family of primitiveness and tradition."[36] This journey involved searching for his roots geographically and stylistically. He traveled throughout Europe and lived for many years in Scandinavia before returning to the United States and settling in the Harlem section of New York City. Stylistically, he mastered and then completely rejected European modernist styles ranging from the Ashcan school realism of his *Self-Portrait* of 1923-26 (Washington, D.C., National Museum of American Art) to the highly experimental *Self-Portrait* of 1929 (Washington, D.C., National Museum of American Art), in which a free-wheeling expressionistic handling of paint gained the artist both praise and condemnation from observers of African-American artistic practice during the period.[37] Johnson's early use of academic realism and expressionism eventually gave way to a self-styled "primitivism" that the artist himself saw as representing his true identity. He used his self-image and stylistic eclecticism to situate himself as an artist engaged in modernist movements and in New Negro ideology. Through his self-portraits, Johnson searches for an essentialist and unified identity and engages in processes of self-(dis)identification through the adoption, mastery, and complete rejection of adoptable and adaptable modernist styles. Clearly, the self-portrait was an important vehicle on Johnson's journey to self-discovery.

Towards the end of his life, Johnson's trek through the self-portrait resulted in the trauma of discovering only multiple, fragmented, and layered selves. His triple *Self-Portrait* of 1944 (Virginia, Hampton University Museum) tells the sad story. Johnson's highly stylized and dislocated examination of self emphasizes "a strange quality of dissociation and pathos on all three faces [that] bear witness to Johnson's intensely interior, psychological self-image at this point in his life."[38] The artist has literally come undone and unglued into pieces. Through the positioning of his arms, he makes a desperate attempt to pull himself together and embrace his other selves. The "strange quality of dissociation" is reinforced by the bright coloration and mismatched patterning

of the striped shirts. Because the portrait was produced towards the end of Johnson's life, some have attributed the fragmented nature of the image to the artist's deteriorating mental condition and erratic behavior that caused him to become alienated from family, friends, and himself.[39] Johnson's life and art were part of an attempt to balance modernity and tradition. I think that his triple self-portrait was the result not so much of his mental illness per se, but rather was the outcome of a destabilization of self caused by the desire to become whole again through the refracted prism of modernity.

The concept of modernity emerged at about the same time that European nations began to conceive of their own dominant relationship to a non-European world. The imposition of European models of historical change became the tool by which subjugated societies (which included, of course, African-Americans) were denied any internal dynamic or capacity for development.[40] Imperialism is a key aspect of the emergence of modernity and the connection with "the aggressive European self-image" and also creates the cultural conditions for the disruptions that modernity brings to the individual.[41]

The concept of modernity is also significant in the emergence of colonial discourse. Michel Foucault argued that discourse is the crucial feature of modernity itself, for both are fundamentally about power and knowledge.[42] Germane to the topic at hand is the fact that the emergence and growth of modernity is coterminous with the emergence and growth of Eurocentrism and the disavowal of Afrocentrism. The full embrace of Afrocentrism would seem to provide the African-American with a remedy for the fragmentation and loss of self that is caused by modernity.

In his book *The Black Atlantic* (1993), sociologist Paul Gilroy rethought the concept of tradition as modernity's polar opposite in relation to people of color and the African diaspora.[43] Tradition, he tells us, refers to the close kinship of cultural forms and practices generated from the diversity of black experience. However, according to Gilroy, Afrocentrism has an absolute and perverse reliance on a model of the thinking and knowing of the racial subject which differs from the double consciousness that fascinated Du Bois and the black modernists. Gilroy questioned whether tradition was indeed the antithesis of modernity and whether or not reversion to tradition was a viable remedy for the fragmentation of the self caused by modernity. This is an important question for African-Americans because modernity, Gilroy contends, wreaks havoc upon diasporal modes of thinking and experience, promoting the doubling and splitting of self.[44]

Molefi Kete Asante defines Afrocentrism as "African genius and African values created, recreated, reconstructed, and derived from our history and experiences in our best interests...It is an uncovering of one's true self, it is the pinpointing of one's center, and it is the clarity and focus through which black people *must* see the world in order to escalate."[45] In Afrocentrism, "the

idea of tradition is invoked to underscore the historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural cross-fertilizations which make the notion of a distinctive and self-conscious black culture appear plausible."[46] Tradition provides a place of refuge and consolation from "vicious forces that threaten the racial community (imagined or otherwise)."[47]

Asante's conception of the African self as coherent, whole, and therapeutic in its rediscovery is intriguing and yet highly problematic. Moreover, the concept is overly masculinist in its notion of implied male mastery/genius and female compliance to the idea of "woman" and the forces of nature.[48] It is also conservative in its promotion of a monolithic notion of community "values." Afrocentrism poses a ontological problem for the African-American self-portraitist working within conventional Western modes of artmaking, for neither self-portraiture nor oil painting are part of African cultural traditions.[49]

One self-portrait by Malvin Gray Johnson (1896-1934) provides visual evidence of how the opposing charges of modernity and Afrocentrism might be united, but not necessarily harmonized. Johnson's *Self-Portrait* of 1934 (Washington, D.C., National Museum of American Art) relies directly on African art as a means through which to produce an identificatory self-representation that attempts to embrace the traditional. During his lifetime, Johnson was described as an artist who preferred Negro subject matter. He died young (38) and produced few works. Information about his life is sparse and spotty. We do know that he was a relatively isolated figure who, although interested in aesthetic and social issues of immediate concern to African-Americans, did not participate in any public or activist capacity to New Negro demands for equality. In the history of art, Johnson has been characterized by African-American art historian James Porter as an experimentalist—first with color, then with form based on his study of African sculpture and its influence on modern European painting.[50] Porter's account of meeting Johnson provides some insight into the artist's temperament. "I shall never forget my first meeting with him, when his apparent relaxation and poise of mind masked for a while his more electric quality, with which I became more impressed at subsequent meetings."[51] Porter's use of the term *masked* is not accidental and proves instructive for understanding the artist's attempt to unify Afrocentrism and Eurocentric art forms.

In Johnson's *Self-Portrait* the artist compositionally associates himself with African masks, thus affirming Gates's observation of the New Negro as "a coded system of signs, complete with masks and mythology." Two years prior to this self-portrait, Johnson had painted an independent canvas called *Negro Masks* (Virginia, Hampton University Museum) in a cubistic style. Now, in the 1934 self-portrait, he has placed that earlier painting on a wall behind him, aligning his own head and face with the masks in the previous canvas. By paralleling his self-portrait with African masks, the artist "indicates

that his self-image as a black man and black artist is incomplete without the demonstration of his connection to African culture. In painting the masks, he paints himself."[52]

Although head and body are given equal emphasis in Johnson's self-portrait, there is a marked stylistic distinction suggested between them. The artist's head, set in association with the African mask, stylistically retreats into an academic traditionalism as he situates his body in association with surrounding cubistic and expresssionist modes of description—incorporating flattened space and surface design elements. Johnson attempts to balance the destabilizing effects of modernity on his self-perception and self-presentation by appropriating affirming aspects of an African ancestral legacy. Johnson's strategy was unique, for while other African-American artists such as Lois Mailou Jones, Aaron Douglas, and Sargent Johnson did invoke the cultural significance and power of the African mask in conjunction with modernist expression, Malvin G. Johnson was the only one to directly compare his own physiognomy with the African mask in the self-portrait format—designating the mask as self-reflexive sign and symbol. Correlations between modern modes of expression and African art were exactly what Alain Locke had in mind when he encouraged black artists to produce a race-based art drawn from their ancestral legacy.[53]

Locke was a pivotal figure for African-American artists during the 1920s and 1930s. He brought his expertise in African art to bear on his philosophy of black creativity. His ideas had tremendous influence on how African-American artists sought to represent themselves. For Locke, it was the collective consciousness of African-Americans, rather than the individual artist, who he hoped would lift Afro-America to an exalted position in the eyes of white American society. It is clear that in his writings on art and culture, he was supportive of European artists who specialized in "colonial type studies," for their concentration on race and physiognomic details ideologically supported his premise for a racialist art in which "race awakening" and "spiritual selfhood" were the desired goals. Locke saw Malvin G. Johnson as a supreme modernist—a black innovator who avoided "imitativeness and derivative exhibitionism."[54]

Clearly the African mask was important to Locke and to Malvin G. Johnson as a sign and symbol of identity formation. Houston Baker Jr.'s description of the mask and its multiple functions within African-American modernism and modernist primitivism are instructive here.[55] In his book, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), Baker devotes several pages to the discursive and semiotic function of the mask in African-American modernist practice.[56] For Baker, the mask is one of several forms that "signal a symbolizing fluidity...a family of concepts or a momentary and changing...array of images, figures, assumptions, and presuppositions that a group of

people...holds to be a valued repository of spirit."[57] Baker's definition takes the signification of the mask beyond the notion of form and static object; the mask is ritual or "motion seen."[58] Even more significant to the realities of self-portraiture is the fact that the mask in American culture is "captivating and effectively engages in seeming authenticity," as an "accurate sign of a 'tradition'."[59] The mask, then, constitutes the premier visual sign of afrocentricity. However, the mask is also an instrument of pleasing deception in that it "isolates the wearer from the external social and cultural environment" and can "manifest some aspect of the wearer not otherwise visible."[60] Thus, representation in which the subject dons the mask or is placed in comparative association with it, can be imaginary, delusional, self-serving, or can work to meet the expectations of others. For the African-American self-portraitist, the complexity of the form and function of the mask as instrument of concealment and revelation coincides, collides, and colludes with Du Boisian "double consciousness" and with the "crushing objecthood" of Fanon.

Malvin G. Johnson not only draws a visual alliance between his face and that of African masks thus converting himself into an objectified item of ethnographic scrutiny, but in so doing he also attracts attention to the discursive importance of ethnography and African sculpture in the forging of twentieth-century African-American modernist expression. "Ethnography" is significant here in the broad sense articulated by critical theorist James Clifford who notes that ethnography as discourse is

> actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. [Posing] questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography codes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes[61]

Clifford's description complicates the negative connotation attached to ethnography as a clear-cut hierachical arrangement of (white) colonizer exercising the power to describe or "know" the (dark-skinned) colonized. It confronts the problem of who has control over the construction and naming of otherness and difference. Of course, ethnography and primitivism are related interests and both evolved in tandem with one another during the period in which Johnson set about fashioning himself on canvas.

**The African-American Self-Portrait as a Form of Ritual Healing**

The discursive complexities of modernity, tradition, and Afrocentricity underscore the "historical continuities, subcultural conversations, intertextual and intercultural cross-fertilizations which [were harnassed by African-Americans

to] make the notion of a distinctive and self-conscious black culture appear plausible."[62] The attempt by some African-American artists to harmonize modernity with African modalities continued throughout the twentieth century and is clearly evident in Renee Stout's striking self-portrait of 1988 titled *Fetish No. 2* (Dallas Museum of Art). In the work, Stout has transformed a likeness of herself (a casting from her own body) into a three-dimensional object of ritual and power. Unlike Malvin Gray Johnson's strategy of self-association with Africa through modernist language, Stout's energies of ancestral recognition are directed inward as opposed to outward. Hers is a project of subjective objectification with a purpose—"inner visual clarity."[63]

Of course, the social and historical contexts for the two projects are very different. Johnson's self-presentation was created under the formative phase and stress of modernist primitivism in which blacks incorporated the viewer's gaze into the subject matter of portraiture and self-portraiture.[64] Stout's work, postmodern in its appropriative and highly theatrical gesture, attempts to sidestep the watchful eye/I of the other which so often reflects "a new and terrible sense of what blackness means."[65] Although *Fetish No. 2* is a self-portrait (part of the modern tradition), it owes little to Western formal strategies and much to African cultural modes of communication and healing. The work gains its power from its reference to the African *minkisi* tradition of accumulated power objects.[66] It exemplifies the drama of individual and collective self-discovery and is part of one African-American woman's attempt to reclaim an African heritage through *auto-graphy*, or narcissistic "re-writing of the self on the [Africanized] body" as a form of cultural reclamation and personal resistance to the negative forces of modernity.[67]

In a recent article by Michael D. Harris on the body in African-American art, he begins by suggesting that it might be possible to "use the role assigned to the human body...as a lens through which we can begin to define the differences between contemporary mainstream Western art and that of African-Americans."[68] In this same essay, Harris quotes Patricia Hill Collins who complains about the state of critique on African-American art—where explanation of what is unique about it is forced to rely on the "Eurocentric masculinist knowledge-validation process."[69] Indeed, this is the state of modern art and modern art history in general, for most categories and critiques of culture have been and continue to be created by and for white men. Stout's method of self-imaging is important in this context, for it frees the African-American self-portraitist from the shackles of Eurocentric modernist concepts of self.

For this observer, however, the question remains as to whether or not Stout's strategy of cultural reclamation onto the body is a successful solution to the destabilizing and fragmenting effects of modernism experienced by the African-American. Stout's project is self-conscious and highly performative,

with the idea of arriving at a unified and known self. It could be argued that those deliberately placed and highly researched signs of Africanicity—cowry-shell eyes, monkey-hair pelt, medecine bags, mirrored gateway into the stomach—seem to take away from the spontaneity and authenticity that is so often associated with finding and knowing the self.

**Redemptive Narcissism and The Photographic Self-Portraits of Lyle Ashton Harris**

Of all African-American artists at work today, it is Lyle Ashton Harris who has consistently used the self-portrait for subversion and self-discovery. Over the past decade, Harris has used self-portrait photography to engage critical investigations of gender identity and post-colonial subjectivity in relation to master narratives.[70] His work challenges and subverts discourse in order to create a new space for black masculinity. Through Harris's photographs, reverberations of Fanon's highly problematic analysis of black male subjectivity emerges, albeit through the lens of postmodern notions of diversity within visual culture.[71] His self-portraits drive us to the intersections of photography, portraiture, and performance to reveal insight into Fanon's premise that self and other are always mutually implicated in ties of identification and desire.[72]

Much of Harris's work is characterized by a persistent emphasis on the body, physicality, masquerade, and disguise.[73] His approach to the self-portrait is one in which we move from the head to the body—the site where gender difference is consciously questioned. His works expand the notion of self-portraiture by considering the entire body, including the head, in gestures of performance and theatricality in the self-conscious (de)construction of identity. From the controlled space of the studio, his images not only embrace the notion of identity as performative gesture, but also address the modernist legacy of fetishizing the black male body.[74] Also, unlike William H. Johnson, Harris's self-portraits expose and embrace multiple selves while rejecting the notion of an essential, unified self. Harris's self-portrait photography shatters the Lacanian master narrative of wholeness and the mirror stage through multi-accentual relations of looking, thereby questioning the stability and image of the self. His self-portraits draw attention to the range of subject-positions and compromise identifications that the subject becomes.[75] He accomplishes all this by playing with stereotypical codes and conventions—conventions that have been culturally constructed through complex dialectics of power. He takes on numerous identitites in his self-portraits, and by doing so theatricalizes and exposes the masquerade of masculinity and femininity themselves.[76] His various photographic identities speak not only to masquerades of gender and sexuality, but to queer locations of subjectivity and colonial mimicry. In sum, the self-portraits of Lyle Ashton Harris constitute a postmodern potpourri of sorts.

Harris's work expands upon Roland Barthes' notion of photography as "a kind of primitive theater" through reliance upon costume and gesture.[77] He presents gender performance as theatrical engagement, shattering the processes of becoming an image of society, a normal standard identity (theatrical in and of itself). His self-portraits are not about finding the alternative identity to the norm. Instead, they articulate Fanon's desire that "in the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself...O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"[78] In questioning identity formations through photography, Harris clearly explains his purpose: "I choose to use photography as a way of investigating and articulating my lived experience...I've found self-portraiture in particular to be a challenging way to interrogate the construction of my identity, as well as exploring the multifaceted relationship I have towards that construction."[79] Such liberating codes of photographic portraiture had been earlier voiced by Roland Barthes and his perception of himself while being photographed: "I constitute myself in the process of 'posing.' I instantaneously make another body of myself, I transform myself into an image."[80]

The performative nature of Harris's portrait photography complicates the traditional claims of the camera as reproducing an authentic "real." Because all portrait photography is fundamentally performative, costumes, props, makeup, etc., merely function to perfect the image stereotype.[81] Harris emphasizes gender in these photographic masquerades as a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real natural or the cultural performative.[82] Because his photographs expose gender as culturally constructed and performed, they also, in the process, subvert phallocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality. They question our cultural conceptions and perceptions of gender in mimetic relation to binary sexual codes and draw attention to the nature of gender as independent of sex which is, like race, a "free-floating artifice."[83] None of the self-portraits previously discussed can claim to accomplish so much.

In presenting a self outside of the normative closed circle of signifier and signified, Harris deconstructs the discourse of identity. To do this, he draws specifically on the rhetoric of the pose to perform a subversive narcissism that unhinges the politics of the heterosexual white male gaze. Since black identity is never stable to begin with, Harris harnesses Freudian narcissism as a point of departure in defining the self. However, instead of directly mirroring Freud on narcissism, Harris lands closer to Fanon who claimed: "I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism."[84] By focusing on the self to explore multiple identity positions, Harris subverts what Freud has called a "transitional" stage between self-love and a relationship with an external object, a separate person. Harris embraces narcissism blatantly without the conventional veiling gestures of artistic individualism. He mobilizes the radical effects of the feminizing rhetoric of the pose to break down the subjugating aspects of

the male heteronormative gaze.[85]

Harris is self-conscious of his subversive strategies by way of the self-portrait and articulates it with clarity:

> I am deconstructing the hegemonic representation of black males through offering new vision and new possibilities. I see myself involved in a project of resuscitation—giving life back to the black male body. I'm teasing at the multiplicities of black male experiences, exploring different subject positions, rather than just recycling the fantasy/projection of the available black stud. Part of the way I complicate this project is by including different representations of myself in most of my work. Often what makes my work difficult for people is its splitting of the subject. You can't fix it as being about gay politics or black politics. It's on the border of both.[86]

The conscientious working of race, gender, and sexuality at the site of marginality is what gives Harris's self-portraits their critical and subversive punch.

By challenging black male phallocentrism through self-portraiture, Harris creates a space for critical discussion of homosexuality in black communities. Much of the quest for phallocentric manhood is expressed in black national circles and rests on a demand for compulsory heterosexuality. As a result, homophobia and persecution of homosexuals is simultaneously protected and promoted. Homophobia is a stance that has undermined black solidarity. For Bhabha, black nationalism in all its forms—from New Negro and *négritude* to the Black Panthers, "reverses but does not displace the models of subject-constitution and social identification in the discourses of Western racism itself."[87] Such nationalisms reveal the contradictory, destabilizing, and fragmentary natures of modernity. As bell hooks has observed, "if black men no longer embraced phallocentric masculinity, they would be empowered to explore this fear and hatred of other men."[88] The self-styled portraits of Lyle Ashton Harris advocate learning new ways for black men to relate to men and to masculinity.

As self-love is the basis of forming a cohesive identity in the Freudian sense, Harris centers his work on love of the self as the key to forming whole black masculinity. He does this by projecting himself into a space of multiple identifications that cross over unexpected categories of race, gender, and sexuality. He presents the black male body (his own body) as an eroticized yet heroic spectacle, as "female" allegory, as symbol of grace and liberty, and as black power. His self-portraits emphasize constitutive identifications which posit the black gay and male subject in the lived experiences of a real contradiction between the psychic and social relations of masculinity and femininity. In his life-size photomural *Construct #10* (1988) (Collection of the Artist), an

anatomically masculine identity conflicts with a feminine performance. Harris represents himself as ballerina and supermodel.[89] The artifice of the pose evokes the masquerade of femininity as spectacle. In this self-portrait, Harris encourages us to question the entire premise of gender as a binary and singular system for determining social and personal identities.

Harris revels in a feminizing narcissism by playing with feminine rituals of beauty as narcissistic act. His body/self is readable only in relation to our projected desire.[90] He objectifies femininity in relation to his subjectivity, thereby shattering normal conceptions of masculinity and blackness. The photographer's self-rendition removes the black male body from its usual significations in dominant culture, suggestively proposing a multiplicitous black male subjectivity. In the process, he exposes the dominant culture's anxieties about unconventional black men as he symbolically castrates himself via the feminine, gay, and black. He then flaunts this castration. His lower body is wrapped in crinoline so to theatrically stage his genitalia. His head is crowned by a wig, his face powered, and his lower body strikes a "feminine" contraposto pose. All become signs of a deconstruction of the codes of masculinity and femininity through performative gestures and props.[91]

Harris's masquerade is camp performance—a highly composite artificiality. Among other things, camp delights in the selfsame artifice which others distrust through the strategies of survival and subversion, especially the masquerade of femininity and the mimicry of the colonial subject.[92] Within the cultural practices of drag and cross-dressing, the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied. Drag performance plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself.[93] Most significant to Harris's use of drag in self-representation is the understanding that drag subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. On this score, Esther Newton writes: "At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, appearance is an illusion. Drag says my 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine."[94] Both claims to truth contradict one another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity.

Lyle Ashton Harris's *If My Friends Could See Me Now (For Nina Simone, Eartha Kitt, and Mother)* of 1994 (Collection of the Artist), boldly acknowledges self-esteem through drag.[95] Here, Harris evokes an image of the diva, playing homage to women and music as source of identity and strength in African-American culture. The artist has dramatically lit himself and dons a patterned silk scarf around his head. The self-portrait is consciously modeled on the cover of Nina Simone's "Baltimore" album of 1978. In diva drag, Harris

also plays upon notions of appropriate blackness in relation to his own homosexuality. Here, he theatrically responds to the social pressure of hypermasculinity exerted upon black men.[96] Through self-styled artifice and performance, Harris pays respects to his cultural roots but questions current identity politics by presenting a false face which mimics femininity. A similar theatrical dedication occurs with *Minstrel* of 1987-88, part of his *The Americas* series of self-portraits. In this portrait, Harris accentuates the pathos of a racially reversed minstrel mask. His face is painted white to emphasize big sad eyes and a broad sullen pout. Harris parodies the existential anguish of inauthenticity that remains unsaid and unspeakable in the discourse of black nationalism by referencing Fanon's metaphor of "black skin, white mask." For Fanon, blacks must don white masks if they are to achieve success in colonial societies. However, wearing the mask does not guarantee or foster authenticity or essence [hence, the implicit "failure" or futility of Malvin G. Johnson's earlier self-portrait].

