

Thomas  
McEvilley

THE TRIUMPH OF ANTI-ART

THE TRIUMPH  
OF ANTI-ART  
CONCEPTUAL AND  
PERFORMANCE ART  
IN THE FORMATION  
OF POST-MODERNISM  
THOMAS  
MCEVILLEY

DOCUMENT

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From about 1965 to 1980, Conceptual Art and Performance Art took center stage throughout the western world, introducing new and complex ideas to the practice of contemporary art, ideas which reverberate globally to this day. *The Triumph of Anti-Art* not only locates the origins and development of these controversial and compelling art forms, but also uncovers many relatively unrecognized yet indisputably important artists, both American and European. Thomas McEvilley is an expert guide through the thickets of seemingly arcane meanings contained in these nonrepresentational art forms, and brings clarity to the intentions and agendas of the artists, as well as to the real world context. Long-term effects of "anti-art," and the development of the pluralistic situation known as post-Modernism, are described in considerable detail. From the Greek philosopher Diogenes to nineteenth-century German Romantic philosophy, from the modern art critic Clement Greenberg to the influence of Marcel Duchamp, Dr. McEvilley exposes the ideas and political impulses that temporarily led to a toppling of painting and sculpture in the decades right after World War II. General essays on twentieth-century art set the stage for surveys of Conceptual Art and various practitioners, including Yves Klein, Bernar Venet, John Baldessari, Les Levine, William Anastasi, and Francis Alys. McEvilley gives equal focus to Performance Art, with chapters on Andy

Warhol and Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and Ulay, James Lee Byars, and Brian O'Doherty. Briefer pieces review the events and exhibitions of such artists as Hermann Nitsch, Robert Rauschenberg, Linda Montano, Pina Bausch and Carolee Schneemann. Finally, McEvilley discusses what the "triumph" of "anti-art" means, and outlines the terms, practices, and politics in global art history.

Thomas McEvilley is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where he heads the department of Art Criticism and Writing. Previously, he taught at Rice University in Houston, Texas. The author of dozens of books, monographs, and articles on art history, classical philology, and philosophy (including the monumental study, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*), he lives in New York City.

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The Triumph  
*of Anti-Art*



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*Publisher's Note*

IT'S FAIR TO ASSUME and insist that a book be more than the sum of its parts, but some explanation is in order when its parts are more than at first they appear to be. The essays that form the core of this book—which was itself formulated and constructed over a number of years—date back as early as 1981 and in many instances were vital to reigniting serious discourse about conceptual art and performance art, and are particularly noteworthy for having rediscovered and validated the important careers of artists suffering long-standing critical eclipse. The general reader might be cautioned that *The Triumph of Anti-Art* is intended neither as a survey nor a definitive history of twentieth-century conceptualism and performance, since many of the “usual suspects” are given leave of absence; but instead as an attempt at providing an historical ontogeny of post-Modernism in the visual arts, as well as a critical grammar for its understanding. Comprehending conceptual art and experiencing performance art both demand that certain assumptions governing aesthetic experience be checked at the door. The mental/emotional toolkit that Thomas McEvilley proposes and provides in this book derives in general from an understanding of the development of aesthetics within a context of philosophy *and* of world history, and in particular from the terms of conflict and confrontation exemplified by each of the artists figured here.

There can hardly be a settled history for art, one which at any and every level constitutes a bedrock of critical assent; but there is almost certainly a buried one. Yves Klein's posthumous reputation by 1980 had reached its nadir in Europe and the U.S. Five years earlier, however, McEvilley had originated the plan for a 1981 retrospective at the Rice Museum in Houston, Texas, producing it with Dominique DeMenil (with some assistance from Walter Hopps), after which it traveled to the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, and to the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Concurrently, McEvilley's



essay on Klein appeared in *Artforum*, and dramatically altered the appreciation of his art.

McEvelley's essay on James Lee Byars was published the year before, in 1981, and established the artist's bona fides, with the result that his reputation spread worldwide. Likewise, his 1983 *Artforum* essay on the now-classic performance work of Marina Abramovic and Ulay was its first exposure in a major international journal. In 1989 McEvelley's conversation with William Anastasi, published in a gallery exhibition catalogue, brought to light Anastasi's seminal influence upon early conceptual art and artists, and helped restart the artist's career. Another catalogue essay, this time on Francis Alys in 1989, removed the artist from the relative obscurity of Mexico City, and inspired far-flung exhibitions and acclaim.