In addition, Harris camps the categories of identity in sexual politics by offering a version of black masculinity that mimics Judy Garland and other feminine icons of metropolitan gay male sensibility.[97] By subverting the black performing minstrel stereotype, Harris plays on the paradoxical relationship between identity and representation through the use of various forms of artifice.[98] Harris performs a version of black masculinity that signifies the minstrel mask in white popular culture (i.e. Black Sambo as sign of entertainment) and does so in a way that simultaneously evokes the masquerade of femininity as spectacle.[99] The artist theatrically stages a self whose primary identity gives way to the artifice of the mask which was, as I have previously indicated, an iconic element of diaspora aesthetics. In the process of mimicry promoted by the mask, black men are alienated and depersonalized. But through memory (the deliberate and playful performance of a role), mimesis can counter and correct masquerade (the unconscious assumption of a role). As with Fanon, Homi Bhabha also sees racial masquerades as potentially subversive. On the one hand, mimicry of colonial authority exposes this authority as hollow. On the other hand, "the effect of mimicry is camouflage."[100] Thus, while the ultimate threat of masquerade may be that under the mask there is nothing, there is also a fear that the costume hides something.

Harris's whiteface persona inverts the blackface performance of minstrel shows, highlighting the way in which constructs of gender and sexuality are bound up with race. In nineteenth-century minstrelsy, white men caricatured African-American subjects by wearing exaggerated black burnt-cork makeup. They often cross-dressed as women, thus impersonating both gender and race. Through these impersonations, minstrel players frequently ridiculed both abolition and women's rights, suggesting the anxiety caused by the social dislocations of nineteenth-century American society. Harris further sub-

verts the practice of minstrelsy by exploring drag personas which empower both blackness and homosexuality. His white makeup is a mask, as are the mascara, lipstick, and wigs he wears in his other self-portraits, and yet they are not. They operate to signify that "in-between" space between identity and identification and point to the variability and dependence of both upon who is looking and constructing a subject through that look.[101]

In the mid-1990s, as an extension of his work in self-portraiture, Harris embarked upon a series of secular and religious family and self-portraits that draw the viewer into a transformative vision of gender, kinship, and African cosmologies. The photos present a high camp world of masculinized women and feminized men. Concerning these works, Harris himself articulated his purpose: "In my art I am trying to present a model of how challenging the family can be a redemptive experience. It is about accepting myself and what my role is in the creation of culture."[102] He continues: "Through autobiography I explored the many facets of my identity: my pleasures, fears, inhibitions and desires. I see autobiography as liberation strategy."[103] "I explore the Black subject at the center of the matrix of desire, not as a fixed ideal, but in flux, liberating, complex, and self-reflecting."[104]

In exploring marginal locations as spaces to explore identity, Lyle Ashton Harris remains the most visibly committed to new forms of black liberation. His self-portraits foster visual discourses surrounding post-colonial identity, interracial relationships, and the body and masquerade. In transcending colonizing responses to determine legitimacy of identity, Harris employed the margins of gender, race, and sexuality as sites of resistance. Through the photographic self-portrait and other autobiographical forms of self-love, Lyle Ashton Harris not only embraces and promotes his own marginal subjectivity, but in the process, he gives the black self new life.

**Conclusion**

As the modern and postmodern forms of self-portraiture discussed in this essay have pointed out, art remains a site of imaginative prospect for transformative thinking about the nature of black existence and experience.[105] This paper has shown that the African-American self-portrait manifested implications of Fanon's conclusion that the colonized is "forever in combat with his own image."[106] Harris's work in particular offers a contemporary re-working and critique of Fanon's psychoanalytic position.[107]

Clearly, for the African-American artist, self-portraiture was a problematic genre to occupy and engage. By adopting and adapting afrocentric modalities to the self; by destabilizing signs of race, gender and sexuality, as well as working through the hybrid interplay of (post)colonial and (post)modern paradigms, the African-American artists discussed in this essay have drawn critical attention to the cultural constructedness, intertextuality, and the arti-

fice of the race, gender, and sexual roles and identities we all inhabit.

This essay is the result of ideas born out of a graduate seminar I gave at Rutgers University in Spring 1999 on gender and sexuality in African-American art. I want to especially thank Stacy Schultz and Jennifer Zarro for the intellectual insights that contributed to the conceptual foundations of this essay.

**Notes**

1 See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

2 Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 120. Also see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 78. This decentering of the subject relates to the concept of menace in the gaze described by Norman Bryson. See Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 87-108. Unlike Hall, Bryson does not consider the complicating element of race in his analysis.

3 In contemporary critical theory, it is not uncommon to pair Du Bois and Fanon. Both were intellectuals bent on fashioning "a performative cosmopolitanism that anticipates the contemporary moment of postidentity." Both were also obsessed with negotiating "the racial particular and the unraced universal"--a negotiation that, I contend, the African-American self-portrait could not escape. See Ross Posnock, "How It Feels To Be A Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 325; also see Thomas Holt, "Marking: Race, Race-Making, and the Writing of History," *American Historical Review* 100 (February 1995): 1-20.

4 Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 253.

5 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 205.

6 Ashcroft et al., 205.

7 See Posnock, 327; Frantz Fanon,*Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

8 Homi Bhabha, "What Does the Black Man Want?," *New Formations* 1 (Spring 1987): 118-124. Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 90; also see Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996).

9 Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 142.

10 Pellegrini, 91-92.

11 Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (1964) (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 27.

12 Jordan and Weedon, 253.

13 According to Lacan, the adult person cannot even have a full grasp of himself as

real because the pronoun "I" can never fully represent the enunciator but instead stands in for the ever-elusive subject. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1978).

14 Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 168.

15 See W. Ray Crozier and Paul Greenhalgh, "Self-Portraits as Presentations of Self," *Leonardo* 21, no. 1 (1988): 29.

16 See Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, "Redefining the African-American Self," in *In the Spirit of Resistance: African-American Modernists and the Mexican Muralist School* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1996), 19-26, esp. 19.

17 See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Face and Voice of Blackness," in Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940*, (Washington, D. C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990), xxxv. Also see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129-155.

18 Gates, "The Face and Voice of Blackness," xxxii-xxxiv.

19 On the employment of this term and its prevalence in visual culture, see Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 25.

20 Jagose, 78.

21 This debate was brought up in the context of Rembrandt's self-portraits, but I think the concerns they raise are relevant to African-American artists as well. See H. Perry Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7; see Karl Joachim Weintraub, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972): Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

22 Jagose, 83.

23 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 103; Jagose, 83.

24 See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, 1903), 17. Du Bois's use of the phrase "self-conscious manhood" is problematic in that it points to the negative gender bias of black identity and the striving for selfhood. This same overemphasis on selfhood and masculinity will come to cloud the critical thinking of Frantz Fanon many years later. On the sexist and homophobic problematics within Fanon's thinking, see Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers*. It is interesting to note that very few African-American women artists—with the exception of Faith Ringgold, Emma Amos, and Carrie Mae Weems—have used the self-portrait as a site of resistance in the construction of identity politics.

25 Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 106.

26 Posnock, 326.

27 Posnock, 327.

28 See Ashcroft et al., 8.

29 On Lacan's mirror stage, see Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 141-45.
30 Pellegrini, 81.
31 Pellegrini, 81.
32 Pellegrini, 80. For interpretations of Frantz Fanon, see Diana Fuss, "Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification," *Diacritics* 24, nos. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1994): 20-42; and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
33 See Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7.
34 The authoritative text on William H. Johnson is Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991)
35 Chapman, 3.
36 See Powell,123ff.
37 Powell,16.
38 Powell,197.
39 Johnson was diagnosed with an advanced case of syphilis-induced paresis and was hospitalized in 1947 at Long Island's Central Islip State Hospital until his death in 1970. See Powell, 219.
40 Ashcroft et al., 145.
41 Ashcroft et al., 146-147.
42 Ashcroft et al., 72.
43 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 188. Gilroy's book is a powerful articulation of the significance of race and diaspora in our understanding of modernism.
44 Gilroy, 188.
45 Molefi Kete Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 14; also quoted in Gilroy, 188.
46 Gilroy, 188.
47 Gilroy, 188-189.
48 Gilroy points out how these relational terms are Hegelian and suggests how Afrocentrism and the individual could relate to them. See Gilroy, 51-54.
49 However, Robert Farris Thompson has pointed out in reference to Yoruba culture that "jijora," that is, "the moderate resemblance to the subject, a balance between the extremes of portraiture and abstraction," is one criterion for African sculpture. See Robert Farris Thompson, "Esthetics in Traditional Africa," *Art News* 66, no. 9 (1968): 44-45, 63-66; Frank Willett, *African Art: An Introduction* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 212; also see Warren d'Azevedo, ed., *The Traditional Artist in African Art and Thought* (London: Bloomington, 1973).
50 Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 181-182.
51 James A. Porter, "Malvin Gray Johnson," *Opportunity Magazine* 13 (October 1935), 117; Bearden and Henderson, 183-184.
52 See Alvia J. Wardlaw et al., *Black Art, Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in*

*African-American Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990), 146-147; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Face and Voice of Blackness," xxxv.

53 Alain Locke's importance as a theorist and critical voice in the rise and development of African-American art and culture has been noted. See Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.,1983); Russell J. Linnemann, ed., *Alain Locke: Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982); Johnny Washington, *Alain Locke and Philosophy: A Quest for Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986). Locke was an expert in African art, especially African sculpture. He sought to stimulate African-Americans' awareness of what he called "our ancestral legacy," urging development of "a school of racial art," see See Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925: reprint, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 254.

54 See Alain Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17 (May 1939): 136.

55 For an analysis of the use of the mask in the context of modernist primitivism, see Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). On primitivism and its adoption by blacks during the Harlem Renaissance, see Robert A. Coles and Diane Isaacs, "Primitivism as a Therapeutic Pursuit: Notes Toward a Reassessment of Harlem Renaissance Literature," in Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin, eds., *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 3-12.

56 Houston Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Baker viewed the afrocentric components of Locke's *New Negro* anthology as enlarging "the field of traditional Afro-American discursive possibilities," 73.

57 Ibid., 17.

58 Ibid., 17.

59 Ibid., 17.

60 See Brilliant, 112. Also see B. L. Ogibenin, "Mask in the Light of Semiotics—A Functional Approach," *Semiotica* 13 (1975): 1-9; A. D. Napier, *Masks, Transformation and Paradox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

61 James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 2-3.

62 Gilroy, 188.

63 Michael D. Harris, "Resonance, Transformation, and Rhyme: The Art of Renée Stout," in *Astonishment and Power* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution,1993),133-134.

64 Brilliant, 8-9.

65 Pellegrini, 81.

66 See Harris, 107-155. Also see Michael D. Harris, "Ritual Bodies—Sexual Bodies: The Role and Presentation of the Body in African-American Art," *Third Text* 12 (Autumn 1990): 81-95.

67 See Stuart Hall, "The After-Life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why Black Skin, White Masks?," in Alan Read, ed. *The Fact of Blackness*, 20.

68 Harris, "Ritual Bodies--Sexual Bodies," 81.
69 See Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 751; Harris, "Ritual Bodies—Sexual Bodies," 82.
70 See David Bailey, "Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire," in Ragnar Farr, ed.,*Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 64.
71 Bailey, 68.
72 See Kobena Mercer, "Busy on the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," in Ragnar Farr, ed., *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, 31.
73 See Monica Amor, "Oneself as many others," in *Lyle Ashton Harris, Selected Photographs: The First Decade*, (Caracas: Centro de Arte Euroamericano; and Coral Gables: Ambrosino Gallery, 1996)
74 See Coco Fusco, "Continuing the Humanistic Legacy: The Works of Lyle Ashton Harris, in *Lyle Ashton Harris, Selected Photographs: The First Decade*, 13; Harris, "Ritual Bodies—Sexual Bodies," 81-95.
75 See Kobena Mercer, "Dark and Lovely: Notes on Black Gay Image-Making," *Ten. 8* 2, no.1 (Spring 1991): 84.
76 Mercer, "Dark and Lovely," 82.
77 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 32. Quoted in Amor, 6.
78 Quoted in Amor, 5.
79 Quoted in Vince Aletti, "It's a Family Affair: Photographer Lyle Ashton Harris Scores a Strategic Hit," *Village Voice* (27 August 1994): 39.
80 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10.
81 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.
82 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), vii.
83 Butler, 6.
84 See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 23. Fanon's masturbatory allusion is also curious, for critical Fanonism has revealed the flaws and inconsistencies of Fanon's take on gender and homosexuality. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Critical Fanonism," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 457-470; also see Fuss, *Identification Papers*.
85 See Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 217.
86 Quoted in Holland Cotter, "Art After Stonewall: Twelve Artists Interviewed," in *Art in America* 82, (June 1994): 64.
87 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 126.
88 bell hooks, "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 112.
89 Jones, 215.
90 Jones, 226.

91 Amor, 5.

92 See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 312. Also see Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man." On camp, see Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1966. See also David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 1993.

93 Butler, 137. Many feminist critics oppose the notion that drag creates a unified picture of an essential feminine which is falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. However, whether underplayed or overplayed, the theatrical drag versions of black masculinity are as much methods of deflecting or neutralizing white disapproval as modes of expressing black traditions.

94 Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 103.

95 See Douglas F. Maxwell, "Inside Out," in *Inside Out: Psychological Self-Portraiture*, (Ridgefield: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 9.

96 See Andrew Ross, "The Gangsta and the Diva," in Thelma Golden, ed., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 159.

97 See Mercer, "Dark and Lovely," 84.

98 Bailey, 63.

99 See Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," 32.

100 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," *October* 28 (Spring 1994): 127. Bhabha views mimicry as constructed around ambivalence: a simultaneous repulsion and attraction from an object, person, or action.

101 Jennifer Blessing, *Rrose is a Rrose is a Rrose: Gender Performance in Photography*, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 107.

102 Quoted in Cotter, 64.

103 Quoted in Deborah Bright, ed., *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 249.

104 John Akomfrah, "On the Borderline," *Ten. 8* 2 (Spring 1991): 61.

105 See bell hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 18.

106 Mercer, "Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Phantasia," 28.

107 Bailey, 64.

# Allegorical Modernism: Carl Einstein on Otto Dix

Matthew Biro

Today, Carl Einstein—perhaps the greatest German art critic of the 1920s—is almost entirely unknown in the English-speaking world. To help rectify this situation and to suggest some reasons for his continuing importance, this essay examines Einstein's critical writing on the art of Otto Dix in light of cultural critic Walter Benjamin's concept of allegory and historian Detlev J. K. Peukert's model of the Weimar Republic as classical modernity in crisis. These latter two figures, it is argued, can help us today to establish an accurate and historically-specific understanding of German art and art criticism in the early and mid-1920s.[1] As revealed by Einstein's analysis of Dix, certain artists and critics during the Weimar Republic experienced their time as a moment of radical crisis and, in response, worked to produce an "allegorical" form of modernism: a mode of appropriationist representational practice that attempted to identify the future of the contemporary moment, the new world that was emerging out of the old. That modernism and representation were indeed connected in the visual arts of the 1920s has to some extent been obscured by the historical dominance of formalist models of modernism in art history and criticism after World War II.[2] Nevertheless, that this was the case is suggested by the ways in which Einstein's analysis of Dix connects with a broader stream of cultural analysis created in Germany by thinkers such as Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin—theoreticians who, in various ways, all attempted to illuminate the experience of modernity in urban life.

Benjamin, Kracauer, and Simmel all shared a "modernist" desire to define what was most characteristic of their contemporary moment.[3] Apprehensive about the modern triumph of western rationality, science, social planning, and technology, they read works of art and mass culture in terms of what they suggested about human development on a social and psychological level. Through various historical and contemporary critical studies, these thinkers argued that specifically modern, social-psychological traits and problems could be discerned in both high and popular culture: traits and problems that helped to explain the turbulence of their time.[4] At the heart of the critical-theoretical practice of Benjamin, Kracauer, and Simmel was an allegorical mode of reading the world: a method of interpreting fragments of modern life so that they dis-

closed larger oscillating "totalities" or constellations of meaning. By rejecting all concepts of totality in favor of one of constellation, these Weimar cultural theorists acknowledged the play of difference and signification that characterizes all interpretation and, thus, the fundamentally dialectical and differential structure of all meaning and representation. For this reason, these theorists maximized contradiction and the play of meaning by interpreting both art and mass culture in a negatively dialectical fashion: namely as a source of social and psychological conflict as well as potential revolutionary newness.

The representational mode of modernism revealed by Einstein's writings on Dix is here called "allegorical" in order to emphasize Walter Benjamin's contribution to this broader critical sensibility that attempted to define the nature of modern life and experience during the Weimar Republic. Although not widely published or read during the 1920s, Benjamin (1892-1940) is nonetheless significant, because he is a member of the same generation as Einstein and Dix, and because his writings so trenchantly captured the problems and contradictions of their shared social and historical space. In his complex, sometimes contradictory cultural criticism and theory written in Germany and abroad in the 1920s and 1930s, Benjamin used the term "allegory" to signify the representational practices most commensurate with the experience of modern life in a way that was very different from more conventional meanings of the term. In the time period during which Benjamin wrote his major works, allegory already had an extremely wide range of meanings in German.[5] From the Greek, *allêgoría*, speaking otherwise than one seems to speak, it stood for multiple forms of imaginative spoken, written, and visual representation—forms of extended metaphor that were constructed in such a way as to encourage their beholders to look for multiple meanings hidden beneath the literal surface of the work. Although Benjamin adopted freely from the term's wide-ranging historical meanings, he also attributed to allegory a much more specific constellation of significance. For him, allegory was a melancholy, modern, and secular mode of representation—one that was essentially violent, historical, and weakly redemptive.

Benjamin initially devised his theory of allegory to explain the principal characteristics of the German *Trauerspiel* or royal "mourning play."[6] As Benjamin argued, this baroque dramatic genre, which presented the intrigues of courtly life as a metaphor for the battle between primordial forces of good and evil, also revealed the growing disenchantment of the modern world. Disenchantment began when human beings started to transform their concept of the natural world from an understanding of nature as a place of mythical or spiritual forces to one where the world was seen as a source of material to be shaped and formed according to subjective human intentions. As Benjamin suggested, the growing dominance of this subjective sense of the world made a feeling of separation from the past fundamental to the experience of moder-

nity. As he put it, "the three most important impulses in the origin of western allegory are non-antique, anti-antique: the gods project into the alien world, they become evil, and they become creatures" (OD 225). Christianity contributed to this process of disenchantment by either banishing or reinterpreting the pagan gods and by shifting the place of all spiritual power to a supersensible or transcendental realm: a realm that slowly began to be taken over by reason and science beginning in the sixteenth century. While the power of Christianity waned, however, the power of disenchantment grew. The fundamental "spiritual attitude" driving the development of reason, science, and technology into his present day, disenchantment, for Benjamin, was the primary force behind the tremendous increase in rational organization and constant modernization since the eighteenth century.

Benjamin suggested that during the time of the *Trauerspiel* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the processes of disenchantment had progressed to a point where not only the pagan gods were viewed as fictional and in need of a corrective reinterpretation, but the strength of the Christian world view was also beginning to be questioned (OD 78-80). For this reason, the representations of the baroque allegorists were both melancholy and retrospective. The allegorists, in other words, recognized their separation from the time of myth and religion and sensed that, as human history developed, both nature and human beings were being devalued and destroyed. Because they saw human beings and nature as "eternal transience" or constantly in decay (OD 179, 224), and because they longed for a past in which the world was still "whole," the Baroque allegorists, Benjamin argued, constructed representations for a mournful audience—representations in which their loss of religious certainty was dramatized and secular sorrows and anxieties could find satisfaction (OD 119).

The German mourning plays indulged the desire of the beholder to consume suffering and destruction on multiple levels. The main protagonists of the plays were absolute rulers, who, as tyrants, caused suffering, and, as martyrs, suffered the violence of others in various horrible forms. The plays, moreover, were filled with scenes of death and destruction, and the dialogues were highly emotive, both in terms of their subject matter and in terms of their language, which was packed with over-extended and over-determined metaphors and analogies. By focusing on the figure of the sovereign, the baroque allegorists represented the fate of both the fallen individual and the now secular or profane human community. In this way, they attempted to revitalize the Christian worldview by propping up traditional examples of human goodness and evil with references to multiple systems of knowledge drawn from cultural traditions that were beginning to be treated as non-absolute. In the mourning plays, interludes were thus used to introduce foreign figures, gods, moral exemplars, and personifications of abstract concepts, who commented upon

and interpreted the main action, thereby multiplying the systems of meaning in which the story and characters were to be understood. At numerous points in the drama, the mourning play's action was brought to a standstill, and its parts dissected and reassembled to form static tableaus that suggested both literal and underlying significance (OD 192-195). Because of its relatively equal (or "leveled") treatment of the cultural systems of the past, baroque allegory, for Benjamin, revealed an experience of fundamental crisis—a sense of loss, destruction, and impending disaster—that, nonetheless, still offered its beholders a few weak signs of redemption.

For Benjamin, both the violence and the weakly redemptive power of the German mourning plays were connected to the fact that these plays represented human beings as creatures (OD 85, 89). As Beatrice Hanssen notes, the meaning of the word "creature" [*Kreatur*] undergoes a number of transformations in Benjamin's writings.[7] In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin primarily emphasized the word's double meaning as both a sacred and a profane term. Originally a translation of the Latin *creatura* in the late middle ages, "creature," in German, first meant the totality of God's creation. This meaning was eventually taken over in the eighteenth century by the term "nature."[8] In addition, however, by Benjamin's time, "creature" had also come to mean what was "animal-like" in the sense of instinctive, base, enslaved, material, passionate, or bodily.[9] For Benjamin, the mourning plays were significant, because they displayed their protagonists' natural dignity and connections to an earlier, more harmonious time, while simultaneously also revealing their "animality" and passionate natures. Through the extreme emotion, suffering, and violence produced by its "creaturely" side, the subject was first shown to be destroyed and then to be redeemed. As Benjamin put it, in allegories, even "the human body could be no exception to the commandment which ordered the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning, as it was written and ordained, might be picked up from its fragments" (OD 216-217). The sovereign—and, with him or her, the secular community—had to be torn into pieces by the allegorist in order to be reconstructed as a constellation of signs. Thus, ultimately, through the intervention of the allegorist, the "product of the corpse is life" (OD 218), because the "deadness of the figures and the abstraction of the concepts are...the precondition for the allegorical metamorphosis of the pantheon into a world of magical, conceptual creatures" (OD 226).

By representing the human creature dialectically—namely, as radically material, guilty, and demonic as well as possessing dignity and worth in the course of his or her suffering and annihilation—the baroque allegorists attempted to banish absolute evil from their world. As Benjamin put it, "ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem" (OD 232).

The absolute evil that allegory attempts to reveal in the human creature turns out to be a "subjective" projection and not an inherent quality.

Allegory goes away empty-handed. Evil as such, which it cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers, are allegories. They are not real, and that which they represent, they possess only in the subjective view of melancholy; they are this view, which is destroyed by its own offspring because they only signify its blindness. They point to the absolutely subjective pensiveness, to which alone they owe their existence. By its allegorical form evil as such reveals itself to be a subjective phenomenon (OD 233).

Pointing out the double and contradictory character of the early modern subject resulting from its creaturely nature, Benjamin suggested that the baroque *Trauerspiele* attempted to redeem their audiences by directing them toward a less subjective conception of human existence: one that criticized modernity's anthropocentrism, yet that was nonetheless socially and psychologically aware. By showing the sovereign as neither god nor devil, the baroque mourning plays suggested that, although viewed suspiciously, the systems of belief and knowledge that traditionally produced multiple forms of sovereign and enslaved existences still affected human identity in the early modern era. The "break" with the Christian world assumed by these early modernists did not mean the rejection of the past and its traditions, but rather a different, less "obedient" relationship to them.

Although developed out of an analysis of baroque theater, Benjamin's theory of allegory soon began to define for Benjamin the fundamental experiences of modernity in his own time. Beginning in the late 1920s, allegory became one of the foundational concepts guiding Benjamin's account of the modern world in his unfinished Arcades Project, a project that attempted to recover the lost social experiences of a particular urban locality Benjamin called "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century." Furthermore, already in the *Trauerspiel* study, Benjamin noted that the baroque mourning plays shared numerous characteristics with contemporary literature and art, including a concern for violence, decadence, and figurative expression as well as a highly alienated and pessimistic sense of political engagement (OD 53-56). In addition, as was the case in the German mourning plays, Benjamin saw his contemporary culture as radically appropriationist. As he noted in the introduction to the *Trauerspiel* study, like the baroque, the "spirit of the present age seizes on the manifestations of past or distant spiritual worlds, in order to take possession of them and unfeelingly incorporate them into its own self-absorbed fantasizing" (OD 53).

In addition to being violent and weakly redemptive, allegories, ac-

cording to Benjamin's model, were historical because they sought to represent the newness of their contemporary moment—the direction in which their world was evolving—in terms of forms and concepts drawn from a multivalent past or tradition. As "ruins," or collections of fragments torn from multiple traditions, allegories proclaimed their own artificiality and attempted to extinguish the false appearance of totality (OD 176-182). In this way, they also announced their "modernity" —their separation from the past and tradition—at the same time as they attempted to project the new situation that was taking form around them: a heterogeneous world of increasing hybridity and transformation. By isolating certain figures and actions in the profane world and commenting upon them from a multiplicity of different historical perspectives, allegories undermined all readings of history as a linear narrative and, instead, promoted a rethinking of the relationship between past and the future. In Benjamin's famous phrase, through allegory, "history becomes part of the setting" and the passage of historical or narrative time becomes frozen and arranged in space (OD 177). By stopping narrative movement, and examining actions from more than one socio-historical perspective, allegories attempted to remind their readers of all that they had lost through modern, rational "progress." Ambivalent about tradition (because they saw it as not quite appropriate to their "fallen" time), but condemned to use it (through recontextualizing appropriations), allegories represented their world as permeated by conflicting systems of meaning and knowledge. Thus, despite modernity's rhetoric of "break" and "separation" from the past, allegories suggested that the new world could only be anticipated by remembering the pasts and traditions that have been lost.

Today, Benjamin's concept of allegory can help us to define the "modernism" —the particular manner of representing the present—characteristic of Dix's art. And, as will be argued, Einstein's writing on Dix is important precisely because it helps us to understand the relationship between Benjamin's theory of allegory and Dix's modernism—both in terms of what Einstein reveals and in terms of what he obscures of Dix's strategies. Einstein's criticism shows Dix's "allegorical modernism" to be a melancholy and retrospective mode of representation—one that attempts to define the newness of his contemporary moment in a violent, historical, and weakly redemptive manner. That allegorical modernism, so defined, anticipates the ambivalence, heterogeneity, and historicism of what some call contemporary "postmodern" culture is here not the result of an anachronistic mode of interpretation. Instead, allegorical modernism anticipates contemporary postmodernism primarily because it reveals that the current sense of "post-ness" or "separation" —a sense of being simultaneously at the end of a long series of historical developments and on the cutting edge of something radically different and unprecedented—has actually been an underlying characteristic running through certain forms of modern western culture since its very beginnings. As suggested by Benjamin's

work on allegory, a dual sense of rupture from the past and of being on the verge of something radically new was characteristic of certain moments of modern culture since at least the sixteenth century. And, as Einstein's texts on Dix suggest, the rhetoric of break or separation from the past continued to be one of the primary strategies by which modern culture justified and perpetuated itself in the 1920s. That today, at the end of the millennium, this trend continues, should not be surprising. As Benjamin's texts suggest, postmodernism was yet another of modernity's rhetorical disguises.[10]

## II

Even if, as Benjamin suggests, allegory is a cultural reflection and response to the experience of crisis on both an individual and a collective level, it remains to be seen how well the concept of crisis fits the history of the Weimar Republic in more than just a superficial sense. Detlev J. K. Peukert's landmark book *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* provides the reasons why "crisis" is indeed an appropriate concept.[11] In Peukert's social and philosophical history, Weimar Germany (1919-1933) represents the crisis of classical modernity: the culmination of a moment between the 1890s and the 1930s, when the main modern ideas and movements achieved their breakthrough and, almost immediately, became uncertain.[12] Peukert's history is notable in that it analyzes the Weimar Republic's development not only in terms of the traditional categories of governmental, military, social, and economic history, but also in terms of rapid changes in its media, leisure, and cultural spheres. By raising questions of culture and everyday life in Weimar Germany, and by viewing them in terms of conflicts between genders, classes, generations, and political ideologies in interaction with more abstract forces indicated by the concepts of social "modernization" and "rationalization," Peukert manages to present a much more complex account of its historical development than has usually been attempted.

At the heart of Peukert's book is a not entirely new argument: Peukert contends that there was no "deutscher Sonderweg" —or "special path of German development" in the context of the modern world.[13] *Sonderweg* proponents claimed that the development of Germany in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was essentially different from other western European societies. They argued that Germany's failure to establish a stable, parliamentary government, a democratic political culture, or an egalitarian civil society during the Wilhelmine Empire and the Weimar Republic resulted from the country's traveling a particularly "German" or even "Prussian" road to Nazism. Arguments about Germany's belatedness as a nation, its initially state-dominated industrial capitalism, the refusal of its pre-industrial elite (the Prussian Junkers) to give way to a strong middle class, the failure of the weak middle class to embrace either socialism or democracy, and Germany's supposedly

deep-rooted "authoritarian" character, were all presented as reasons for a special path of German development in the modern world. Almost inevitably, this specifically German path—a mis-development of modernity characterized by a radical lack of stability—led to the final crisis that allowed Adolf Hitler and the Nazis to assume power.

Against the *Sonderweg* thesis, Peukert argues that Weimar Germany exhibited far more similarities with America and the western European nations of the time than differences. Peukert defines classical modernity as

> the form of fully fledged industrialized society that has been with us from the turn of the century until the present day. In an economic sense, modernity is characterized by highly rationalized industrial production, complex technological infrastructures and a substantial degree of bureaucratized administrative and service activity; food production is carried out by an increasingly small, but productive, agricultural sector. Socially speaking, its typical features include the division of labor, wage and salary discipline, an urbanized environment, extensive educational opportunities and a demand for skills and training. As far as culture is concerned, media products dominate; continuity with traditional aesthetic principles and practices in architecture and the visual and other creative arts is broken, and is replaced by unrestricted formal experimentation. In intellectual terms, modernity marks the triumph of western rationality, whether in social planning, the expansion of the sciences or the self-replicating dynamism of technology, although this optimism is accompanied by skeptical doubts from social thinkers and cultural critics.[14]

As Peukert suggests, the progressive disenchantment and rationalization of the world, detected by Benjamin already in the German mourning plays, became radically more pronounced by the time of the Weimar Republic. In addition, as Peukert also suggests (though not directly), the particularly modern sense of revolutionary crisis—optimism accompanied by skeptical doubts—is one that was fed by a dialectical sense of the human being as creaturely, that is, as both noble and base.

According to Peukert, instead of somehow lying outside the general definition of modernity, Weimar Germany and its culture embodied modernity's contradictions to the fullest possible extent. In this way, Peukert suggests that the Nazi state that emerged out of Weimar Germany was not an aberration of modern development but a potential inherent in "normal" forms of modernization. If, as Peukert suggests, modernity is inherently and fundamentally contradictory, representing and perpetuating itself in and through conflict, then it is not surprising that, like the baroque mourning plays, certain forms of mod-

ernist culture combine total critique with extreme idealism. And, by bringing the Weimar period into focus as a "compressed" form modernity, one that brings together modernity's various antinomies, Peukert's work is significant because he shows how modernity thrives both in and through conflict. He suggests, in other words, that modernity's "telos"—for want of a better term—is ever greater diversity, development, and dialectical opposition. As is the case with western art and popular culture today, certain strands of Weimar culture presented a view of modernization that was radically separated from a sense of rational progress and, moreover, suggested that modern forms of society such as fascism and liberal democracy existed in an uneasy continuum. As will be argued, these strands represent allegorical responses to a state of continuous crisis: modern representations that, by critically depicting the contemporary flux of experience, sought to influence and transform it.

**III**

Why modernity might be understood during the Weimar Republic as the constant experience of crisis and transformation can be gleaned from the particular lives led by both Einstein and Dix, as well as from the heterogeneity of their creative practices. Well into the Weimar Republic and even beyond, Einstein and Dix learned new activities and techniques—in part because they were often forced by their external circumstances to radically change and adapt to new life situations and practices. Einstein (1885-1940) was one of Weimar Germany's most powerful and trenchant critics. The son of a Jewish cantor and teacher, Einstein studied philosophy, history, art history, and classical philology in Berlin between 1904 and 1908, and published his first novel *Bebuquin, or the Dilettantes of Wonder* [*Bebuquin oder die Dilettanten des Wunders*] in 1912. In his influential writings on African sculpture, the early Japanese woodcut, and South Seas sculpture, dating from the second two decades of the twentieth century, Einstein developed a complex theory of "primitive" art—theorizing it to be both religious and modern.[15] As early as 1915, Einstein attempted to relate African sculpture to current transformations in western painting: namely the formal development of cubism in France only a few years before.[16] Through this cross-cultural approach, Einstein, like a number of other influential figures at the time, tried to revitalize a western tradition that seemed to him exhausted by developing analogies and points of contact with non-European aesthetic and social practices.

Between 1916 and 1918, Einstein served as a German soldier in Belgium—an experience that was to turn him towards anarchism and communism. In 1918, after leaving the army, Einstein became an active contributor to the Berlin dada circle, humorously promoting social revolution in Germany by writing songs and sketches, devising publicity schemes, and editing the satirical journal *Bloody E(a)rnest* [*Der blutige Ernst*] with Georg Grosz, as well as

contributing to a related journal *Bankruptcy* [*Die Pleite*]. Then, while continuing his socially-critical Berlin-based literary career in early and mid-1920s—in 1921, his drama *Bad News* [*Die schlimme Botschaft*] was published, an event that was to lead to Einstein's trial for blasphemy during the same year—Einstein also rose to the position of one of Weimar Germany's most prominent art critics. International in focus, Einstein published long reviews for journals, primarily *Der Querschnitt* and *Das Kunstblatt*, introductions to exhibition catalogues, and translations of books on modern art. In addition, he also wrote the first encyclopedia of modern art in German, *The Art of the Twentieth Century*, which first appeared in 1926. An extremely influential work, Einstein's encyclopedia, which was reprinted in 1928 and 1931, established him as a leading authority on modern and contemporary art.

Perhaps as a response to his turbulent times, Einstein's career during the Weimar Republic shows a constant shifting between different activities and fields: literature and criticism, fine art and popular culture (through his involvement with the Berlin dada movement), and modern European and "primitive" art. Einstein's response to crisis, it seems, was to develop a hybrid set of practices—something that appears to have also characterized his years in France. In 1928, with the rise of fascism in Germany, Einstein emigrated to Paris, where he wrote for the journal *Documents*, which he edited with Georges Bataille and others in 1929 and 1930.[17] As an émigré in his mid-forties, Einstein thus helped to influence the direction taken by French surrealism in the early 1930s towards greater ethnographic and anthropological accuracy. By curating exhibitions, he also helped to preserve contemporary French art. In 1933, Einstein organized the first Georges Braque retrospective for the Kunsthalle in Basel and, in 1934, his monograph on Braque appeared in French. If the rise of fascism in Europe and subsequently World War II had not tragically altered Einstein's destiny, he might have extended his sphere of activities in a number of new directions. His interest in film led him in 1935 to write the screenplay of Jean Renoir's film *Toni* (1935). In 1936, Einstein fought with anarchist-syndicalists against Franco in the Spanish Civil War and, back in Paris a year later, agitated against fascism in the communist press. In 1940, Einstein was arrested in Paris for being a German national and deported to a French internment camp in Bordeaux. After France's capitulation to Germany, he was released. A German Jew with no means of escaping a France now under Nazi control, Einstein committed suicide on July 5, 1940.

As suggested by his tragic life and radically hybrid career (a narrative that contains numerous parallels with the more well-known life of Walter Benjamin), the crisis and turmoil that Einstein experienced and responded to in his work was not simply a product of his particular "outlook" on the world. Instead, it was also determined in various ways by objective and violent forces that were radically outside of Einstein's control. At the same time, as Einstein's

criticisms of Dix demonstrate, Einstein also sought to bring out the experience of crisis and turmoil in contemporary art—in the hopes, it seems, that potential solutions might thereby emerge. Instead of shying away from crisis, Einstein attempted to explore and embrace it. Only in this way, it seems, did he feel that he could release the weakly redemptive power inherent in Weimar culture.

Like Einstein, both Otto Dix's life and his works during the Weimar Republic seem to be characterized by change and hybridity and, moreover, project a sense of the moment as a time of ongoing crisis and transformation. Dix (1891-1969) was and remains one of Weimar Germany's most famous painters. Born in a small town in the eastern part of Germany to proletarian parents, Dix was educated at an applied arts school in Dresden before World War I. A volunteer in search of "experience," he fought for four years in the trenches and returned to Germany determined to be either "famous" or "reviled."[18] In the turbulent early years of the Weimar Republic, Dix survived as an art student by moving from city to city and developing connections with different artistic institutions and networks: various groups and movements that exhibited together, as well as specific dealers, museums, and journals that helped to further his career. A prodigious talent, Dix showed and sold his paintings, watercolors, and etchings of contemporary life in every possible context and, in this way, became comparatively successful in the early 1920s. Tried twice for obscenity, Dix was a flashpoint for both right- and left-wing criticism; and, in part because of the media attention he generated, Dix became one of the most famous young painters of the Weimar Republic.

Long associated with *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, "the new objectivity" or "the new matter-of-factness," the style that was supposedly most characteristic of the Weimar Republic, Dix has generally been praised as both a realist and as a social critic.[19] Dix's early works, however, reveal a great deal of eclecticism in terms of form and technique—something that seems to indicate a constant, critical working through of different traditional and avant-garde possibilities of painterly form. Primarily consisting of portraits and landscapes—traditional (i.e., nineteenth-century) modernist genres—these works exhibit a steadfast refusal to identify with any one style or movement.[20] In addition, during World War I, Dix began to combine expressionist, cubist, and futurist elements to represent his contemporary experience, thereby continuing his appropriative and recombinatory practices. Like his other works created during the Weimar Republic, these war-time works seem "citational": that is, they appropriate past motifs and styles, not simply for their forms, but also for their historical and contextual meanings. Moreover, even during the Weimar Republic, the time during which he is most clearly identified with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Dix quotes and appropriates from a multitude of other sources, including Marc Chagall and Paul Klee in 1919, Berlin dada photomontage and George Grosz in 1920, and, later on, during the high point of his identification

with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, northern renaissance masters such as Hans Baldung Grien, Matthias Grünewald, and Lukas Cranach as well as the German romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge. Thus, like Einstein, much of Dix's work throughout the 1920s is characterized by hybridity and a distrust of any single style or framework.

When the Nazis assumed power in 1933, Dix lost the professorship he had assumed at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in 1927. And, although he continued to make art in East Germany after World War II until shortly before his death in 1969, his work after 1933 never achieved the popularity of his works of the 1920s. Since the 1950s, however, Dix's work has been subject to an ever-increasing amount of art historical analysis—one that reflects the turbulence and hybridity of his life and works. Initially dominated by biographical-stylistic,[21] Nietzschean,[22] and social-realist models of interpretation[23] (or combinations thereof), the art-historical writing on Dix has become considerably more complex since the early 1980s. Although the focus remains on Dix's art during the Weimar Republic or the years just before, questions of institution,[24] reception,[25] and gender[26] have also been explored in relation to his work. Nevertheless, despite his early fame and the rapidly increasing bibliography, Otto Dix remains an ambiguous figure within the pantheon of twentieth century art. Although his political commitment and his technical talents are praised, Dix's realism, the importance given to subject matter in his art, and his refusal to leave the traditional media of painting, etching, and drawing have all been read as signs of Dix's anti-modernism and, thus, as reasons to dismiss Dix as an important twentieth-century artist.

## IV

Einstein's two texts on Dix are important because they set Dix into the fundamentally modernist concerns of his contemporary moment in a particularly trenchant way and because they give further evidence that artists and critics in the 1920s conceived of their time as a moment of ongoing crisis. Furthermore, Einstein's writings reveal the ambivalence that Dix's art evoked during the Weimar Republic—and, hence, its fundamentally dialectical structure—as well as the allegorical character of certain strands of German culture of the time. By so doing, Einstein's criticism points to a suppressed form of modernism in the twentieth century—a set of forms, strategies, media, and discourses that concentrated on representing the contemporary moment as a time of ongoing crisis. Dix's allegorical modernism is a form that has been overlooked by histories of modernist art in part because Dix did not focus on the traditional modernist concerns—e.g., abstraction, flatness, and medium specificity—that were central to the writings of Clement Greenberg and other formalist critics. These concerns became extremely influential in both the United States and Europe after World War II, and, more recently, have been reinforced by certain

modes of postmodern theory and criticism that view the return of avant-garde practices after World War II as indicating a fundamental "break" from a primarily "formalist" or "non-objective" pre-World War II moment.[27]

Because of the radical incommensurability of Dix's art with stereotypically modernist—i.e., formalist—concerns, the significance of Dix's allegorical modernism has been largely unrecognized. Consequently, a concept of modernism that binds Dix's practices and strategies to those of his contemporaries such as Max Beckmann, Paul Klee, László Maholy-Nagy, and the Berlin dada artists has remained largely undeveloped.[28] As Einstein's texts as a whole suggest, Dix's art was, indeed, "modernist," because it was radically and fundamentally concerned with defining and representing the new world that was emerging in his present moment. And as Einstein's texts also suggest, although this form of modernism was representational, it was never exactly "realist." Instead, it depicted its present allegorically—namely, as violent and fragmented, and moreover, as permeated with both destructive and redemptive potential. Through allegory, Dix represented his contemporary world through multiple lenses of historical possibility—contradictory frameworks that he indicated through constellations of fragmentary signs that he embedded within the everyday.

Einstein's first essay on Dix, which was written for Paul Westheim's *Das Kunstblatt* in April 1923, at a time when Dix was preparing to go to trial on obscenity charges, was extremely positive.[29] Defending Dix's more clinical or "objective" style and subject matter, something that was then drawing attack in the conservative press, the essay begins by suggesting the death of expressionism, a common trope at the time and a sign of Dix's "post-ness" or "break" with the past. As Einstein elliptically put it, "We are fed up with the color-drunk peasant brothers-in-law of Gauguin and Van Gogh. Enough of these Dionysian daubers" (K 97). In addition to suggesting how broadly "expressionism" could be conceived by the early 1920s, Einstein also emphasized the relativism or leveling of the tradition characteristic of the time: the fact that conflicting and radically different aesthetic principles—namely, abstraction and objectivity—could simultaneously inspire conviction in the fine arts sphere. As Einstein put it, "The poles of contemporary art are stretched to the breaking point. Constructivists, nonobjectives, establish a dictatorship of form; others like Grosz, Dix, and Schlichter break apart reality through pregnant objectivity, uncover this moment in time, and force it to self-irony" (K 97). Like the worlds depicted in the baroque mourning plays, the Weimar Republic is presented as a space of conflicting values and ideals.

Dix's objectivity was, for Einstein, not a literal or a photographic form of realism, but rather a focus on the present that rendered its meaning ambiguous, filled with both possibility and danger. Thus, like expressionism, which it supposedly rejected, Dix's objectivity doubled the world, making it a sign of

itself, and thereby forced it to reveal something below its surface. And, like expressionism, objectivity was also a mode of representation that both connoted and depicted violence and passion. In the work of Dix and the others, "painting" was "a means of cool execution" and "observation" was used "as an instrument of vehement attack" (K 97). What differentiated Dix's objectivity from expressionism, for Einstein, was its choice of a new, contemporary subject matter—scenes of squalid, everyday life in the Weimar Republic—as well as its colder, more critical, and incisive way of representing this new subject matter. As Einstein suggested, Dix's objectivity was a manner of representation that used kitsch—different mass cultural clichés and stereotypes—to reveal multiple chains of significance below the surface of modern life.

Through its appropriations from kitsch, Dix's art suggested that, in addition to being an extremely brutal time, Weimar Germany was also a radically unoriginal one. According to Einstein, Dix presented his contemporary world as an ugly confusion of clichés and stereotypes. "Dix resolutely...kicks into the flatulent belly of this time, which is a mere caricature of a time, forcing from it confessions of its evil villainy, and he candidly reveals its people, whose crafty faces wear pinched stolen grimaces" (K 98). In this unoriginal, primarily urban condition, subjectivity dissolves. "False personality, which stockpiles jokes and rascally anecdotes, is a defective and a sellout of the bankrupt" (K 100). Einstein thus praised Dix's modern urban subjects of the early 1920s—his prostitutes and pimps, bourgeois couples, circus types, and sex murderers—who all revealed the modern self in crisis. By critically representing these modern subjects (and, through their juxtaposition, suggesting class difference and hegemony), Dix attacked everything that was wrong with his time: its political, social, psychological, and moral shortcomings as well as what Georg Simmel, with whom Einstein had studied in Berlin, called the preponderance of "objective spirit" in modern society.[30] And, as suggested by Einstein's analysis of Dix's art, a sense of post-ness—of separation from the immediate past and of a "new" conjunction of oldness and newness—was a pervasive characteristic of the time.

For Einstein, Dix's radical subject matter emerged out of the most dangerous failing of his early work; namely, its literary character.

> Dix began with a dangerously literary approach...very talented, but somewhat oppressed by the mixed-up time. Romanticism of the local quarter, somewhat childish journalism. Soon Dix dispensed with the literary element and found support in the sensational: the repulsive element of the permanent-stupid meanness. Anecdote was put aside. Now Dix paints heads, gesticulating flesh and superimposed seashells, both penetratingly and convincingly. He has found the arrogant repulsiveness that squats on every chair,

> that deceives with smug stupidity, defending a crumbling situation with a backside hot for currency. He gives kitsch to kitsch (K 100-101).