Another essay appearing here should be remarked: "Art in the Dark" dates from 1983, when the legitimacy of performance was threatened by a resurgence of Romantic canons of expressiveness, primarily in Neo-expressionist painting. Still taught widely in art history courses, this essay was the authoritative legitimation of performance from the perspectives of anthropology or the history of religion.

Thomas McEvelley's essays on the works of particular artists often bring with them these narrower contexts of art historical advocacy by virtue of having often been the best or first comprehensive readings of their respective subjects' systematic production of meaning. To relocate the essays into the broader context of this volume has required in some cases their slight revision or abridgement, as well as the authoring of major new essays on conceptualism, performance, and modernism (derived to some extent from seminal essays published in the 1980s and '90s), and four appendices. Each of the essays retains its individuality while at the same time contributing to the larger matrix of a continuous book.

—Bruce R. McPherson

P R E L U D E

## Diogenes of Sinope

### *Patron Saint of Conceptual and Performance Art*

**C**ERTAIN ANCIENT GREEKS INSISTED THAT PHILOSOPHY SHOULD be an activity coextensive with life. Certain artists in our own time have said the same about art. "Philosophize more often than you breathe" was the advice of one of the ancient exponents of this view. What he meant is that life lived with a certain focus *is* philosophy, as in our time it has been claimed that life lived with a certain focus *is* art.

The process of expanding a limited category into a universal frame involves a willingness to manipulate language directly. The semantic boundaries of the category-word are broken open and forced, step by step, to the limits of life. Consciousness is violently retextured by imposing a new conceptual overlay on its experiences. Some ancient philosophers pursued this goal through enigmatic and challenging public behavior that was specifically designated as philosophy. "Performance philosophy" would be an appropriate term for this activity. The classroom philosophers of ancient Greece were no happier to confront this radical expansion of their realm than the established art academies of the late twentieth century were to encounter performance artists who insisted that the artistic frame should not separate one experience from another, but should enclose every moment of life.

The great hero of this tradition, and arguably the great prototype of much Performance and Conceptual Art, was Diogenes of Sinope, who lived mostly in the fourth century BC.<sup>1</sup> Diogenes designated his entire life as a performance of philosophy. Living in the streets and plazas of Athens and Corinth, he exhibited his every action to public inspection, a lifestyle for which he was called simply "the Dog." From that urban stage he devoted himself to the performance of a series of absurdist acts designed to subvert the habitual motivation systems of his viewers.

Diogenes' actions always demonstrated the viability of behavioral options opposite to those of the citizens at large. Thrusting at the cracks of

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communal psychology, his tiny and quiet gestures laid bare a dimension of hidden possibilities which he thought might constitute personal freedom. His general theme was the complete and immediate reversal of all familiar values, on the ground that they are automatizing forces which cloud more than they reveal.

A successor who goes nameless in the literature summed up Diogenes' legacy as he felt it, in a piece repeated always the same. Ascending a platform from which philosophers would customarily address the public, he would simply laugh for the duration of a normal speech, then descend. More than any specific linguistic message, the generalized affirmation of a laugh could point to the unbounded openness that Diogenes had articulated in his gestures.

In our time the category of art has been opened up and deliberately universalized, as the category of philosophy was in Diogenes' day. Artists have performed bizarre and enigmatic public acts and designated them as art. Artists have put themselves on exhibition, and in extreme cases have designated their entire lives as performances. These gestures have dissolved the traditional boundaries of art activity and set new ones at the limits of the life-field. In many cases the project has both an artistic goal—the discovery of new art forms beyond the old boundaries—and an ethical one: by refocusing life as art, it is hoped to purge it of conventional motives and restore it to a fresh and disinterested appreciation.

One day Diogenes was seen sitting in the public square  
gluing shut the pages of a book.

When a play had just ended and the crowds were swarming out,  
Diogenes made his way into the emptying theater against the flow.  
When asked why, he replied,  
"This is the kind of thing I practice doing all the time."

When a rich man took Diogenes into his house and cautioned him  
not to spit on the rugs and furnishings since they were very expensive,  
Diogenes spat in the man's face and explained that it was  
the only thing there cheap enough to spit on.

Diogenes praised people who intended to get married,  
or go on a journey, or enter a profession and,  
being just about to do so, decided not to.

When he was captured by pirates after a shipwreck and put up for sale  
at a slave auction, the auctioneer asked him what he could do.  
"Govern men," he replied, and told the crier to call it out  
in case anyone wanted to buy a master for himself.

Alexander the Great, who had heard his notoriety, came and stood  
beside Diogenes where he was sunning himself in the gutter,  
and asked if there was anything he could do for him.  
"Yes," Diogenes said, "get out of my light."