Einstein argued that Dix quickly transcended his tendencies towards literature and anecdote by producing analytical portraits: works that represented their subjects as signs of larger forces that control the profane, everyday world. As narrative became reduced in Dix's art, closely-observed yet caricatured details (scars, steely eyes, double chins, and taut or sagging flesh), came to serve as signifiers of the subject's and the time's divided "character" or "soul." For Einstein, Dix's painted visages were important because they suggested the sick nature of the contemporary moment: a period oriented toward glorifying both body and commodity, an era that was somehow more stupid and crude than earlier times. In this way, by giving "kitsch to kitsch," Dix accurately reflected his turbulent time; and, by creating a social-critical and class-conscious art, he produced "permanent fact and a principled approach with accurate painterly means" (K 101).

Although he repeatedly noted their caricatured and mass-cultural aspects, Einstein only hinted at the fact that, like the photomontages of the Berlin dada artists, Dix's seemingly-traditional paintings and etchings from the early and mid-1920s actually contained a number avant-garde elements.[31] At the same time, Einstein's hint is important, because it points to Dix's avant-garde tendencies: his blurring of the distinction between art and life. Dix's avant-garde tendencies can be seen in the political nature of his art—its focus on social criticism. In addition, they are also evident in the manner in which he critically introduced mass culture into the fine-arts genre of history painting, thereby criticizing the institution of art as well as the other institutions of society and state. Furthermore, Dix's avant-garde tendencies are apparent in his strategies of ironic distancing—his various ways of putting his paintings within quotation marks or evoking a sense in the spectator that Dix believed the opposite of what was represented. Through such strategies, the meanings of Dix's works were rendered unstable and their various audiences were called upon to engage with and "complete" the works' conflicting strands of association. Finally, Dix's avant-garde tendencies can also be discovered in his stylistic, technical, and thematic quotations: attempts to mirror the fragmented and unoriginal character of his interwar context and present the Weimar Republic as a time that was culturally-overloaded and in a state of ongoing normative crisis. By proclaiming its artificial and fragmentary character, Dix's art thus provoked responses like that of Einstein—responses that engaged with Dix's work in a critical and politically-committed manner.

For Einstein, it was ultimately Dix's avant-garde ability to present what was worst about their contemporary moment—to give "kitsch to kitsch"

—that gave his work its value. By creating a moment of synthesis between kitsch and historical portraiture, Dix's art somehow transcended its own kitschiness. Dix's paintings and etchings

> are not caricatures. This is impossible where the totality of the upper classes sweats itself into caricatures. And there Dix, the dashing painter who trains himself in observation, strikes. For him, an unrepaired rental house, a stuffed sofa, an irrigator, and a bare prosthesis become nature (K 101).

By focusing on class struggle in the context of everyday life, Dix's art found truth and invested overlooked and discarded objects with the power of nature—the power to generate new forms and combinations. In this way, Dix's kitschy, post-expressionist objectivity was potentially revolutionary in the spheres of both art and society. It had a weakly redemptive power, and, hence, it was convincing and significant in Einstein's eyes.

In 1923, Einstein praised Dix's "objectivity" and "observation" highly. "One conducts war," as Einstein put it, "either by inventing forms or by ruining them through representation and by reacting to the caricatured seductive power of objects and individuals...with carefully structured counterattacks" (K 99-100). In 1926, this was no longer the case. By this time, Dix had become one of the foremost artists in Germany, sought after as a portrait painter in Berlin and, although his talents were not in question, the fact that his work remained so literary and representational seems to have become much more problematic for Einstein. By 1926, signs of conservatism and reaction were everywhere. Perhaps because his left-wing modernist representations had not helped to stop the rise of the right in Germany, Dix's kitchiness and his ability to represent his moment as a confusion of conflicting clichés and stereotypes began to seem problematic to Einstein.

As the remarks on Kandinsky and the Russian constructivists in his encyclopedia suggest, Einstein was not a particularly great fan of radically non-objective art.[32] He preferred artists like Henri Matisse, André Derain, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque—painters who moved toward abstraction but who never fully gave up the representational motif. In comparison to these French painters and to the more radical non-objectivists, Dix's painting seemed more and more formally inadequate to Einstein by the mid-1920s: too filled with detail, kitsch, sentimentality, and pulp fiction. In 1926, the third year of the Weimar Republic's phase of relative stability, Einstein saw Dix's art as being bound too closely with the past. A regurgitation of baldly-chosen, barely-digested elements from a broken set of outmoded traditions, Dix's cold, violent painting appeared inappropriate and ill-suited to Weimar Germany's anti-bourgeois and formally-experimental modern moment. Despite his proletarian roots,

Dix seemed too conservative.

Although Dix was included in Einstein's encyclopedia—and thus in his "pantheon" of twentieth century artists—Dix was only given a single paragraph.[33] The paragraph, moreover, gives the impression that Einstein had radically changed his opinion of Dix's art. Although inclusion was unavoidable because of his fame, technical ability, and sheer productivity, Dix was introduced only to be quickly dismissed as authoritarian by his former supporter. Einstein began by emphasizing Dix's appropriationist character.

> Dix—born in Gera in 1891—developed himself from Saxon-Florentinism into a painter of his times, whose artistic power does not always correspond to the audaciously-chosen material. After a Dresden Quattrocento, he became Wedekindesque in his Pandora-like view of instructive immorality.[34]

Obliquely referring to Dix's increasingly-elaborate painterly strategies, Einstein suggested that it was precisely Dix's painting that no longer supported his subject matter. Over the course of the 1920s, even though he continued to represent modern life in Weimar Germany, Dix began to make more and more painterly citations of figures and techniques drawn from sources located deep in the historical past. Modern versions of traditional *vanitas* and *memento mori* figures appeared, and secular scenes were given religious connotations through triptych forms—sometimes complete with predella. In addition, Dix began to paint on wood and emulate and transform the technique of the northern renaissance masters—a technique that consisted of building up multiple layers of tempera and oil paints on the painting's surface separated by overlays of transparent glaze.[35] In his encyclopedia, Einstein emphatically rejected this strange and hybrid "traditionalism": Dix's practice of representing modern life in terms of much earlier artistic themes, forms, and techniques,[36] and what I have been calling his "allegorical modernism." Although Einstein had previously appreciated Dix's activist and socially-critical stance, by 1926 he saw these qualities negated by Dix's anachronistic references, his tendencies towards narrative and pulp fiction, and his too-literal appropriations of the works of others.[37]

According to Einstein, the counterfeit nature of Dix's manner of painting had become so pronounced by the mid-1920s that Dix even falsified his own earlier experience:

> Dix is the son of war and failed revolt, determined not to forget too quickly. He risks contemporary kitsch, but for this reason his painting can easily prove banal. One trusts the exciting and interesting motif too much. In 1924, he attempted to paint the character of the war—an embarrassing allegory.

Referring to Dix's war representations—among other works, the now lost painting *The Trench* (1920-23) as well as his series of etchings *The War* (1924), among the most famous and debated contemporary art of the time[38]—Einstein found Dix's focus on content, detail, and allegorical reference both banal and embarrassing. Concluding on a devastating note, Einstein suggested that perhaps Dix was "at heart a reactionary painter with a left-wing motif."

## V

Compelling and engaged, Einstein's art criticism suggests a view of Weimar culture as modernity in crisis by registering extreme ambivalence about Dix's art. Einstein's ambivalence can be seen in the way that his opinion of Dix's art shifted so radically. In April 1923, in the context of social turmoil and hyperinflation caused by the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr district and the resulting German "passive resistance," Dix's representations of circus, street, and society types as critical emblems of the contemporary moment seemed convincing to Einstein. He praised Dix's "cold gaze" and his ability to turn observation into a means of attacking and dissecting aspects of Weimar society. By 1926, however, Dix's fame, his economic success, and his increasingly-technical painterly pursuits appear to have made him too bourgeois and traditional for Einstein. Dix, Einstein argued, was too content-oriented and not formally transgressive enough.

As Einstein's ambivalence suggests, Dix's art produced a multiplicity of conflicting interpretations—often in the same spectator. An effect not simply of Dix's works but of the relativism and uncertainty of the historical moment as a whole, this conflict of interpretations, as Peukert's *The Weimar Republic* suggests, was fundamentally connected to modernity understood as a state of ongoing crisis. In response to the turmoil produced by processes of modernization, artists like Dix attempted to reflect contemporary conflicts; and critics like Einstein, when interpreting such artists, attempted to mirror and accentuate the conflicted and uncertain character of their contemporary culture. And in this way, they produced a fundamentally dialectical form of modernist culture by means of which they attempted to analyze and reconstruct their contemporary world. Through critical representations of the contemporary moment, and the constant evocation of multiple traditions from which they indicated partial distance or separation, they hoped to imagine new forms of identity and society commensurate with their experience of crisis.

The development of Einstein's opinion of Dix's art also suggests that to represent the experience of ambivalence and crisis was a project that was extremely difficult to maintain. And here it was Einstein's criticism that appears to have failed and not Dix's art. Radically heterogeneous in terms of influence, motif, and style, Dix's painterly "objectivity" was hard to place or define—a

result of its many affinities with two earlier forms of German art: dada and expressionism.[39] Most Weimar critics (and Einstein fell into this group in his second review), tried to separate these earlier styles from Dix's cold objectivity or, at the very least, to assimilate them into his *sachlich* focus on technique, precision, and the everyday—an error that has been repeated in many histories of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. As was argued above, in contrast to Einstein's later judgment about Dix's too-literal and tradition-bound painterly practices, Dix's works continued to reveal radically avant-garde elements and, thus, extreme heterogeneity and experimentation. By linking painting to mass culture and by using fragments torn from different historical contexts to stand as signs of larger and conflicting constellations of meaning, Dix created fundamentally dialectical representations that undermined earlier expectations about the nature and function of art.[40]

Today, by focusing on the dialectical character of Dix's art, as well as on the aspects that bothered critics like Einstein the most about Dix's work (namely, its connections to mass culture and allegory), art historians will be able to better define Dix's particular form of representational modernism. As suggested by Einstein's criticism, this new form of representational modernism conformed neither to photographic realism, nor to earlier, more formalist and abstract modes of modernist representation such as those of Matisse or Picasso. Furthermore, as Einstein also suggests, members of Dix's contemporary audience did not always see his art as "objective" in the stereotypical *Neue Sachlichkeit* sense of the term; namely, as realistic, matter-of-fact, non-utopian, and sanguine about the effects of Germany's rapid and ongoing modernization. Instead, as indicated by Einstein's ambivalent texts, Dix's representational form of modernism is perhaps best understood as "allegorical" in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term.

Einstein brought out the allegorical character of Dix's art, not merely through his literal references to Dix's "embarrassing allegories" of war, but also through his emphasis on the fragmented, crisis-permeated, and culturally-constructed nature of both the individual and society in the Weimar Republic. As presented in Einstein's critical texts on Dix of the early and mid-1920s, everything in the Weimar Republic seems to be composed of combinations of repeated fragments. Like the allegories of the baroque dramatists, Dix's modernist allegories responded to the crises of the subject and of the "new" fallen situation that arose as a result of a "break" or "separation" from the immediate past by emphasizing their own artificiality and citational character. As in Benjamin's reading of the baroque, the old forms and symbols seem to live on in new hybrid combinations in the modern world. Of course, Dix's subjects were not sovereigns, nor were his social contexts those of the court. However, his characters appear to possess the same "creatureliness" —the same dialectical animality and occasional nobility—characteristic of the baroque *dramatis*

*personae.* Furthermore, as suggested by Einstein's analyses, Dix's art showed that tyranny and reckless individualism had come to permeate every level of Weimar society. As suggested by Dix's art, the absolute egocentrism criticized in the baroque tyrant dramas became a mass phenomenon during the Weimar Republic.

Moreover, also connecting Dix's art to Benjamin's theory of allegory is its weakly redemptive power, visible both in its social-critical character as well as in its multiple references to past symbolic systems, which, it suggests, still have the power to change and transform the Weimar Republic. Also weakly redemptive are the attempts in Dix's art to combat a concept of time as an empty continuum filled with constant progress. In Dix's art, as in Benjamin's account of the German mourning plays, history seems to have become part of the setting. Dix's characters almost always appear frozen in the midst of action—either absorbed in dramatic activity or confronting the beholder with stylized gestures of self-presentation. In addition, Dix's figures are often surrounded by mottoes, symbolic objects, or emblems that suggest larger forces and structures that work through or around them. Finally, as in Benjamin's model of baroque allegory, abrupt juxtapositions are used in Dix's art to "stop" time and provoke reflection on current events from a multitude of different standpoints of historical knowledge and belief. As closer analysis of Dix's art would suggest, Dix's juxtapositions often positioned the slowly-emerging new human being and society somewhere between high art and mass-produced kitsch. For this reason, his works potentially caused their viewers to reflect upon the different symbolic systems through which human identity was constructed during the Weimar Republic. By stopping time through allegorical representation, Dix creatively depicted both a subject and a time fallen into crisis.

As has now become apparent in relation to the tradition of modern art in the twentieth century, the most basic "forms" or "modes" of representation can no longer be defined in terms of "style" or "movement" —if, indeed, they ever could be. Since the very beginning of the twentieth century (if not also much earlier), modes of representation have always had at least the possibility of including multiple styles, themes, concepts, and techniques as components within a larger constellation of ongoing representational practices. Such hybrid forms are perhaps best seen as "representational matrices" —complex structures that exist over time and that never manifest all their possibilities in a single work. As such, they contain more than just formal and thematic elements, for at heart they are also conceptual and thus suggest a "point of view" in the sense of a developing "philosophy" or "outlook" on the world. Allegorical modernism was an outlook in this sense, although this philosophy was, of course, by no means a characteristic of Weimar culture in general. At the same time however, as suggested by the figures discussed in this essay, alle-

gorical modernism was not something entirely particular either: it was something shared, consenting, and dialogic, a matrix that Weimar culture inherited and that was worked upon by numerous cultural practitioners during the course of its brief and turbulent history. As such, allegorical modernism was something that was both "common" (in a non-universal, non-essentialist sense) and riven by dissension. It was constituted at different moments within Weimar history in terms of alternating polarities and emphases, and it reflected a wide range of diverse forms, contents, techniques, and political ideologies.

By suggesting that a constellation of issues similar to those explored by Walter Benjamin in his theory of baroque allegory were circulating in the field of Weimar art criticism, Einstein's writing on Dix discloses interesting continuities between visual art and cultural theory during the Weimar Republic. As such, Einstein's writing shows that Weimar culture anticipated contemporary western culture's ambiguous focus on representation, subjectivity, and history as sources of both positive and negative forms of value and identification. Dix's allegorical modernism, Einstein suggests, was a project of representing a simultaneously disintegrating and reconfiguring present by means of broken and appropriated forms. Critically crossing the boundaries between fine art and mass culture, Dix sought to represent the conflicts, characters, and institutions of his time in ways that would inspire revolutionary transformations. An art that both represented and attempted to manage the experience of modernity as continuous crisis, Dix's work, like Einstein's writing, engaged with the world because it wished to change it. As such, Einstein and Dix can help art historians today to recognize a suppressed form of politically-engaged modernism that links certain types of art and theory across the spectrum of Weimar culture. As the examination of even a few strands of allegorical modernism during the Weimar Republic suggests, the same contradictions of modern culture continue to both menace and enable us today at the beginning of a new millennium.

**Notes**

I would like to thank Edward Dimendberg, Ann Duroe, Christine Mehring, and Juliane Biro for their comments on this essay.

1 On Einstein's relationship to Benjamin, see Charles W. Haxthausen, "Reproduktion und Wiederholung. Benjamin und Einstein: eine kritische Gegenüberstellung," in *Etudes Germaniques*, 53 (1) (January-March 1988): 55-76; see also Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Carl Einstein; or, The Postmodern Transformation of Modernism," in Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 36-59. On Benjamin's relationship to German art history and aesthetics, see Michael P. Steinberg, "The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods, and the Objects of History" in Michael P. Steinberg, *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 88-118;

Steinberg's model of Benjamin's practice of historical materialism is particularly useful. See also Thomas Y. Levin, "Walter Benjamin and the Theory of Art History," *October* 47 (Winter 1988): 77-78. My thinking on Benjamin has also benefited from the following works: Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Macmillan, 1977); Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Timothy Bahti, *Allegories of History: Literary Historiography after Hegel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), in particular, 183-225 and 255-290; and Edwardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2 A dominance that came about in part through the brilliance and convincing character of much of the formalist art history and criticism produced since World War II; in particular, Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, and Yve-Alain Bois.

3 On the concept of modernity in the work of these three thinkers, see David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

4 Benjamin was an anti-subjectivist thinker in that he rejected a concept of the subject as something fully rational and conscious. In addition, he rejected the Hegelian concept of the subject adopted by Marx and much of the Marxist tradition: a creative and consistently self-improving "rational consciousness" that realized itself on an individual and a collective level in and through history. As suggested in this essay, however, the subject remains a part of Benjamin's thinking in its corporeal, libidinal, and emotional aspects: aspects that Benjamin theorized in the 1920s through the concept of the human being as "creature."

5 For the range meanings allegory had in German art history in the 1920s and 1930s, see, for example, Otto Schmitt, ed., *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, 1 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937), 346-366.

6 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925/1928), translated by Josh Osborne, (New York: Verso, 1990). Hereafter OD in the text.

7 See Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), in particular, pp. 103-107 and 150-162.

8 See J. Wiebering, "Kreatur, Kreatürlichkeit," in Joachim Ritter und Karlfried Gründer, eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1976), 1204-1211.

9 See Hans Schulz, ed., *Deutsches Fremdwörterbuch* (Straßburg: Karl Trübner, 1913) Vol. 1, 402.

10 This is also suggested by the fact that one of the best and most influential theories of postmodernism in the visual arts in the 1980s, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" by Craig Owens, was heavily based on Benjamin's theory of baroque dramatic allegory. See Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University

of California Press, 1992), 52-87. The essay originally appeared in 1980 in two parts. See Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 67-86; and Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism (Part 2)," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 58-80. On postmodernism as both a social and a discursive phenomenon, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

11 Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (1987), translated by Richard Deveson, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991).

12 Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 276.

13 Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 271. For an earlier critique of the *Sonderweg* thesis, see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

14 Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 81-82.

15 See Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 2. Auflage (Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1920) (originally published 1915); Carl Einstein, *Afrikanische Plastik* (Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, nd.); Carl Einstein, *Der frühere japanische Holzschnitt* (Berlin: E. Wasmuth, nd.); and Galerie Flechtheim, *Südsee-Plastiken* (Berlin: Galerie Flechtheim/Kunsthaus Zurich, 1826). See also Einstein, *Afrikanische Legenden* (Berlin: E. Rowohlt, 1925).

16 See, in particular, Einstein, *Negerplastik*, 9-12 and 17-24.

17 See Carl Einstein, *Ethnologie de l'art moderne* (Marseille: André Dimanche, 1993).

18 "Berümht oder berüchtigt." The phrase is Conrad Felixmüller's. See Conrad Felixmüller, *Legenden 1912-1976* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1977), 54.

19 The term "Neue Sachlichkeit" was first coined by the museum director Gustave Hartlaub in 1923 in preparation for his exhibition of the same name at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1925. Within Hartlaub's typology of German realism, Dix was a "verist," a left-wing, critical, as well as cynical social realist. On the Mannheim exhibition, see *Ausstellung Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925). On the developing concept of German realism in the 1920s, see also: Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925); Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland*, 1918-1933 (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag, 1969); and Fritz Schmalenbach, *Die Malerei der "Neuen Sachlichkeit"* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1973). For an English translation of Hartlaub's catalogue essay of 1925, See Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 491-493.

20 Dix's stylistic eclecticism has been noted by many scholars. See Dietrich

Schubert, *Otto Dix* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwohlt, 1980), 18 and Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix*, translated by Doris Linda Jones and Jeremy Gaines (Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1992), 20. Andreas Strobl treats this issue at length; see Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix: Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 180-183, 200-201, and 204-215.

21 See Fritz Löffler, *Otto Dix: Leben und Werk* (Wiesbaden: Ebeling Verlag, 1960); Otto Conzelmann, "Vom Porträt zum Menschenbild—Otto Dix, der Menschenbildner" in *Otto Dix—Menschenbilder: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Gouachen und Zeichnungen* (Stuttgart: Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, 1981); *Otto Dix: 1891-1969* (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 1985); Hans Kinkel, *Die Toten und die Nackten: Beiträge zu Dix* (Berlin: 1991); and Birgit Schwarz and Michael Viktor Schwarz, *Dix und Beckmann: Stil als Option und Schicksal* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1996).

22 See Otto Conzelmann, *Der Andere Dix: Sein Bild vom Menschen und vom Krieg* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983).

23 See Schubert, *Otto Dix*; Brigid S. Barton, *Otto Dix and Die neue Sachlichkeit, 1918-1925* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981); and Linda F. McGreevy, *The Life and Works of Otto Dix: German Critical Realist* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981).

24 See Peter Barth, *Otto Dix und die düsseldorfer Künstlerszene 1920-1925* (Düsseldorf: Galerie Remmert und Barth, 1983); and Sergiusz Michalski, *New Objectivity: Painting, Graphic Art, and Photography in Weimar Germany 1919-1933* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), English translation by Michael Claridge.

25 See Strobl, *Otto Dix*, in particular, pp. 132-183. See also Dennis Crockett, "The Most Famous Painting of the 'Golden Twenties'? Otto Dix and the *Trench* Affair," *Art Journal* 51 (1) (Spring 1992): 72-80; Gunter Otto and Hans Dickel, *Otto Dix: Bildnis der Eltern: Klassenschicksal und Bildformel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984); and Brigit Schwarz, *Otto Dix: Großstadt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1993).

26 See Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Dora Apel, "'Heroes' and 'Whores': The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imagery," *Art Bulletin* LXXIX (3) (September 1997): 366-384; and Karcher, *Otto Dix*. Karcher also connects Dix's work to the thinking of Benjamin and Kracauer; see Karcher, *Otto Dix*, 129-167.

27 On the necessity of contesting the reduction of the concept of modernism to high modernism, particularly in relation to German and Austrian literary modernism, see David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen, "Modernism and the Experience of Modernity" in Huyssen and Bathrick, *Modernity and the Text*, 1-16. For similar arguments in art history, see Mark Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism: The 'Aestheticism' of the *Action d'art* Group, 1906-1920," *Oxford Art Journal* 21 (2) (1998): 99-120 and Antliff, "The Rhythms of Duration: Bergson and the Art of Matisse," in John Mullarkey, ed., *The New Bergson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 184-208.

28 The work of Maud Lavin is an exception here. Her work on Hannah Höch begins to develop precisely such a concept; see Maud Lavin, *Cut with the*

*Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

29 Carl Einstein, "Otto Dix," *Das Kunstblatt* 7 (4) (April 1923): 97-102. Hereafter K in the text. For an English translation see Kaes, et. al., *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 490-491.

30 Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," in *Die Großstadt: Voträge und Aufsätze* Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung zu Dresden, Bd. IX (Dresden: Jahn und Jaensch, 1903), 187-206. See also Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Gerog Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409-424.

31 Peter Bürger notes the fundamental connections between Benjamin's model of allegory and avant-garde art in the second, third, and fourth decades of the twentieth century; see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), translated by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); in particular, 68-73.

32 Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte, XVI*, 2. Auflage (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1928), 147-153, 173-175.

33 See Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 170. Dix fares better in the illustrated material: Einstein reproduces four works by Dix, as opposed to only one by Schlichter. In comparison, Matisse is given seventeen plates, and Picasso gets thirty-six.

34 All references are to Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 170.

35 On Dix's technique, see Bruce F. Miller, "Otto Dix and His Oil-Tempera Technique," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74 (October, 1987): 332-55.

36 On Dix's stylistic pluralism, see Strobl, *Otto Dix*, 200-201

37 In addition to Wedekind, Einstein negatively cites Dix's dependence on both George Grosz and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

38 See Crockett, "The Most Famous Painting of the 'Golden Twenties'?"

39 On Dix's association with the Berlin Dada artists, see Renate Heinrich, "Material und Malerei: Dix und Dada," in *Dix* (exhibition catalogue) (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1991), 85-91 and Ulrich Weitz, "Kriegskrüppel, Kapp-Putsch und Kunstlump-Debatte," in *Dix*, 95-100.

40 On the dangers of drawing too-sharp distinctions between modernism, mass culture, and the avant-garde, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

# Ironied Out And The New Old Masterism

Donald Kuspit

## I.

A general point: the disaster of conceptual art, its bad effect on art as a whole. The mind that makes conceptual art practices a mad Solomon's wisdom, suggesting that it has gone mad, lost its judgment, become unbalanced: it pathologically cuts art in half, killing it—reducing it to absurdity, and finally irrelevance and inhumanity. When Joseph Kosuth declares that "art only exists conceptually"[1] he dispenses with its material existence—its existence not simply as the embodiment of a concept, but as a body in the world that has a certain meaning and effect—emotional resonance and social consequence—that can be conceptualized. If art only exists conceptually, then it only exists ironically, for it is only half art.

Arthur Danto reduces art to an even more refined absurdity when he declares that "the objects [of art] approach zero as their theory approaches infinity."[2] This announces that theory annihilates art. Art is no longer simply dematerialized, but dispensed with. Indeed, theory replaces it, which is the point of Danto's remark that "art is really over with, having been transmuted into philosophy."[3] These statements are somewhat intellectually pretentious, not to say tendentious. They reduce art to, at best, an illustration of theory, the crude demonstration of a subtle philosophical point—a classic philosophical strategy to elevate theory over practice. Philosophers invariably—arrogantly—privilege theory over practice because they are theorists who practice nothing, at least nothing of any practical value to the world. This makes them peculiarly naive: art exists as a worldly practice, and remains one however much it may become the object of theoretical speculation. However much philosophy tries to preempt art, the way a parasite takes over, drains, and finally kills its host, or at least its spirit, art transcends—certainly resists—theory, squirming out of its hold by reason of its irreducible—untheorizable—materiality.

For Kosuth and Danto art is a kind of materialization of ideas that are otherwise hard to grasp, even incomprehensible, in their pure philosophical form, by the simple-minded—the unphilosophical, or at least those who are not professional philosophers. There is nothing new about this notion of art. It echoes Plato's contemptuous view of it, more particularly, his condescending use of myth to communicate complex ideas to the intellectually unsophisticated masses. The fictions of myth—art at its most collective, as it were—allows them to gain insight into more extraordinary things than their mundane

lives and level of understanding ordinarily permit. For philosophers—who tend to put more stock in ideas than in experience—the make-believe of art is the sugar coating of everyday comprehensibility on the difficult abstract truth. Of course, the philosopher may use art to hide the fact that he has not thought through the logic and consequences of his concepts—even to hide the fact that his theory has become an intellectual deadend, and as such sterile and futile. The use of art by philosophers may mask the tragedy of theory, giving it credibility when it has reached the limits of its explanatory power. Dressed in art, theory continues to look alive even when it is dead.

In short, the philosopher's view that art exists only conceptually—by virtue of the grace of theory, however circumscribed the theory—is profoundly condescending to art. The philosopher despises those who appreciate art for its sensuous appeal; its exciting use of matter re-sensitizes the senses, and philosophers don't trust their senses, and don't want to be excited. Such people are inherently inferior to philosophers who use art as an instrument of the mind, which supposedly gives art more integrity than it would otherwise have. They do not realize that the senses have a kind of mind and integrity of their own. For Kosuth and Danto, the pseudo-philosopher Marcel Duchamp is the fountainhead of conceptual art, and their lopsided understanding of art as fundamentally conceptual and philosophical reflects his rebellion against what he called "aesthetic delectation." In their hands, it has become a doctrinaire, even authoritarian version of the familiar intellectual prejudice against sense experience—the old assumption that thinking is superior to sensing—that ideas are superior to sensations. However novel, philosophers dismiss them as frivolous, as though to avoid the material path they take. And of course, sensing is fraught with illusion, as though thought had none.

## II.

Conceptual art depends on the subtlety of its concepts, as well as their ironical use, but its concepts have always been commonplace, and its irony wooden and rote. Kosuth's picture of a chair, dictionary definition of a chair, and material chair (1965) is the classic example of this. Ann Hamilton's Venice Biennale installation *myein* (1999)—a Greek word that means "to shut the eyes" (Hamilton connects it to "myosis," an abnormal contraction of the pupil of the eye)—is a more recent example, stretching the credibility of conceptual irony to a decadent new extreme. I will argue that Hamilton's installation is the theatrical climax of conceptual irony, and that the concept behind it—the idea that America is blind to its own violence and imperialism—is a cliché. I will also argue that the irony with which Hamilton surrounds her idea is overblown, as though to distract us from its shortsightedness and one-sidedness. Hamilton's irony is as archly naive as Kosuth's, but more importantly her concept is a stereotype, and as such hardly the original insight into America it claims to be.

This suggests that Hamilton's mind—the conceptualist's mind, which the arch-conceptualist Duchamp thought had the poet's intelligence rather than the "stupidity of the painter"[4]—is, after all, average. "The artist," André Breton wrote, "ceases to be an average human being...he himself is caught up in the drama being enacted" by his art.[5] It begins an "unpredictable adventure" from which he can never return to the safety of averageness. Breton's example is Rimbaud, who wrote that "terror came" while "analyzing his own experience in *Alchemie du verbe*." It was a terror uncovered by art, and which could be explored by it, but which it could never expunge. Hamilton's *myein* is not an imprudent adventure the average human being dare not risk—and is unlikely to conceive—but a rather average view of America, indeed, the typical view of the average intellectual, or rather the pseudo-critical view of the pseudo-intellectual artist. Its simplistic condemnation sweeps all complexity aside, which is why it lacks analytic credibility.

Nor is Hamilton the seer or visionary that Rimbaud thought the artist could become by disordering his senses, as the sensuous irony of her installation suggests she is. Esthetic trickiness—red dust pours down the white walls, casually accumulating on the floor—is not the same as sensuous terror—the terror one feels in one's senses as one stretches them to the perceptual limits. The sensuous superficiality of Hamilton's installation confirms the superficiality of her concept of America. Unlike Rimbaud, she does not expand and deepen sense experience, but narrows and trivializes it, and with it the world that is its object. Hamilton's dust is a mote in the eye, rather than the catalyst of visionary insight. Her simple-minded generalizations about America show a certain blindness towards it. Indeed, the whole installation is an exercise in self-blinding, all the more ironical because it claims to be about America's blindness to itself. Where Rimbaud offered "illuminations"—perceptual and conceptual epiphanies—Hamilton offers blindness, her own more than ours. Her installation lacks the psychological depth and intensity of Rimbaud's visionary poetry, indicating that art can be quite prosaic underneath its visionary appearance. This is no doubt another example of conceptual irony, however unintended. In short, Hamilton's sensuousness is a pretentious veneer on her conceptual inadequacy.

## III.

Hamilton, then, is not the seer she believes she is, or pretends to be—the seer the artist must be, if he is to be avant-garde. The self-congratulatory avant-garde idea of the artist as seer is on its last crippled legs in Hamilton's art, which is one of the reasons it is pseudo-avant-garde rather than genuinely avant-garde. Duchamp's emphasis on the artist's ideas rather than craft has also seen better days. But what matters is that Hamilton has a sociopolitical idea, not just any old idea. She wants to have an impact on the world, not just

on the artworld. Her installation seems more serious and subtly provocative than Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), with its transformation of a urinal into a work of art, and its play on German word "Armut," evident in the signature "R. Mutt." *Fountain* is obviously provocative, and ultimately frivolous. Hamilton is ironical about society, not about art—Duchamp's irony has, after all, become a settled mode of art, indeed, an institutional cliché—and she claims to have something important to say about society as a whole, in contrast to Duchamp, who seemed indifferent to it.

Thus *myein* seems to be a conceptual advance beyond Duchamp's readymades—it also involves more advanced technology, as the machines that churn out the red dust indicate—however much it depends on the irony that he made fashionable. *Myein* must also be more serious than Rimbaud's poetry, which is after all only about his experience, not the character of a whole society. Is Hamilton more important than Duchamp and Rimbaud because she works on a grand installation scale, rather than an intimate one? Her theatricalization of her idea—the spectacular character of her installation (however ironically minimalist the spectacle)—certainly makes it seem more significant—not to say portentous—than their ideas. Indeed, her dramaturgy may be her real achievement.

Where Duchamp suggested that the idea of art is up for grabs—that art has no essence, but is nominal and relative and, as he said, contingent on the engaged spectator rather than the artist, whose identity he brought into question along with the art he made—Hamilton tells us that art can be used to communicate, through irony, urgently true ideas that have been repressed. Her installation tells the truth in a tantalizing way—or is merely mischievous? But once we understand the method in its deviousness, the scales of blindness fall from our eyes. We unexpectedly grasp the truth, in an inner vision, the installation cleverly insinuates. We are obliged to feel that we have had a once-in-a-lifetime experience—a unique, profound revelation, involving a change of heart as well as mind. The grand theatrical manner of the installation—the atmosphere of awe in the huge space, and the numinous effect of the Venetian light—presumably ratifies Hamilton's profundity.

Of course, the idea of America as a violent, imperialistic country is hardly repressed, as she implies: it is a media commonplace. America is not blind to itself, if the media is the social space where the truth is told and reified into obviousness. If the media shows the mass mind's thoughts, then Hamilton's installation does nothing more than apotheosize them. Strip away the aura of criticality generated by the irony of her installation, and one sees that she has the same one-dimensional idea of America as the average mind. Hamilton is not critical, as she thinks she is. Her theatricality confirms her lack of independent imagination, for spectacle is the natural medium of communication in a mass society.

Entering the space of her installation, one finds oneself on an empty stage, and as such the unwitting actor in her sly conceptual drama. One may have to struggle to grasp her communication, but when one does—and she finally tells us her concept—one realizes its banality. Even Sol LeWitt, another conceptual minimalist, declared, in "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (1968), that "banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution."[6] Hamilton gives us a banal idea executed in a pseudo-beautiful—ironically beautiful—way. There is an inner mediocrity to Hamilton's ironically dramatic installation because the idea it illustrates is mediocre.

It is perhaps worth noting that LeWitt, a more austere minimalist than Hamilton—so much so that he seems a fundamentalist compared to her—has also taken to sensuousness, as though to enliven his dead geometry. His theatricality was there from the beginning, more or less as a propaganda device for his ideas. Theatrically projected, they gain emotional interest. Indeed, outside of theatrical space conceptual art lacks carrying power, and the banality—not to say poverty—of its ideas becomes evident. LeWitt's theatricality has become grander over the years, perhaps out of unconscious fear that the triviality of his geometrical concept will be discovered, suggesting the inadequacy of his art as a whole. Written large—mythologized, as it were—the smallness of the concept becomes invisible. As in Hamilton's installation, LeWitt's new emphasis on theatrical sensuousness is a stop-gap measure hiding his indifference to craft and material substance.

## IV.

For conceptualism, the "art" in art has nothing to do with its material medium, but with the artist's intention or concept. Not only is art not necessarily material, but the artist's subjective idea becomes its be-all and end-all. It is as though, in compensation for its loss of material consequence and objectivity, there is over-emphasis on the artist's mentality. Recently there has been a reactive attempt to return to the more complete, balanced idea of art offered by tradition. I am referring to the New Old Masterism, as I call it, or the new objectivism, as it can also be called. In the new traditionalism the material medium and the artist's concept are re-integrated. The conceptual hierarchy, which privileges concept over medium, collapses. It is only when they work together that art seems felt—indeed, rich with feeling—and can move the spectator deeply, that is, evoke unconscious feelings. It is feeling that conceptualism is determined to avoid. The concept is meant to oust the feeling. In short, conceptualism involves fear of feeling, even a denial of feeling. Its repudiation of material—the ultimate avant-garde nihilism—is a repudiation of feeling—the ultimate pathology. Conceptual irony replaces vital feeling, that is, intellectual cleverness compensates for lack of intense feeling—the failure to feel, perhaps the inability to feel. One has to examine the psyche of concep-

tualists closely rather than take their ideas at face value.

In the Old Masters, material and feeling are indistinguishable—experientially identical. The material medium seems alive with feeling the way a body is alive with movement. Feeling seems embedded in the medium, and the medium seems to embody feeling. The return to Old Master models of art, or at least the Old Master humanistic idea of objective art, is implicitly a critique of conceptualism and a return to feeling. The New Old Masterism seems conservative, even reactionary compared to conceptualism—the ne plus ultra of avant-gardism. But avant-garde art is no longer revolutionary, however much its revolution is perpetuated by neo-avant-garde art. What looks like an advance is in fact a reification: neo-avant-garde art turns avant-garde art into a pillar of salt in a desert of its own making. More particularly, neo-avant-garde art hypostatizes avant-garde art into a self-aggrandizing spectacle. Theatrical(ized) conceptualism, whether in Hamilton's understated minimalist format or Robert Wilson's hyperbolic maximalist format—these are the two basic types of theatrical conceptualism that exist today—is the most accomplished avatar of avant-garde art, ingeniously synthesizing its discrepant and discordant elements. But theatrical conceptualism institutionalizes avant-gardism, suggesting that its radicalism has become passé and mannered. Today the distinction between revolutionary and reactionary has blurred. What was once revolutionary now looks reactionary, what was once reactionary now looks revolutionary. As the conceptualists insist, art depends on its context—it is relative and timebound—and the times and context have changed. Indeed, they seem more relative than ever, which is part of the postmodern point.

The New Old Masterism restores everything conceptualism devalued and repudiated, suggesting that conceptualism is the last gasp of a spent avantgardism. From the perspective of art history, avant-garde art had a short, troubled life, which lasted little more than a century—from, say, 1863, when Manet painted *Olympia*, to 1973, when Robert Smithson died. It has lost its spontaneity and rejuvenating power and become a stiftling tradition in its own right. It has to be propped up by theory because it has lost its creative power and originality. It depends on philosophy because it has lost imagination. Even Clement Greenberg, one of the great advocates of avant-garde art, declared that when every artist became avant-garde, avant-garde art was over. The New Old Masterism attempts to repair the broken connection to tradition without forfeiting avant-garde innovations. As I will argue, it subsumes them in an older, larger artistic enterprise.

The New Old Masterism involves a return to the personal craft of object making, and, more crucially, to the human object and human condition, as art's perennial subject matter. Sol LeWitt dogmatically insisted that "When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art,"[7] but for the New Objectiv-

ist one can never learn one's craft too well, and the result of doing so is not slick but uncanny. Superior craft intensifies vision so that it becomes insight, which is what happens in highly crafted Old Master art—the best Old Master art, such as the paintings of Leonardo, Dürer, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Poussin. The New Old Masterism restores the idea of the work of art as a carefully considered and composed object rather than an improvised sketch, that is, an integrated, organic whole rather than a partial expression. This correlates with the restoration of the human figure—often mangled and manipulated in avant-garde art, so that it came to seem like an agglomeration of abstract parts from a junked machine—to organic integrity and bodiliness. The ideal is a sustained work of art rather than the transient expression of an idea. The work of art is meant for meditation, rather than to shock. Surprise occurs through discovery, not through novelty. The New Objectivism involves a return to shared ideas of perception and intelligibility, with the proviso that they issue in a nuanced, individualized conception of their object, indicating an intimate relationship with it. The artist attempts to find common ground with the spectator, rather than to state her intention in ironical form. In the New Objectivism there is less self-congratulatory emphasis on the artist's narcissism, or, to put this another way, there is a renewal of interest in the object. It is regarded not simply as an instrument of the artist's intention, but an independent phenomenon with a sense of its own, however much this involves common sense ideas of objects. The object once again becomes urgent and strongly felt because the artist invests in the humanity that links her with the spectator, who is the object she aims to establish a relationship with through her art. Indeed, the New Objectivism is premised on the artist's relationship with the external world of other objects rather than the demonstration of her intention at its expense, as though that made her a superior object—superior to all the other objects in the world, especially the spectator. Clearly there is a defensive narcissism in conceptualism's insistence on the priority of the artist's intention, which dispenses with the world's objective givenness as though it was a minor illusion.

Conceptualism privileges the artist's intention at the expense of external reality, but in doing so it unwittingly declares the bankruptcy of the artist's creativity. The artist's intention is, after all, a limited resource, quickly exhausted, and, in fact, not much to begin with—often no more than the intention of being an artist. When, celebrating Duchamp's readymades, Breton described them as "manufactured objects promoted to the dignity of works of art through the choice of the artist,"[8] the emphasis is on the artist's choice not the manufactured objects. The artist's creativity is reduced to choice—a rather diminished creativity. There is little or no making of any object—at most, a readymade may be "assisted" (sometimes simply with a title, and often with no more than a bit of exhibition space), as Duchamp reductively called the creative contribution. All the creativity is supposedly in the "intense, fascinating light

cast by [the artist's] signature," which in fact does nothing more fascinating and intense than mark a "narrowly defined object," assigning it the "status" of art, as Breton says. This assignment, automatically accomplished by the signature of a person who calls herself an artist—suggesting that anyone who can sign her name can call herself an artist—supposedly involves a "whole mental process." But it is not clear what that process is.

It is not clear what the artist's name implies or what in fact it means to be an artist, other than to sign one's name on some object one has not made oneself. Nor, for that matter, is it clear in what the dignity of art consists. Why does it have status? The irony, of course, is that Duchamp mocks the status of art by designating ordinary objects as art, giving them an ironical prestige. Duchamp's name is his idea of himself, and reduced to a name the idea doesn't amount to much: only a signature. He, along with art and the artist, literally becomes nominal: they exist only in name, suggesting that they can mean whatever one wants them to mean, because they have no meaning in themselves—no substance apart from the use to which one puts them. They dissolve in the nihilistic vertigo of irony. Is there anything more than vanity in Duchamp's signature—added like a kind of graffiti to ordinary objects—anything but self-privileging in declaring oneself to be an artist, anything but the desire for social status in making art? Signing his name to a manufactured object, Duchamp instantly acquired the social prestige of being an innovative artist. Never mind that he wasn't much of an artist before—a rather derivative painter, stumbling around to find his own identity. He really felt himself to be an artist when he realized that all he had to do was to sign his name to objects he found readymade in the world. For his signature made him notorious, which was more than enough of a social and artistic identity for him, if not exactly proof of his creativity.

Thus one gets out of an artist's name, and the signed manufactured object, what one puts into them. The "whole mental process" is nothing but a mystique. It is the spectator's mental process that counts, not the artist's: the spectator's projection of himself into the signed object, enriching it—making it "art." The artist doesn't make art; her signature on an object invites the spectator to regard and accept it as art, which means to find in it whatever great expectations she had from art. They in fact tell us more about her than about art. Calling a manufactured object a work of art is like admiring the Emperor's new clothes, or perhaps making them. Perhaps it is like taking a Rorschach test. The object remains what it is, however much its ordinariness is negated by the new dignity it acquires by being "chosen." It becomes a fascinating, novel, elite thing, rather than just some old everyday trivial thing. It loses its familiar identity by being mentally located in the limbo called "art," without quite gaining a clear new identity. It seems unfamiliar, and thus fresh and unusual, but it isn't, and the freshness and difference have to do with one's

attitude to it, not anything inherent in it. Breton acknowledges as much in his discussion of Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition." He singles out the passage in which Poe declares that originality has more to do with negation than invention. Breton implies that the "ultimate negation" of something occurs when one declares it to be a work of art, a seemingly magical act that makes it enigmatic and irrelevant at once.[9]

But the negation cuts both ways. Not only are the everydayness and familiar understanding of the object suspended and even undermined, so that it becomes peculiarly nameless and thus seemingly mysterious, but art itself is negated and cast into a limbo, in which it seems to lose purpose and meaning. "I threw the *urinoir* into their faces," Duchamp wrote referring to *Fountain*, "and now they come and admire it for its beauty,"[10] which is to misunderstand it—to regard it as art. Calling the *urinoir* a work of art negates its usual function, but also contradicts the usual idea of art. As Duchamp stated, "the choice of these Ready-mades was never dictated by any esthetic delectation. Such choice was always based on a reflection of visual indifference and at the same time total absence of good taste." Thus the choice of the readymade—the conceptualizing of a manufactured object as a work of art—is an attack on all that art usually means, namely, esthetic delectation, good taste, beauty, and, more crucially, the esthetic transformation of the perceptually, socially, and emotionally given. The masterful result is not simply a subjective expression, but catalyzes objective reflection. All this is indifferently dismissed as beside the conceptual point.

Conceptualism has come a long way from Duchamp to Hamilton, whose installation is full of good taste—discreet white walls, fashionably pure—and esthetic delectation (without much transformation) and beauty—oceanic color, appealing to the eye—but it continues to negate objects. Hamilton turns a book of poems into a Braille wall text, negating it as an object—in an earlier installation she ruthlessly burned words from a book—just as Duchamp negates the objectness of his readymades by calling them works of art. There is tremendous arrogance in such destructive nihilism. After negating the object's usefulness, the traditional idea of art, and the idea of esthetic experience, there is nothing left except the destructive indifference with which one started. Of course, like the bicycle seat and handlebar Picasso used to construct a bull's head (1944), which he said could be dismantled if someone needed them, one can always urinate in Duchamp's *Fountain*, putting it to good use. Making it functional again would put the finishing touch on its irony, just as restoring Picasso's bull's head to functionality would complete its irony. One is of course unlikely to have the chance of doing this, because both sculptures—if I can use that traditional term to describe Duchamp's signed readymade—have become untouchable, precious objects, economically and culturally.

My point is that the negation of the object is inseparable from the elevation of the artist's intention—its victory over the object, as it were. It is a Pyrrhic victory from the point of view of the New Objectivism, for in making art something more in the mind than in the material world, it makes it a kind of emotional desert. The intention may justify itself with a concept, such as Hamilton's violent, imperial America—in Sol LeWitt's conceptual drawings the intention is the series of instructions telling one how to execute them—but the fact that it is an artist's intention matters more than content of the concept. Having the intention is enough to make one an artist, especially if the intention ironically negates ordinary objects by calling them art, which itself is conceived ironically, that is, as the opposite of what it is usually thought to be. The artist's intention is used to achieve "liberation from the object," as Malevich said (1913), both the officially esthetic art object and the esthetically indifferent ordinary object—although, as has been pointed out, singling it out by calling it art is to invite sensitive esthetic perception of it, which completes the irony of calling it art, as the frustrated Duchamp unhappily realized when he rebelled against the rationalization of his readymades as beautiful and stylish. "Art is not in the object, but in the artist's conception of art to which the objects are subordinated," Ursula Meyer writes,[11] but the artist's conception is a narcissistic matter—an issue of subjective choice, whether or not that choice makes any objective sense. Indeed, the less it is qualified by objective considerations—the more the concept, choice, or intention becomes a pseudo-personal signature rather than a reference to reality, however oblique—the more ironically "artistic" it seems. In Hamilton's installation, the objective reference is minimal and banal, and the spectator in effect becomes the object. Everything else is red dust, suggesting a dismissive "dust to dust" attitude to external reality.

**V.**

I want to analyze Hamilton's installation in detail, teasing out the ironies that are its conceptual substance, to make it clear that irony has become an impasse and obstacle to creativity today, even farcical and suicidal, that is, a pseudo-artistic cul de sac of self-deception and self-betrayal. *Myein* occupied the four rooms of the American pavilion, which were kept empty, except for the red dust falling down the walls and covering the floor. At first sight the installation seemed neo-esthetic—a kind of revival of decadent aestheticism, as though Hamilton, sensitive to her site, was trying to distill the seductive colors and atmosphere of Venice. That atmosphere, which constantly changes, depending on the restless luminosities of sky and sea mingling in it, made Venice an Impressionist delight, as Whistler's *The Riva, Sunset. Red and Gold*, 1879-80, Renoir's *Fog in Venice*, 1881 and Monet's *Santa Maria della Salute*, 1908-12 indicate. Perhaps Hamilton was also trying to literalize, in a material that seems

immaterial, and thus peculiarly—ironically? —spiritual, the exotic veil of sensual colors that cloak Gustave Moreau's figures and landscapes and that, in several famous watercolors and gouaches, came to exist on their abstract own. Was she exploiting the mystique of Venice to offer an appreciative reprise of modernist colorism? Was her installation a spectacular attempt to revive what used to be called Lyrical Expressionism, an optimistic offshoot of tormented Abstract Expressionism?

No, nothing so art historical was involved, however much there was a certain amount of postmodern appropriation of modernist colorism. It was all ironical facade, adumbrating the conceptual and politically correct point, which Hamilton had to explain, for it was not immediately apparent in the physical appearance of the installation. As she stated—and had to state if she wanted the spectator to get the critical point of her spectacle, rather than swoon away in the delirium of her color—"I wanted to make something big and yet something almost humble and empty, to comment on American domination....There is so much in our history that we cannot look at, that we refuse to see."[12] The only people who can "see" Hamilton's critical idea are the blind, or at least the relatively few who can read Braille—apparently only ten to fifteen percent, according to statistics—for the pavilion's white walls are covered with a Braille translation of Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: the United States, 1885-1915: Recitative*, a book of poems dealing with American violence. Associated with this is a recording of Hamilton's voice, whispering Lincoln's second Inaugural Address, in which he called for healing during the Civil War. Like Reznikoff's poems, Lincoln's speech is ironically presented in an unfamiliar, esoteric language, the phonetic alphabet used by pilots (Alfa for *a*, Bravo for *b*), making it impossible for most people to understand. The pilots are no doubt purveyors of violence for Hamilton.

We now get the point—or think we do—of the red dust that falls from tanks hidden in the ceilings: it is supposed to represent toxic waste, another American crime, as much against the nonhuman environment as against humanity. The poisonous powder is also a symbol of America's insidious power, as Hamilton implies: "My materials are beautiful, and I do want you to look at it...But part of the piece is about American culture insidiously filtering out into everyplace, like the powder."[13] It's an old story: the ugly American, who superficially looks good. Thus Hamilton's colors are contaminated and contaminating, their beauty poisonous rather than sublime, deadly rather than vital—ironical rather than innocent. Her dust has more in common with the dust that covered Duchamp's *Large Glass* for the early part of its life, like a womb of death, rather than with Venetian sensuality. In the empty space, it is also the dust of the American desert—the dust that declares America to be an empty desert, unable to support spiritual life.

Like the red dust of Antonioni's desert—and I wouldn't put it past

Hamilton to reach out for whatever allusion she can get away with, in view of the fact that her work is in effect a composite of quotations, that is, a kind of intellectual composite board—Hamilton's beautiful red dust is altogether deceptive and ironical, that is, inwardly ugly. The red dust symbolizes not only social and environmental pollution but also powdered blood, presumably the residue of violence, rather than an emblem of the ecstasy the eye is capable of. It is a fatal dust that deceptively looks alive by reason of its lurid color, rather than a symbol of the perceptual heights the highest sense can rise to. The whole installation is deceptive and ironical, for the Braille is impossible to decipher for the ordinary openeyed viewer and even for most of the blind, who are in any case unlikely to come to an exhibition of visual art. And even if a sighted person could read Braille, or a blind person who could read it came to the exhibition, it is unlikely that she would be allowed to touch the walls of the pavilion and read the text, for they have been sanctified by being converted into art, and we all know that in a museum you are not supposed to touch the art. Similarly, only a rather limited part of the population will be able to understand the spoken text, but it is not clear that they will be able to hear it clearly, for it is spoken in a whisper. They'll really have to concentrate, which is hard to do without any chair to sit on, and in a crowd. One might as well be deaf—and Hamilton in effect tells one one is—and forget the whole thing. But of course she doesn't want you to do that. Indeed, she wants you to remember Lincoln's momentous words, whatever they were.

The whole atmosphere is deceptive and ironical and sinister—subliminally unpleasant however overtly pleasurable: the beautiful, sensual, subtle color is perversely at odds with the ugly, rather unsubtle anti-American meaning. If you attend to the color as such you miss the meaning. And if you are blind, and the guards allow you to read the Braille and get the meaning, which is obvious once you read the text, you still miss the color, and so miss the irony of the piece, which is to miss its point. Similarly, if you listen carefully to the speech you won't be able to look very carefully at the color. The irony begins as one approaches the pavilion, for one sees it through a glass wall that distorts and blurs—all but dissolves—its appearance, so that it looks abnormal. This begins the myosis process of deception and irony, involving the blinding—blind-siding? —of the spectator. It climaxes on the inside, where the spectator is left in the baffling, pseudo-sensual, pseudo-esoteric void, confirming that she is too stupid to get the clever point, unless the artist deigns to tell it to her. Fooling the spectator is a good part of the installation's appeal, at least if one likes to be made a fool of.

Hamilton generates numerous ironies with her installation, not the least of which is the fact that it attacks and condemns her sponsor, the American government—bites the hand that feeds it, as it were. America, which has always been susceptible to guilt and mea culpa, because of its utopian aspira-

tions, is no doubt grateful for the artistic opportunity to learn the violent truth about itself, which it presumably didn't know until the artist came along to state it, however obscurely. But once we get beyond the artist's process of obfuscation—and it is the process of obfuscation that is the art—the truth she has to tell is quite commonplace and familiar, as I have suggested. All Americans know about America's violence, and deplore it, and are eager to remedy it, even if they disagree how to do so. But the artistic point is that it is ironically hard to become enlightened by Hamilton's installation--to read the text, to get the ulterior motive of the color, without the help of Hamilton's statement, that is, her superficially topical concept. Without this concept, the installation is so much boring visual excitement—shocking red, after all, is no longer shocking or fashionable—covering an ordinary text that has been made artificially mysterious, at least for people with eyesight, by being written in a language that most people cannot read. But then of course one can buy the book of poems in its non-Braille version and read them and get their familiar message without further ado. And one can also get a copy of Lincoln's speech. One really doesn't have to learn Braille or the pilot's phonetic alphabet. Hamilton's installation is not so visionary after all—the red dust functions as an aura that creates the illusion of profound import—but rather quite comprehensible, once one goes through all the artificially closed doors that Hamilton has built. They open, without much surprise—that is, without much Baudelairean surprise of the new—when she waves the magic wand of her banal concept. The open sesame of this punchline doesn't reveal much of an intellectual treasure. It is her way of closing the doors, that is, blinding us, that makes Hamilton's installation unconventional, rather than the all too ordinary meaning we find when they open. And those familiar with late modern art history, e.g., Robert Morris's work with the blind and his dust pieces, as well as the sound pieces of Bruce Nauman, know that it is not so unconventional, but in fact an unwittingly parodic reprise of current performance conventions. There is, indeed, emptiness—intellectual as well as emotional emptiness—at the core of the installation. That is, the emptiness of the space gives it away. That is its real irony, for the emptiness betrays the ingeniousness of the installation, however much Hamilton may try to rationalize it as the emptiness of America.

Hamilton's installation gains a good deal of its social significance by reason of the fact that it takes place on foreign soil. It wouldn't have much critical carrying power in America, except for the art cognoscenti, who want to show their radical chic by endorsing art that claims to be shocking social criticism, however clichéd the revelation, all the more so because it offers no fresh insight into the disgrace it claims to disclose. Hamilton's installation in fact caters to European prejudice against and envy of America and its success story—to the European crowd that is most likely to visit the exhibition because of its European site, and who will be happy to find their fashionable anti-

Americanism confirmed by a fashionable American art. Europe likes to blame its problems on "Americanization," as though it was forced to "Americanize" —as though Americans forced Europeans to watch American movies and listen to American popular music, two of America's biggest "cultural" exports. Isn't Hamilton's installation one of those cultural exports and as such yet another example of American cultural imperialism—a kind of carpetbagger American art looking for European credentials to confirm its sophistication? In any case, the European audience has an American who agrees with its worst fears about America—who sees corrupting American influence and power everywhere, and who condemns the homegrown violence for which American is known, especially because of the many school shootings that have recently occurred. Of course, virtually all Americans, even those who want the right to own guns, condemn the shootings and deplore American violence, but when an artist does so it's somehow different. It presumably shows that the artist is capable of greater, more authentic social responsibility than ordinary citizens, confirming her privileged place in society. It has become fashionable to self-righteously deplore American domination, and Hamilton is doing the self-righteously fashionable leftist thing for the right audience, which is what really makes her art privileged, and in fact makes it another symptom of American domination.

The ironies that are the substance of Hamilton's installation—and I regard it as exemplary of conceptual irony, and in fact the zenith of high conceptualism—unwittingly confirm its creative hollowness, for they afford no insight into the idea the installation mediates. In fact, Hamilton confirms the shallowness of her idea by ironically reifying it. Her installation claims to be a kind of reflection on America, but it forces us into an unreflective relationship with it. It blinds us to America's complexity and the complexity of the issues of American violence and domination—this is the real blindness or know-nothingness, as it were, that informs Hamilton's installation. It implies that there is no remedy for them, and unwittingly exults in them. Indeed, her attractive color, however deceptive, adds expressive lustre to the gloomy theme. Finally, Hamilton's linking of homegrown American violence with American domination abroad is a crude, facile falsification—a generalizing conflation distorting the particulars of both. Her installation is a conceptual homily which ignores historical reality.

In a sense, Hamilton mistakes stylish ambivalence about America with critical insight into it. Since Jasper John's painterly treatment of the American flag, which ironically glorifies it, it has been fashionable to be ambivalent about America. No doubt we all are, but we don't pretend that this helps us understand it. Johns mocks the flag by making its surface rough rather than smooth. At the same time he seems to enlarge the flag, for it takes up the whole canvas. It seems overwhelming—an inexorable emblem, symbol-

izing absolute power. In America one can artistically desecrate the flag; Johns couldn't have made an ironic painting of the flag of Nazi Germany. But my point is that treating America ironically is not the same as making an insightful critical statement about it. Johns and Hamilton, after all, are only artistically mouthing overfamiliar ideas, for the America flag and American domination and violence are on the same level of mindless cliché. Like Johns's flag paintings, Hamilton's installation is not consciousness raising, but rather artistically intriguing.

The opposition between the eye and the mind—between seeing and knowing—is the ironical substance of *myein*. Within this grand irony there are subsidiary ironies, all variations on the primary irony: the opposition between seeing and blindness, seeing and touching, seeing and reading, color and whiteness, the physical and the mental, matter and idea, the visible and the invisible, English and Braille, English and a phonetic language, the minority who can read the text in Braille and the majority who cannot, the specialized few who can understand a phonetic alphabet and the great majority who cannot, exclusivity and spectacle, the idea and its implementation (by the mechanics who installed the 24 electric motors for the dust), Europe as the site of the installation and America as its subject matter, the American pavilion's classical facade and its stark modernist interior, and so on.

## VI.

Irony, writes D. C. Muecke, is "a double-layered or two-storied phenomenon...[T]here is always some kind of opposition between the two levels, an opposition that may take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility...[T]here is in irony an element of 'innocence'."[14] Hamilton's installation abounds in contradictions, incongruities, incompatibilities, but none of them are innocent. They are all manufactured stereotypes rather than spontaneous ideas—new discoveries—which Duchamp's ironies are in comparison. To me this indicates that irony has become decadent. It is no longer as fresh and innovative as it was at the avant-garde beginning of the century, when Duchamp introduced his ironic indifference. Hamilton gives us tired, fin de siécle irony, pretentiously making intellectual claims for itself rather than sniping at our preconceptions, as Duchamp's irony did.

More crucially, Duchamp's irony tries to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable opposites—manufactured objects and art and later language and vision—without quite succeeding. He raises the question of the relationship between apparent opposites without giving us an answer, which forces us to think for ourselves. He sets up a tentative dialectic, as it were, without carrying it through. His ironies disturb our mental peace; their tension becomes ours. They are puzzles that seem unsolvable, and remind us that nothing can be taken on faith. They may be misleading, but that's for us to decide. In contrast,

Hamilton's ironies reconcile the opposites out of which they are constructed. Her ironies are rooted in the concept behind the installation, which however hidden finally becomes known. She in effect cuts the Gordian knot of her installation's ironies with the sword of her concept—American violence and imperialism. Her ironies are strategies rather than ends in themselves: clever ruses building up to a banal idea, making it seem more significant and unique than it is, rather than conundrums unsettling our consciousness and forcing us to think for ourselves—come up with new concepts—which is what Duchamp's ironies are. Hamilton's ironies do not involve the creative discovery of conceptual difficulties where there seem to be none, but rather the esthetic management of a preconceived idea. Hamilton does all our thinking for us, whereas Duchamp stimulates us to think hard and long. His irony arouses our own creativity, rather than puts it to sleep.

The point I am trying to make is that conceptual irony has become a way of creating the illusion of novelty when there is no real novelty—creating the illusion of novelty when there is no underlying innovation involving new insight and consciousness. Hans Eysenck points out that "artists...inevitably search for novelty: what has been done once cannot be done again. A given style in art finally collapses, and a new style...arrives because the old style has nothing new to contribute. Artistic production is judged in terms of its 'arousal potential', i.e. in terms of what Berlyne called 'collative properties,' such as complexity, surprisingness, incongruity, ambiguity, and variability."[15] Hamilton's irony is the novelty that comes into being when the search has run out, whereas Duchamp's irony broke the ice of the old style to let something new come into being. Hamilton's irony is the last gasp of the old avant-garde style rather than the beginning of a new style. Avant-garde style having lost its arousal potential, it falls back on irony. Moreover, if, "within a given style, arousal potential is produced in particular by what Martindale calls 'primordial content,' i.e. by what Kris called 'primary process' thinking,"[16] then neo-avant-garde irony lacks primordial import, especially in contrast to Duchamp's avant-garde irony. Neo-avant-garde irony is a species of secondary process thinking, lacking the imaginative depth of the primary process thinking implicit in avant-garde irony. "Secondary process thinking...is abstract, logical, and reality oriented...while primary process thinking is free-associative, concrete, irrational and artistic." In neo-avant-garde irony, art loses the primary and grasps at secondary straws. Unable to reach to the primordial in experience, it becomes a secondary social phenomenon—a kind of social commentator (whether it does or does not know what it is talking about). Hamilton's rich color gives her installation the veneer of sensual primordiality, but it is meaningless apart from the social concept it ironically adumbrates. Where Duchamp's irony has a free-associative, irrational concreteness, Hamilton's irony is abstract, logically thought out and reality oriented. Her installation is not irratio-

nal, like Duchamp's readymades, but dogmatically rational.

## VII.

I have perhaps belabored what I regard as the bankruptcy of the avant-garde as represented by Hamilton's conceptual installation, beating it into the ground of its own irony, but I do so to make it clear that something truly new and critical—post-avant-garde—is needed if art is once again to make imaginative sense rather than simply function as a means to score ideological points. Ideological dogmatism and indoctrination, thinly veiled by thickly applied irony, is not the same as the imaginative unfolding of inevitability in beauty—the imaginative transformation of fate into beauty, that is, the reconceptualization of fate as beauty, reconciling us to it, which is not the same as submitting to it.

The paradox of art is that it makes what seems inescapable beautiful, so that the experience of inevitability becomes exhilarating rather than depressing. It is as though fate is a mountain we have triumphantly climbed—an unmovable obstacle we have successfully removed from our path in life. We have to descend again, but the unforgettable experience of climbing the mountain fortifies us against what we will find in the world below, even against our own fate in that low world. It is a feat to face fate without flinching, and even to find it invigorating to face; both are implicit in beauty. Becoming conscious of unsubtle, terrifying fate through subtle, consoling beauty, we discover we have more emotional stamina and raw courage than we thought we had. Beauty, then, is a matter of selfhood holding its own against fate, and transcending it—in spirit if not fact. The beauty of art commands us to change the self, as Rilke wrote, so that it does not succumb to fate.

I agree with William Gass when he writes: "I think it is one of the artist's obligations to create as perfectly as he or she can, not regardless of all other consequences, but in full awareness, nevertheless, that in pursuing other values—in championing Israel or fighting for the rights of women, or defending the faith, or exposing capitalism, supporting your sexual preferences or speaking for your race—you may simply be putting on a saving scientific, religious, political mask to disguise your failure as an artist. Neither the world's truth nor a god's goodness will win you beauty's prize."[17] When Gass states that "the artist's task" is to "provide beauty for its own sake" he is in effect saying that beauty is fate in elegant disguise—typically in human disguise, but also in the disguise of nature (art brings out the fate in both when it makes them seem beautiful) —for fate exists for its own sake, that is, with the indifference of universality, which is what beauty mimics in the act of adorning. When Gass declares that beauty "reward[s] even the most casual notice" and "become[s] the focus of a truly disinterested affection,"[18] he is in effect declaring that the reward of beauty is disinterestedness itself. The self at its most

disinterested is the self at its strongest, and beauty instantly gives the self the strength to contemplate fate with a certain detachment, so that the self does not succumb to the sense of futility that usually comes with the recognition of fate—the recognition that there are certain fundamentals one can do nothing about.

Beauty, then, feels like fate—seems inevitable and impersonal once it is created—because it mediates fate, even as it seems to soften it, making it more tolerable—or at least less disturbing—than it would otherwise be. Fate is the ugly underpinning of life, but beauty, which is fate with a benign face, invokes a state of disinterestedness that counteracts the feeling of futility that accompanies the revelation of fate—the feeling of being cheated of ourselves and our freedom when we become aware of the workings of fate in our lives. Fate, which is usually invisible, has a disastrous emotional effect when it becomes visible. Beauty offers what seems like a palliative. It seems to be the sugarcoating on the bitter pill of fate, but the sugarcoating is also the antidote to the poisonous feelings fate induces—sullen feelings poisoning the well of life, so that its water seems to lose all taste, and we finally lose our appetite for life. To be disinterested, which is what beauty makes us, means that we become ourselves completely despite our realization that we can do nothing about fate—our fate. As Kant wrote, in the state of disinterestedness called beauty we experience the "free and unimpeded interplay of imagination and understanding," that is, "the mutual subjective harmony of our cognitive powers."[19] We are completely integrated, so that we are completely ourselves, even when fate is the object of our cognitive powers, the object we try to imagine and understand. In a sense, we realize that if disinterested beauty can be created in an ugly world of interests—if beauty can be created out of that ugliness—then we can re-create ourselves independently of our fate. The artist who creates beauty demonstrates that the self is not a matter of fate, in contrast to social identity. One cannot change one's social fate but one can change oneself, so that one can rise above one's fate, mentally if not physically. Beauty gives one the feeling of transcending fate, which fortifies the self against it, even as beauty carries within itself the limits to life set by fate—the rules that predetermine the outer shape of our lives. There is indeed something strange in beauty, as has been said—an uncanny sense of fate, which is hard to grasp even when it stares one in the face—but also something stoic.

I am suggesting that what is missing from avant-garde art—what has been contemptuously dismissed by it—is beauty. But beauty, I also want to suggest, is making a return in the work of a number of artists, who, for all their differences, look to Old Master art—particularly Old Master figurative art—for an understanding of it. This restoration of beauty, with no sacrifice of ugliness—for without ugliness beauty lacks emotional depth, that is, becomes vacuous, shallow prettiness (however spiced with cosmetics it is the ultimate

empty surface) —is to my mind evident in the works of Odd Nerdrum, Vincent Desiderio, James Valerio, Jenny Saville, Paula Rego, Brenda Zlamany, Julie Heffernan, and, unexpectedly, in the recent portraits of Eric Fischl. As you can see from this list, there is no single model of Old Master beauty that they adhere to, for there is no one type of Old Master beauty that is inherently preferable to any other. In fact, these artists do not take any one type of Old Master art as a model to be rigidly adhered to and blindly emulated, that is, as an academic or procrustean standard of excellence or dogma of perfection, but rather study the Old Masters—more broadly, the traditional art avant-garde art repudiated—for insight into what might be called the process of beauty: the transformation of the ugliness of reality into a beauty which is just as realistic—beauty which conveys a radically different attitude to reality than the everyday attitude that Breton called "miserabilism"—"the depreciation of reality in place of its exaltation."[20] Most people depreciate reality because they are depressed by it; to exalt it is not to deny that it is depressing, but to recognize that there is more to it than the ugliness—the ugliness between human beings—that makes it depressing. The artists, then, are interested in the process of beauty not the form of beauty that embodies the process—that is a kind of static precipitate of the vital, life-enhancing process. The first lesson the Old Masters have to teach is that there is no preconceived form to beauty, and the second is that there are always strong traces of ugliness in it. This is what makes authentic beauty subliminally strange and tragic, in contrast to the ingratiating familiarity of prettiness, which is inherently inauthentic. Thus, the restoration of beauty that is currently underway under the tutelage of the Old Masters involves a new appreciation of reality—a new realism (not a neo-realism, that is, a reconstruction of an old realism), making the objective world freshly meaningful.

At the beginning of this century Marinetti called an "old [Master] picture" a "funeral urn,"[21] but today the New Objectivists find fresh life in old pictures—find the phoenix of beauty in them. For them, "admiration of the past" is not "useless," as Marinetti said it was, nor does it consume our "best strength," as he said it did. On the contrary, the "violent gushes of action" that he celebrated seemed to have exhausted art, along with mock intellectual irony. When the avant-garde repudiated tradition, it repudiated beauty, ridiculing it as antiquarian, inappropriate to the modern world, and relegating it to the museum—as though that was not praise. But, looking back at a century of avant-garde art, we realize that it was incapable of creating beauty, or rather that the beauty it produced—if it can be called beauty—was perverse. One of the ambitions of the New Old Masterism is to overcome perverse modern beauty—ugliness by another name—by restoring traditional beauty.

More subtly, the issue that haunts the New Old Masterism is to reconcile the emotional ugliness of modern art with the objectifying beauty of

traditional art—to reconcile the irreconcilable. When Nerdrum turns to Rembrandt as a model, and Fischl turns to Caravaggio as a model, and Saville follows the lead of Mannerism when she paints her subtly grotesque figures, or Valerio, Rego, and Zlamany paint their pictures with a realist precision that dates back to Velazquez, and Heffernan uses eighteenth century conventions to stage her allegorical self-portraits, they are not so much celebrating traditional beauty as using it to contain modern ugliness. They integrate modern perversity into traditional beauty, not to spice the latter but to neutralize the former, indicating that it is no longer a source of esthetic vitality and innovation, but rather a part of art history. They want to show that, like all other art today, it belongs to the past. It is a matter of memory—and thus seems fated—which alone seems to promise a future for art. It has become part of our culture's visual fate, whether it has an esthetic future or not. The New Objectivists in effect objectify modern perversity—perverse modern subjectivity, as it becomes manifest in art—which puts it into art historical perspective. They in effect declare that perversity inhibits creativity rather than liberates it, which is why it can only do damage to art—produce bad art—rather than help its cause. It is, in other words, no longer imaginative to be perverse, but rather academic. It is the greater good of art that the New Objectivists are concerned about, not the revival of Old Master art, as though it was the ironic next avant-garde step, that is, the usual avant-garde one-upmanship.

What do I mean by perversity, and how does traditional beauty contain it? Michael Balint has pointed out that "'modern art' has made an immense contribution to human maturity by demonstrating that we need not repress the fact that in and around us...discordant features exist. Moreover it has taught us not only that such discordances can be resolved by artistic methods, but also that it can be learned to tolerate such unresolved discordances without pain," resulting in "less fear, greater emotional freedom."[22] At the same time, modern art involves "narcissistic withdrawal" from objects, bringing with it "the danger of regression." Instead of a "mature—or 'genital'" love relationship, involving a "fairly harmonious relation between the [subject] and his object, whether a human being or some inanimate thing," the relationship becomes "disturbed" and hateful, and "disintegrates." "Our relation to *our* world of objects has led to a frightening experience, to a trauma. In order to avoid the repetition of the trauma we establish a new regime in which that kind of relation can be avoided with certainty, e.g., narcissistic withdrawal. It is an empirical fact that the fear then spreads and it is not only that contact with the object is evaded but also that our treatment of it, our attitude toward it, cannot remain on the mature level; it assumes more and more immature 'pre-genital' forms. Something like this has happened in 'modern art.' The treatment of the object, 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; some forms and methods of representation in 'modern art' are highly reminiscent of primitive 'anal' messing; 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]

Clearly this regressive "new regime" of destructive anal-sadism is what Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel calls "the anal universe," more particularly "the anal-sadistic universe of confusion and homogenization."[24] This "new kind of reality," which arises out of the "reconstitution of Chaos," and "take[s] the place of the psycho-sexual dimension, that of the Father" —the world of differences and boundaries—is in emotional fact one of the oldest kinds of reality, the reality of faeces. The anal universe involves a "return to undifferentiation," which is chaos, an "indifferentiation...inherent to the sadistic-anal phase, where all objects, erotogenic zones, ideals, etc. are pulverized by the alimentary canal and homogenized into identical particles, the faeces...Faeces belong to both men and women, children and adults, whereas one has to be a man to own a genital procreative penis, one has to be a women to bring a child into the world, and in either case one has to have reached the status of adulthood."[25] Perversion, Chasseguet-Smirgel says, erases "the double difference between the sexes and the generations—the basis of reality and of all differences. Thus, the genital order and the genital penis of the father disappear from the psychic scene," and, one might add, the scene of perverse modern art. The work of Picasso, generally regarded as the consummate modern artist, is quintessentially perverse. Its fundamental "aim is to *destroy reality*, composed of differences, and in its place to establish the reign of anality where all differences have been abolished."[26] This is particularly evident in his analytic Cubist portraits—the artistic advance or breakthrough of Cubism is psychologically speaking a regression to anal-sadism and thus a breakdown—where the figure, slowly but surely, loses its individuality, differentiation, and humanity. Is it an accident that these portraits, which sadistically attack the human figure—Picasso himself said that he was tempted to completely annihilate it, but decided to stop his attack when the figure was reduced to a caricature of itself (it is a truism that caricatural wit is hostile in intention) —are the color of faeces? Picasso in effect fecalizes the figure by destroying its human essence, the differences given to it by natural law.

Cubism, then, is perverse. It involves the destruction of naturally given and naturally differentiated things, as Chasseguet-Smirgel says. Natural differences are replaced by formal differences, which are then fetishized into aesthetic ends in themselves. Instead of separations given by natural law—as Chasseguet-Smirgel points out, "the principle of separation is the foundation

of the law"[27]—we get unnatural formal separations absolutized into aesthetic law, which in effect undoes, reverses, and caricatures natural law. Ironically, what seems esthetically pure is a superior kind of faeces, that is, seemingly pure forms are anally contaminated. Formal differences are what is left after nature has been dedifferentiated, and as such are illusory differences. Formal details, when isolated as sacred ends in themselves and ritualistically organized into a realm of their own, so that they no longer articulate natural differences—indeed, they are incapable of conveying even the most idiosyncratic experience of objects—are the luxury components of the most rarified of anal universes.

Picasso's hybrid forms, which graft together forms incompatible in nature, are his most familiar perverse inventions. Involving "new combinations of new shapes and new kinds," they reveal his Luciferian arrogance and hubris. As Chasseguet-Smirgel points out, "the word 'hybrid' comes from the Greek *hubris*, which means violence, excess, extremeness, outrageousness," qualities of "the man who does not respect the law of differentiation [and] challenges God."[28] Indeed, such a man seeks to replace God, who is the quintessence of organic creativity, and God's organic universe, with his own grandiose self and his own invented universe—an anal universe of hybrids, which are perversely constructed rather than organically created. One sign of their perversity is that they cannot grow, develop (differentiate), and die, the way organic beings do. Remaining the same forever, the constructed hybrid embodies the modern artist's fantasy of immortality. It is his ultimate perversity, for his immortality supposedly supplants God's immortality. This is absolute hubris—a final labored attempt to overthrow God, which necessarily fails. The hybrid, then, is a creature "whose conformation is other than the natural one of their species or sex," and as such a monster or a chimera. It is unlawful and inherently chaotic, for it incorporates "undifferentiated values": "absence of law is consubstantial with chaos."[29] Because it is chaotic it is sterile, that is, like a mule, who of course is a hybrid. The fact that the hybrid is inherently incapable of reproducing—hybridization is an inventive effort to replace natural reproduction—indicates that its apparent immortality is death in dramatic disguise. The hybrid is discord and disintegration in the guise of pseudo-concord and pseudo-integration, suggesting that it embodies the death wish, which is what the wish for a new kind of life always represents.

Now the mock union of fragments of incommensurate realities in the hybrid and, more broadly, the sweeping hatred of object(ive) reality that shows itself in the destructiveness of anal sadism, suggests the inability to contain the anxiety aroused by primitive feelings—"raw, concretely felt experiences which can only be dealt with by expulsion." Wilfred Bion calls such infantile experiences "beta elements." "Projected into the breast they are modified by the mother's understanding and converted into...'alpha elements'. If the beta

elements are felt to be concrete things that can only be ejected, the alpha elements on the contrary lend themselves to storage in memory, understanding, symbolization, and further development."(30) The pervert has not "introject[ed] the container-breast and its capacity to form the alpha function...of converting the beta elements into alpha ones." If "an identification with a good container capable of performing the alpha function is the basis of a healthy mental apparatus," then the pervert's mental apparatus is far from healthy.

I submit that beauty is a culturally created substitute good container-breast—a good container-breast available for everyone who never had one to identify with in the first place—able to contain all the personal anxiety, destructiveness, and perversity that can be put into it, so that they can be symbolized, understood, and put to constructive subjective and social use. When de Chirico said that "modern pseudo-art" is a consequence of the "loss of skill...the incapacity to work well...to create a true work of art,"[31] he was saying, to my mind, that the modern artist can only make pseudo-art—perverse art—because he has lost the skill to create beauty. When the modern artist abandoned craft he lost the capacity to create beauty. There are many examples of the nihilistic forfeiture of craft in modern art. The most obvious is the widespread use of improvisation, which does not involve working well and wisely, but rather spontaneously. It is no doubt important to be spontaneous in a world of automatons, as Erich Fromm says, but it is also potentially perverse, for an improvisation tends to blur differences and deny containment or wholeness, all the more so because it is essentially unfinished. Conceptual art is the most conspicuous example of pseudo-art, that is, art that minimizes and even despises craft—the hard work of making a beautiful work of art. Sol LeWitt asserts that the idea is more important than the execution, which he leaves to teams of inexperienced students or friends—anyone, for that matter. More famously, Duchamp gave up transformative work altogether when he ironically elevated a found object to the status of a work of art, as though that was more than enough to make it true art. For two decades he stopped working altogether, although we know that he in fact was secretly working on the *Étant donnés*, 1944-66. It is a diorama of found objects, involving, at best, mediocre stagecraft—hardly what one can call true craft. It differentiates an undifferentiated material by loving work, so that it becomes beautiful--the embodiment of inevitable differences—rather than imposes an idea by fiat on found material, which renames it but does not essentially transform it.

Beauty involves the idealization of naturally lawful differences and separations, which confirms that they are fated. If the sadistic anality of modern art—avant-garde art, which is modern art that is authentically modern, that is, as perverse as modernity, which hates tradition and destroys it—tends to obliterate natural, lawful differences and replace them with unlawful, unnatural

formal differences, which are then fetishized into an anal phallic law of their own—the ironic law of the anal universe—then the "postmodern" beauty of the New Objectivism tries to contain modern perversity, unnaturalness, unlawfulness, indifferentiation, in effect subsuming them in a new genital objectivity and object-oriented subjectivity. The New Old Masterism may seem conservative, but as Chasseguet-Smirgel writes, "it would be inexact to qualify 'Oedipians' as conservatives and perverts as progressives. In fact the former...can turn out to be marvelous discoverers and creators who integrate models (parental substitutes) and then are able to surpass them. Perverts, if left to themselves, would almost certainly lead the world to its ruin. They hate reality to too great an extent not to seek its destruction. For mankind to progress without becoming mad in the process, a conviviality between 'Oedipians' and 'perverts' may be necessary."[32] For the New Objectivists, who are postmoderns, modernist subjectivists, with their artistic perversity, are the parental figures to surpass.

This is accomplished, as I have said, by dialectically acknowledging their perversity in a well-crafted beauty. It must seem as objective as traditional beauty. This is why the New Objectivists study the Old Masters. They are not looking to find a measure and model for their own postmodern beauty, nor to legitimate it by affiliating it with the past, whose grandeur then becomes their own, but rather to recover the idea of beauty in all its intricacy. The lesson the beauty of the past teaches is that all beauty involves ugliness—even the extreme ugliness of perversity—but that ugliness can be neutralized, put in its psychic place, so that growth can take place, encouraged by beauty. In a sense, beauty objectifies perversity by representing it in a disinterested way, which makes it seem less consequential and inviting, and thus destroys its hold on us. Seen through the lens of beauty perversity looks ordinary rather than extraordinary, commonplace rather than unique, even comic rather than tragic, a failure rather than triumph of creativity. This change in attitude, which involves the realization that perversity is immature, opens the way to a new artistic maturity.

Indeed, the New Objectivists hope to restore artistic maturity by way of the genital objectivity of beauty. Rediscovering the differences fated by natural life, they re-establish the lawful basis of art, restoring it to truthfulness. But it must be emphasized that perversity remains—ironically, all beauty must have something perverse in it to make it vital. It is the something strange that is proverbially in beauty—the something ugly and malevolent latent in benign, manifest beauty. Perversity is always immanent in genuine beauty, but under its transcendental control. As Segal says, using classical tragedy as the paradigm of creativity, "the ugly is largely in the content...including [the] emotionally ugly—hubris, treachery, parricide, matricide—and the inevitable destruction and death of the participants. There is an unflinching facing of the forces

of destruction; and there is beauty in the feeling of inner consistency and psychological truth in the depiction of those destructive forces of conflict and their inevitable outcome. There is also a counterbalancing of the violence by its opposite in the form: the rhythm of the poetry and the Aristotelian unities give a harmonious and particularly strictly ordered form [one might say lawfully ordered form]. This form contains feelings which otherwise might be uncontainable."[33] Thus, as Segal writes, "the aesthetic experience is...a particular combination of what has been called 'ugly' and what could be called 'beautiful'."

They are combined, as she says, by the artist's work—the artist's skill and craft. These transform the ugly so that it seems beautiful—transform the perverse so that it becomes an uncanny incident in a larger harmony, rather than an uncontainable disaster given what can only loosely be called form. For the form of perverse works of art is as perverse as their content, that is, it is too anally disintegrated to do the work of containment and integration that form typically does. In fact, at their most extreme, Picasso's analytic Cubist portraits, which set the tone for modern perversity, de-form the object, to the extent that it becomes unrecognizable, and chaotically scatter its fragments across the canvas, so that it becomes impossible to contain them. The frame has become an urn for the ashes of reality. Only beauty can perform the alpha function on perversity, making good the object it has destroyed. Only the idealism of beauty can contain the sadism of perversity: only idealism can give art the strength to deal with the miserabilism and nihilism of perversity. Beauty is the only reparation for the holocaust of modern perversity, for it alone can reconcile us to what is otherwise so alien to our humanity and civilization.

The new artistic maturity that we see in the New Objectivists involves the struggle to restore organic wholeness to the human figure without denying that human beings can be morbidly perverse. The grotesqueness of Saville's females suggests their perversity, all the more so because they are viewed from a perverse angle, just as the lurid chiaroscuro of Fischl's figures conveys their destructive perversity, a function of what seems their split personalities. Similarly, when Valerio places nudes on a tiled floor, so that they seem to float in the room reflected in its tiles, or emphasizes their flabbiness and varicosity, he conveys their perversity. He seems to be paying homage to Ivan Albright, an earlier Chicago artist, who was a master of perversity, as his crumbling figures—most notoriously Dorian Gray—indicate. Desiderio's sick rooms—full of sick people and sick art—are also implicitly perverse, as their mannerist space suggests. If, as Robert Stoller famously writes, perversity is "the erotic form of hatred...a fantasy...primarily motivated by hostility...portray[ing] itself as an act of risk-taking,"[34] then Nerdrum's hostile, erotic figures, often naked as the day they were born, as though to suggest their primitive emotions, are inherently perverse, all the more so because they are set in a deserted

space fraught with risk. Zlamany's surface tends to be perversely distorted, and her landscapes, animals, and even artists seem weirdly empty, as though they were inwardly eaten up by their own malevolence and arrogance. Heffernan tends to overload her pictures with allegorical still lives, which function as the perverse attributes of the female nudes they accompany. Rego often pictures her women in perverse positions, suggesting their inner tension and hostility.

Nonetheless, for all the perversity of their figures, these artists sake it clear that they are natural, differentiated, whole human beings—not at all fragmented inwardly, nor for that matter outwardly. The figures are essentially mature human beings with a disquieting perverse dimension—a touch of dementia—rather than perversely destroyed human beings who no longer even have the possibility of becoming whole, which is the way I have described the figures in Picasso's Analytic Cubist portraits. It is the fact that organic wholeness seems to have become a realistic possibility that makes the work of the new Old Masters uncannily beautiful, and thus freshly objective rather than subjectively decadent.

**Notes**

1 Quoted in Ursula Meyer, ed., *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), x.
2 Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Death of Art*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Haven, 1984), 31.
3 Ibid., 8.
4 Quoted in Meyer, x.
5 André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (New York; Harper & Row, 1972), 77.
6 Quoted in Meyer, 175.
7 Ibid.
8 Breton, 88.
9 Ibid., 86-87.
10 Quoted in Meyer, ix.
11 Ibid., xi.
12 Quoted inSteven Henry Madoff, "Codes and Whispers," *Time*, July 12, 1999, 75. Madoff writes that Hamilton's "recondite Braille and phonetic whispers work too well perhaps: she leaves viewers with little to grasp easily. When a visual work rests so heavily on literary means, its impact is inevitably blunted."
13 Quoted in Peter Plagens, "A Visionary Hits Venice," *Newsweek*, July 12, 1999, 65.
14 Quoted in Frank Stringfellow, Jr., *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 13.
15 Hans Eysenck, *Genius: The Natural History of Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69.
16 Ibid., 159-60.
17 William H. Gass, *Finding a Form* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 291.
18 Ibid., 292.
19 Quoted in my essay "A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Aesthetic Disinterest-

edness" in *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Post-Modern Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 337.

20 Breton, 348.

21 Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 287.

22 Michael Balint, "Dissolution of Object-Representation in Modern Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 5 (1951): 326.

23 Ibid., 326-27.

24 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: Free Association Books, 1985), 11.

25 Ibid., 141.

26 Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, "Devil's Religions: Some Reflections on the Historical and Social Meanings of the Perversions," *Psychoanalysis and Culture at the Millennium*, eds. Nancy and Roy Ginsburg (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 316.

27 Ibid., 323.

28 Ibid., 322.

29 Ibid., 327.

30 Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London and New York: Tavistock/ Routledge, 1991), 51.

31 *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 232.

32 Chasseguet-Smirgel, "Devil's Religions," 335.

33 Segal, 90.

34 Robert J. Stoller, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (New York: Delta Books, 1975), 4.

# The Mentality Of Charles Burchfield

Donald Kuspit

Charles Burchfield regarded his mother as a "genius."[1] The nickname of Alice Bailey, his fiancée, was "mother."[2] Burchfield confessed: "Were it not for Alice, my mother and my art, surely I would kill myself."[3] But Alice called off her marriage to him, declaring that he was "hung up on his mother" and dominated by her.[4] Eventually he married a woman eight years older than himself, reversing the usual age relationship between husband and wife. He routinely called his wife "Mother" (undoubtedly capitalized), and on Mother's Day lavished special attention upon her.[5] As Benjamin Townsend writes, "The older, sustaining, maternal woman played an important role in Burchfield's life."[6]

All of this suggests a not unfamiliar idealization of mother, but Burchfield's unrealistic attitude to his mother lasted his lifetime. He never seemed to have been in conflict with or about her. Perhaps his excessive dependence on his mother was necessary in childhood, and compensatory, for his father died when Burchfield was five, a probable suicide.[7] But in adulthood it indicated a peculiarly arrested development. Burchfield had five children (in six years), but he was apparently uncomfortable with the role of father[8]—adult male—and preferred to remain a son. What does this extreme mother-love, and overestimation of his mother, have to do with his art? Everything.

As he said, his mother "allowed" him "to go out in the woods alone, accompanied only by my dog."[9] But he wasn't alone; the dog was in effect his mother. Being alone successfully means being with one's mother implicitly.[10] His dog was his faithful, trustworthy, supportive companion, like his mother. In other words, the dog was an alternative, surrogate primary object. The intimacy of Burchfield and his dog is comparable to the intimacy of the dog and the knight in Dürer's *Knight, Death, and Devil*, 1514. Like Burchfield, the knight ventured into the wilderness accompanied only by his dog—man's best friend. The dog is reliable and fearless, and never leaves the knight's side, even when death and the devil threaten him. There can be no greater threat, as Burchfield learned when he attended Presbyterian Sunday School, where he was taught that "playing cards, dancing and theater were all manifestations of Satan," along with sex.[11] Thus the equivocal, supportive love of dog for man, comrades in arms, subtly attuned to one another. The relationship between man and dog is as sexless and affectionate as the relationship of a mature son

and his mother. Thomas Mann's *Herr und Hund* describes the deep, ideal intimacy between them. The man talks to the dog, as though it is human. It is, in his unconscious. It is a symbol of his most indelible introject—his mother.[12]

Burchfield was plagued with object relational problems all his life. He never overcame his "monumental shyness. In lieu of human contact, [he] would wander the woods in a highly excited state."[13] His mood seemed to oscillate between ecstasy and anxiety, which at times seemed indistinguishable. He lost himself in the woods, which aroused him sensuously even as they terrorized him. They were not the depressing woods in which Dante lost his way in life. Burchfield's woods were female. His most famous works offer an "intimate view of nature and her 'secrets'."[14] He was in effect sexually curious about nature. His association of woman and nature is hardly unique, and feminists have argued that it relegates woman to a secondary, passive position. But nature was primary and active for Burchfield, as his numerous images suggest. It is full of feeling and alive with energy, no doubt Burchfield's own, projected onto nature as though onto a dream screen (which makes it mother's breast[15]). More crucially, perhaps, it was in the "midst of nature" that he found his "abode," that is, the home where he could be at "perfect peace" with himself, indifferent to and beyond the need for "the companionship of my fellow men."[16] Nature was indeed a good mother, even though it was sometimes nightmarish, as he said, that is, a bad mother. Burchfield certainly had a very different, somewhat less objective relationship to nature than Thoreau. However, he was not without detailed knowledge of it, just as Thoreau's knowledge was informed by fantasy.

I think Burchfield split off his sense of nature as a fearful, dangerous, evil place—indicative of his paranoid-schizoid destructiveness toward his mother, otherwise unacknowledged—in his *Conventions for Abstract Thoughts*, where they could do no harm.[17] They are in effect apotropaic symbols, warding off the feelings they themselves represent schematically. This left Burchfield with a deliriously benign nature, sexually charged and forgiving at once, as a famous 1930 journal entry suggests: "A tall dark pine tree stands by—I raise my eyes to the sky, fling wide my arms and pray to God to forgive me my sins, my lusts, my hideous thoughts, my cheapness...I fall on my knees—it is not enough—I fall on my face—press my forehead to the snow—at last the tears come—the wind roars past—I grow cold and I rejoice in being cold—I come away in peace."[18] This certainly suggests what Townsend calls Burchfield's "neoprimitive animism,"[19] but it also indicates his Christianized guilt. Perhaps most of all, it confirms his ambivalence toward nature, which is not just split into good and bad mother parts, but into male and female parts. That is, it is sternly male, as the awesomely tall, judgmental, paternal pine tree implies, but also sanctimoniously female, a place of meaningless hymns and prayers.[20] If awe derives from awareness of the erect penis, as psychoanalysis argues, and

piety can be understood as worship of an awesome object, then Burchfield's mother had a paternal aspect to her, at least in his fantasy. That is, he never outgrew the preoedipal sense of the mother as the perfect phallic woman.

Indeed, declaring his mother a genius announced her omniscience and omnipotence, which is the way the infant conceives the mother it is helplessly dependent on. Burchfield did something more: for him "genius" is synonymous with "gratifying"—completely gratifying, so that there is no need or thought of another gratifying object, that is, no need to even imagine another woman. Thus to be a genius is to identify with the consummate mother—the mother in her ideal aspect, more particularly, in her primitive phallic aspect. This is why his wife was his mother: he wanted to sustain and repeat the gratifying infantile intimacy he had with her. It renewed his artistic genius the way Antaeus renewed his strength whenever he made contact with his mother, the earth.

Burchfield was unable to separate from his mother, and thus fully individuate, because he was loved all too well by her. No doubt his father's death led him to cling all too closely to her, and she to him, each becoming all-important to the other and all the more inseparable because of their loss. But it seems likely that she encouraged their special intimacy beyond their mourning, thus never allowing Burchfield to separate from her and outgrow his immature dependence. In fact, with his father's death, it became all but impossible for him to separate from his clinging mother, for the father not only represents separation from the mother, but forces it. As Freud said, there is no greater intimacy than between mother and son—particularly if the mother prefers the son to her husband, and if the husband is not around to interfere with their intimacy. Burchfield was clearly an Oedipal winner, but he paid a high price for his victory. It made him a successful artist, but also a somewhat self-tortured—guilty—one. (One can't help wondering if the relationship between Burchfield's parents was as indifferent as his relationship with his wife, except in her manifestation as mother.)

Burchfield, then, by reason of his infantile intimacy with his mother, and her deep, peculiarly seductive need for him, could not help but idealize her. She hung onto him when he was an infant and child, never letting go, which is why he hung onto her forever after, never wanting to let her go. They formed a remarkably stable, durable "monad."[21] Burchfield's mother was undoubtedly overstimulating simply by reason of her possessiveness. His nature—his surrogate mother—looks overstimulated. In the works of his "golden year," as he called 1917, nature is relentlessly overstimulated, as though he could not help over-responding to it, that is, trying to possess it as completely as it possessed him. During that hyperactive year Burchfield made some 500 pictures, a quarter of his oeuvre. They became the basis for almost all of his later works.[22] (It is likely that Burchfield's hypersensitivity to nature reflected his

innate sensitivity, that is, his artistic constitution,[23] as well as his sensitive relationship with his mother.)

Burchfield was twenty-four when he made them, and struggling to escape from his mother in order to marry, in conformity to society as well as to satisfy himself sexually. The works show extraordinary intimacy with nature, ambivalently divine and demonic. Nature looks monstrous and sinister as well as beatific and sacred in the "golden" works, indicating that Burchfield was struggling—unsuccessfully—to distance himself from it, as though in horror of nature, but finally succumbing to its embrace. His struggle to escape the Gordian knot of his mother's hold on him only tightened it, which seemed to give him orgasmic pleasure. His nature is in fact convulsive, suggesting the compulsive character of the connection between his mother and himself.

The 1917 pictures are an attempt to purge his feelings for his mother by investing them in nature, which distorts its appearance, so that it looks unrealistic and seems like an hallucination.[24] But endowing nature with his feelings for his mother only confirms her inescapable hold on him. At the same time, his distortion of nature unwittingly acknowledges his unconscious feeling that his mother has distorted his life. Burchfield never knew what nature looked like undistorted. Just as the world was too much with Wordsworth, nature was too much with Burchfield. Again and again he confirmed his special relationship with Mother Nature. He predictably called his wife "mother," as noted, in effect marrying her, and he clearly never loved any woman but her. His insatiable curiosity about nature was a kind of devotion to her. Studying the moods of nature—joyous or melancholy, comforting or threatening—he was admiring her. He was as absorbed in nature as she was self-absorbed. Thus Burchfield's pictures of nature are perversely pastoral. He is, indeed, a child of nature, but one who never grew up. He has a Wordsworthian vision of nature,[25] but the vision prolonged became pathological.

Burchfield remained in thralldom to his mother, never escaping her power and his idealization of it, until he began to idealize American industry. It was a symbol of masculinity for him; here, at last, was "man's work." His depiction of it was his own decisive break with his mother. It was the only time he questioned her authority and the intimacy that allowed it. When he identified with American industry, in such works as *Black Iron*, 1935, he was able to regard himself as unequivocally male. Industrial America was the alternative phallic power to that of his mother. He had at last found a new father, with whom he could identify, and who gave him a strong sense of masculine identity. He was able to describe masculine America with relative objectivity, indicating a certain maturity, rather than project his immature subjectivity on it. Similarly, when he turned away from landscape and depicted town life, he was affirming his masculinity, that is, distancing himself from his mother.

I am suggesting that Burchfield had gender difficulty—that he was

never certain of his maleness because of his uncritical identification with his mother, implicit in his blind adulation of her. He was preoccupied with her femaleness, which took the form of his fascination with nature. It was as mysteriously compelling as his mother's femaleness. There is no question that she would not let him go, so that he could not help but see her everywhere in nature, which no doubt gave his depiction of it an uncanny edge. There is also no question that he never brought his relationship to nature and her into question until he encountered American industry, with its convincing masculinity. His pictures of it do not have the same uncanniness as his pictures of nature, but they have a sturdiness that suggests a self-assured, unitary masculinity—a far cry from the contradictory moods that symbolized female nature. Robert Stoller writes that while

> it is true that the boy's first love is heterosexual, and...fathers are too-powerful rivals, there is an earlier stage in gender development wherein the boy is *merged with mother*. Only after months does she gradually become a clearly separate object. Sensing oneself a part of mother...a primeval and thus profound part of character structure (core gender identity)—lays the groundwork for an infant's sense of femininity. This sets the girl firmly on the path of femininity in adulthood but puts the boy in danger of building into his core gender identity a sense of oneness with mother (a sense of femaleness). Depending on how and at what pace a mother allows her son to separate, this phase of merging with her will leave residual effects that may be expressed as disturbances in masculinity.[26]

Thus "masculinity requires a boy in time to separate from his mother's intimacy."[27] It seems clear that Burchfield did not. The idea of doing so never seems to have occurred to him, for the relationship was profoundly satisfactory. She found her femaleness reflected in him, and he internalized her need for him, so that he in effect became her.

It was only in the mid-thirties that Burchfield was finally able to separate from his mother, however briefly. He was able to overcome his sense of femaleness and feel unequivocally masculine, as *Black Iron* and *Grain Elevators*, 1938 indicate. Intimations of such symbolic masculinity appear already in *Coke Ovens at Twilight*, 1920. This picture has been called "mundane,"[28] but that's its saving grace emotionally. It was liberating for Burchfield to depict an everyday phallic factory scene rather than an all too exciting phallic nature. The masculine objectivity of the factory was a relief and reprieve from the feminine subjectivity of nature. Stoller writes

> that the problem boys have with creating their masculinity from

> the protofemininity leaves behind a "structure," a vigilance, a fear of the pull of the symbiosis—that is, a conflict between the urge to return to the peace of the symbiosis and the opposing urge to separate out as an individual, as a male, as masculine. In that conflict, a barrier must be raised against the impulse to merge.[29]

In mid-life, Burchfield was finally able to erect that barrier, win that "struggle...not to be seen by oneself or others as having feminine attributes, physical or psychologic. One must maintain one's distance from women or be irreparably infected with femininity."[30] He was finally able to establish and maintain distance from his mother and his own femininity. The barrier took the form of American industry, successfully combating the depressing effects of the Great Depression, which castrated America, in effect femininizing it. Burchfield's heroic rendering of factories and machines—of industrial power, indicating that America was no longer impotent—was a personal as well as social triumph.

The pathos of Burchfield's career is that he could not integrate his new-found masculinity and his old femininity—the new industrial and the old natural landscape. He was only able to look backward—regress to a lost paradise of intimacy with Mother Nature. This suggests just how completely "nonconflictual gratification can lead to developmental arrest,"[31] particularly the narcissistic gratification of symbiotic merger with the mother. In his late period (1943-67) Burchfield regressed to his earlier pantheism, as it has been called, or to "the 1917 manner," as he called it.[32] Unfortunately it had in fact become a manner—a dogmatic mannerism. Burchfield recapitulated his earlier relationship to nature, but it was no longer the same—no longer as spontaneous, secure, and rich with fantasy. This is often the case with a nostalgic relapse to an irrecoverable past.

**Notes**

1 J. Benjamin Townsend, ed., *Charles Burchfield's Journals* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 124.
2 Jay Grimm, *Charles Burchfield and the Myth-Making of America* (Masters Thesis, SUNY at Stony Brook, 1993), 13. Grimm offers a major reinterpretation of Burchfield's art and life. I appreciate his sharing his ideas with me.
3 Townsend, 75.
4 Grimm, 14, remarks that Alice Bailey's stepdaughter made this claim at the June 10, 1993 symposium on Burchfield at The Drawing Center in New York City.
5 Townsend, 124.
6 Ibid.
7 Grimm, 6.
8 Burchfield referred to "uninteresting problems at home," and noted his "harsh unsympathetic words to my wife, when she was crying in the agony of boredom" (Townsend, 135). According to Grimm, "his portraits of his family

members are among the most ambiguous family views in art history." Burchfield often made day trips alone, and was happy only in solitude.

9 Quoted in John I. H. Baur, *The Inlander: Life and Work of Charles Burchfield* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 18.

10 See D. W. Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), 31.

11 Townsend, 72. See also Nancy Weekly, *Charles E. Burchfield: The Sacred Woods* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 42 and Grimm, 12. Burchfield had problems with religion throughout his life. He experienced religion as oppressive and depressing. It induced feelings of loneliness, "terror," and "constraint," as he wrote in 1920. "The child forgets where his mother is; there come to him unutterable forebodings of times when all protecting friends will be gone" (Weekly, 37). Weekly, 45, observes that "Burchfield frequently castigated himself for his human [sexual] desires, which he feared made him unworthy," and "appeal[ed] directly to God...for absolution." In a 1928 journal entry he identified in relief with an atheist, but in 1944, ill and approaching old age, he reluctantly joined his wife's church (Weekly, 43). The churches he depicted either loom ominously or seem drained of all energy, unlike his nature. *Church Bells Ringing, Rainy Winter Night*, 1917 is a famous example of the former, and *Sun, Moon and Star*, 1920-55, in which a diminished church appears listlessly at the end of the road, of the latter. Burchfield once noted that the steeple of Salem Baptist Church looked "like the eye of a dead horse" and that the church gazed with "eyes of imbecility" (Weekly, 43). Weekly, 43, quotes Burchfield's short text "Baptist Church Picture," in which he describes "the hollow voice of the minister" and suggests the conformist hypocrisy of the church-goers.

12 I am suggesting that Burchfield's dog was an "object alternative" for his mother, to use Jean-Michel Quinodoz's concept. *The Taming of Solitude: Separation Anxiety in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 32. It is a defense against separating from the object and recognizing its independent reality. "The objective alternative involves the relationship of a subject who acknowledges the object and trusts it. Although the object is known, it retains an element of mystery...because the relations are situated on a symbiotic psychic level which confers an internal reality upon the object."

Burchfield's mother remained a mystery for him his whole life because he was unable to "renounce possession" of her. There is no doubt that she tried to prevent him from doing so for her own narcissistic reasons, but that does not fully explain why he did not even try to break her hold on him. The mystery of his psyche is why he never actively rebelled against her, as is normal at a certain stage of development, but completely submitted to her, in an extraordinary display of emotional passivity.

The woods were a grander symbol of her than the dog—a more consummate alternative object. When he disappeared into them, he disappeared into her. That is, he apparently never lost his sense of their mysteriousness, which suggests that he always experienced himself as merged with her. They surrounded him on all sides, as she did. Even when the woods seemed dangerous as

well as mysterious—anxiety-arousing as well as ecstatic—they testified to his inability to separate from her. Separation was not liberation for him, but catastrophic collapse: to lose his mother would be to lose himself—to disintegrate completely.

His journals are full of entries in which his mother is associated with nurturing nature. On March 26, 1911 he "carefully" picked "a single little pale blue Hepatica blooming all by itself in all the dead leaves," putting it in his buttonhole "to show to Mother." On March 28, 1911 he and his mother "enjoyed ourselves by watching the robins and sparrows eating the crumbs she had thrown out." On April 6, 1911 he writes that "mother mixed up some brown sugar and water, and placed it" where "a big Cecropia Moth, which had just come out of the cocoon" that Burchfield had placed behind a flower pot, "would find it." On November 12, 1911 he remarks that he "painted a branch of apples for mother." On November 14, 1911 he notes that his mother is happy because sparrows found food and shelter in a barn during a snowstorm. "That's just the place for them," she exclaims. "I hope they leave it open all winter!" On November 16, 1911 he puts on his "woods clothes" to go for a morning walk in the winter woods, after his mother prepared breakfast for him and gave him a kiss. After seeing robins on February 4, 1912—he had never before seen them in winter—"I could hardly wait until I got home to tell Mother." She is clearly the person he is closest to. On August 17, 1913 he states that he is glad to have a mother who has a "love of birds," and places "a pan of water out for them." On August 20, 1913 he writes that his mother wakes him up every morning, and that he was "harder to wake this summer than I had ever been before." On September 6, 1913 he mentions his mother's desire to read Gene Stratton Porter's last novel *Laddie*, which he is reading. He admires Porter's works "since they are inspired by a profound love for and intricate knowledge of nature." On September 6, 1914, after "making a sketch of petunias," his mother approves of him becoming an artist. She smiles and kisses him, and he writes: "A mother is always surprising you. You may think she is wonderful but she is always doing something so unexpectedly loving & understanding that she is like nature—ever new." On September 12, 1914 he writes that his mother put out hamburger for a small snapping turtle he found in the grass and brought home. He and his mother share a particularly poetic moment on September 26, 1914, suggesting that they have the same innate sensitivity. She and his art become one in principle: "At a lucky moment in the afternoon, the sun struck a polished kettle-lid, creating a blinding glow, which was halo-ed with a rainbow of light. Where is the vulgar kettle now? Mother said it reminded her of a locomotive gleaming in the sun, the sun-glowing steam from the kettle, the locomotive's smoke and steam!" Was she a genius because she made such remarks?

On December 22, 1914 he tells his mother that "no church was good enough for her." He remarks that he learned more about goodness from "her example than from any church organization." In the Spring of 1919 he describes his eagerness to share with his mother his "wonder" at the sight of a flock of eagles. He captures one bird, which he describes as "a religiously beautiful woman." On the morning of November 13, 1919 he lays in bed listening to his mother sing

and whistle "an old quaint air" in the kitchen downstairs. "As I listened I laughed happily that she was my mother." Is she singing and whistling for him? In 1926, returning home one day, he finds "Mother in bed & strangely apathetic—not because she was not glad to see me—but from tiredness." He was so filled "with sadness" that he "could scarcely sleep." In other words, he became as depressed as she was. There was little or no boundary between them, so that emotions were instantly contagious. On May 19, 1929 he writes that he sometimes wishes "with all my being" that there was "a powerful Being who would reach a helping hand out to me—one to whom I could come weeping as I did to my mother when I was a boy[,] confess all my baseness, and be forgiven." On August 7, 1933 he records his mother's death on June 23rd at 7:30 A.M. He spent "a night of black despair" with her. At 4:00 A.M., as he "sat holding her hand and wrist in which the pulse was steadily growing weaker, all the robins seemed to go mad with singing at the same moment." They are implicitly angels, and it is the moment of her ascension. On August 10, 1941, feeling particularly depressed, Burchfield writes that his "dearest memory" is of his mother and sister Frances "as they were in the last period of their lives." On September 11, 1956 he woke up "very depressed" from a dream in which he was on a visit to his "old home" in Salem, which he found "in the greatest confusion and untidiness." His mother "lived there alone and had grown so unhappy and lonely, that she let everything go—including her own personal appearance." On January 4, 1957 he dreamt that he found a story of his wife's "early life and marriage written and illustrated with drawings and photographs by his Mother." It included "primitive" drawings of "us children at play." His wife becomes his mother, and he becomes their child.

Burchfield's life clearly revolved around his mother. She seems the only person of any consequence in it—the only really significant other, from childhood to death. He meticulously records every occasion of intimacy between them. She was the big event in his life, and he studied her as carefully as he studied nature. One of the reasons he kept a journal was to record their life together and her words of approval. His journal is full of her presence, for she was his muse and the embodiment of the nature he depicted.

I am grateful to Robert M. Slammon of the Burchfield Art Center in Buffalo, New York for the journal references.

13 Grimm, 5.

14 Quoted in Baur, 92.

15 See Bertram D. Lewin, "Sleep, the Mouth, and the Dream Screen," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 15 (1946): 419-34.

16 Townsend, 61.

17 As Grimm, 19, remarks, the *Conventions* were "pictographs for human emotions," almost entirely the "bad" emotions. Burchfield mastered them by reducing them to schematic abstractions. But he never brought them completely under control, as the recurrent monstrous look of his nature suggests, particularly at its most untamed and eruptive. This look is a defense against his destructive fantasy of his mother's—nature's—seductiveness. Weekly, 40, also notes that the *Conventions* "symbolize undesirable human characteristics and

emotions," such as "Fear," "Morbidness (Evil)," "Melancholy/Meditation/ Memory of pleasant things that are gone forever," "Fascination of evil," "Imbecility," "Dangerous Brooding," and perhaps worst of all, "Insanity." Burchfield seems to have had a lifelong fear of it.

18 Townsend, 87.

19 Ibid., 243.

20 Burchfield remarked that "to admire or sketch a tree [is] more of a prayer than meaningless phrases mumbled in a church" (Townsend, 646).

21 Bela Grunberger, *New Essays on Narcissism* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 3, describes the monad as "a sort of virtual space which protects [the newborn infant] from both the outside world and its deep and overwhelming instinctuality...The monad is a nonmaterial womb which functions as though it were material; on the one hand, it encloses the child in its narcissistic universe; on the other, it prepares it for the partial dissolution of that universe...The function of the monad's existence is to *reassure* the newborn child." I am suggesting that Burchfield's mother enveloped him so completely in her monadic function—probably intensified by her own narcissistic need for a child-monad—that he could never experience his instincts, especially his sexuality, as anything but disruptive and terrifying, that is, as a threat to the narcissistic security and happiness that came from his being contained in the "nature" of his mother.

22 Grimm, 16.

23 See Phyllis Greenacre, "The Childhood of the Artist: Libidinal Phase Development and Giftedness," *Emotional Growth: Psychoanalytic Studies of the Gifted and a Great Variety of Other Individuals* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971), vol. 2.

24 Grimm, 15, notes Burchfield's susceptibility to hallucinations. It is not always clear whether the nature he "describes" in his journals and pictures is observed or hallucinated. It may be a hallucination filled in with observed details or an observation hallucinatorily exaggerated.

25 See Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* (1804), which is one source of the influential romantic idea that the artist can recover childhood vision, all the more so when s/he studies nature.

26 Robert J. Stoller, *Presentations of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 16.

27 Ibid.

28 Weekly, 68. In a sense, Burchfield's first factory image had to be mediocre, for he was not accustomed to feeling masculine and being objective.

29 Stoller, 18.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 26.

32 Quoted in Grimm, 42.

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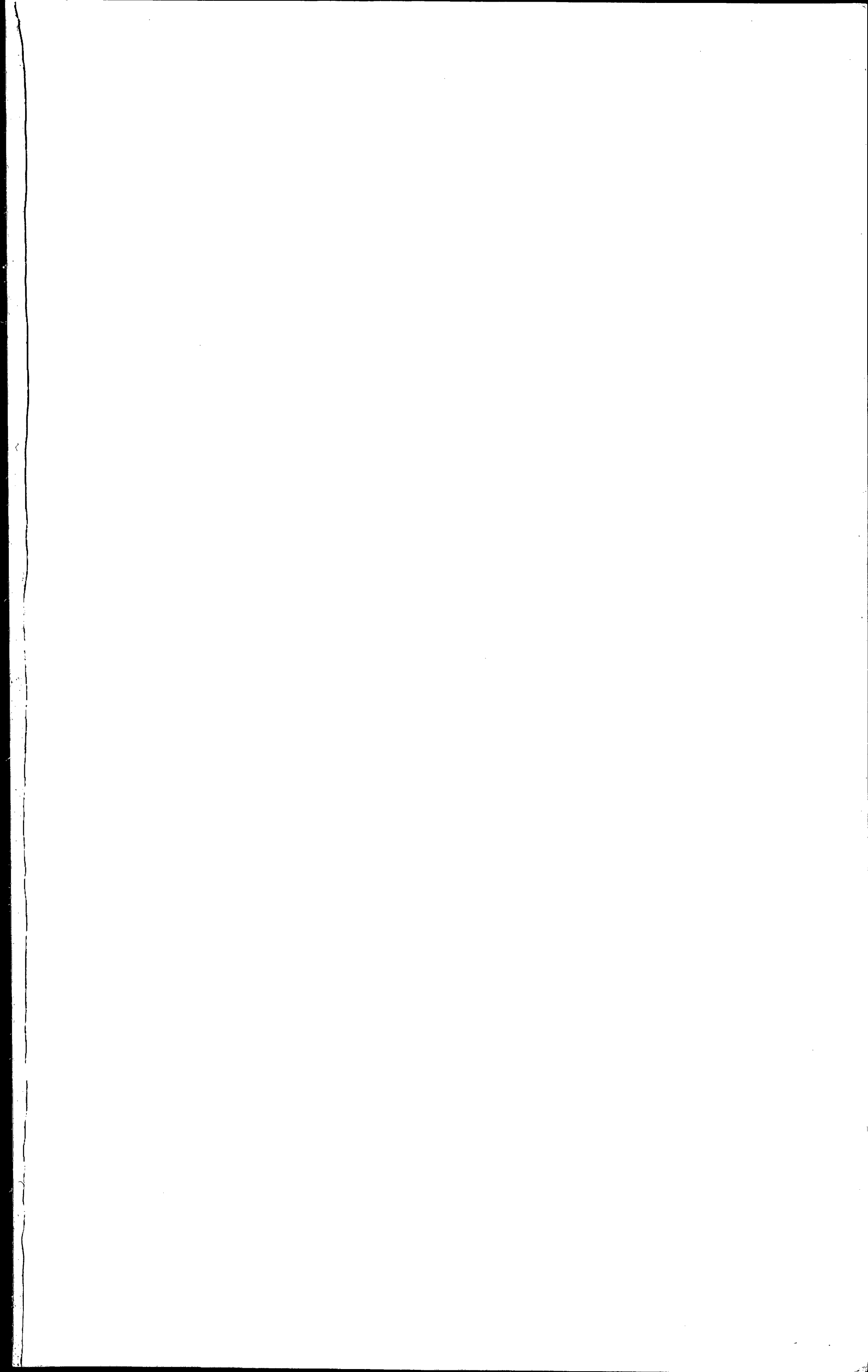

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