One day Diogenes was seen making the rounds of the ornamented  
porticoes of Athens, begging alms from the public statues.

He would walk backward through the city streets.

One day Diogenes was jerking off in the market place and,  
when condemned by passersby, remarked that he wished  
he could satisfy hunger just by rubbing his stomach.

When a friend dropped a piece of bread in the street and was  
embarrassed to pick it up, Diogenes tied a rope around the neck of a  
huge wine jug and spent the afternoon dragging it around the plaza.



One day Diogenes shaved half his head bald,  
then went to a party where he was accosted and beaten up by young  
toughs. The next day, bruised and battered,  
he wrote their names on a slate, hung it around his neck,  
and spent the day walking around town with it.

When the rats crept up to his table he said,  
“See, now even Diogenes keeps pets.”

Entering a classroom where a professor was lecturing,  
Diogenes stood in plain sight, holding a fish before him.

One student after another began to giggle,  
till the class was in a tumult.  
“Look,” said Diogenes, “this fellow’s lectures  
are less interesting than a twopenny fish.”

When Plato, investigating species-genera relationships,  
defined man as a featherless biped,  
Diogenes walked into the classroom  
carrying a plucked chicken and said,  
“Here is Plato’s man.”

When he was asked how he wanted to be buried, he said,  
“Upside down. For down will soon be up.”

One day he sat down and held his breath until he died.

1. I have translated the Diogenes anecdotes myself. For sources and discussions see: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, 2 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1925) 6:23; Farrand Sayre, *Diogenes of Sinope: A Study of Greek Cynicism* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst, 1938); Donald Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (London: Reprografischer Nachdruck der Ausg., 1937); A.J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1977); Daniel H. H. Ingalls, “Cynics and Pasupatas: The Seeking of Dishonor,” *Harvard*

*Theological Review* 55 (1962); Herman Diels, “Aus dem Leben des Cynikers Diogenes,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 7 (Berlin, 1894); Kurt von Fritz, “Quellenuntersuchungen zu Leben und Philosophie des Diogenes von Sinope,” *Philologus* supplemental volume 18 (Leipzig, 1926); Gunnar Rudberg, “Zur Diogenes-Tradition,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 14 (Oslo, 1935). The whole story is reinvestigated in Thomas McEvilley, *Diogenes: Defictions* (Berkeley, California: Peter Koch Printer, 1994).

# 1

## Origins of Anti-Art

# Kant, Duchamp, and Dada

## *The Background*

THE PREFIX *anti-* MULTIPLIES, AS IF EXCITED, AROUND SITES of contention. Before the twentieth century its main arena was theology, as in terms like “anti-Christ” and “anti-Pope.” Its meaning is sometimes simple opposition, but sometimes a mysterious kind of interchangeability is implied; the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives “opposite, against,” along with “in exchange, instead.” The anti-Christ, in other words, may not be simply opposed to Christ; he may also be Christ’s dark alter-ego, Christ turned inside out.

In the war-torn twentieth century (when, as the *OED* observes, the prefix was “extraordinarily productive”) the arena of struggle shifted from theology to cultural politics, settling specifically, by about mid-century, on art. This shift began early in the nineteenth century, when art was gradually replacing religion as the primary channel to the beyond, and climaxed in the generation after World War II.

During this period the meaning of the word shifted from that of opposition to that of exchange. The anti-thesis, for example, does not merely oppose the thesis but proposes itself as a replacement for it. Simple opposition is illustrated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s use of the term “anti-philosophy” in 1818 to describe a materialistic view brought about, he felt, by “thorough coldness of the moral feeling.” Coleridge was an idealist metaphysician, and to him it seemed that an opposition to metaphysics showed a lack of feeling. More than a century later, when the use of the prefix was being heated up by World War II, R.G. Collingwood coined the term “anti-metaphysics,” which he defined as “a kind of thought that regards metaphysics as a delusion and an impediment to the progress of knowledge, and demands its abolition.” In Collingwood’s view the term “anti-metaphysics” indicates a critical philosophy that may have something positive to offer; if successful, critical philosophy will replace metaphysics. The idea of simple opposition has partly given way



to that of exchange, and the value has shifted from a thoroughly negative to an ambiguously positive.

Around World War II and immediately after, the use of the powerful and troubling prefix spread through culture. “Anti-literature” was used of Surrealism in 1935, evidently from a feeling like that expressed in Aristotle’s *Poetics* that any narrative must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Dylan Thomas, in 1939, said, “I like the idea of [Henry] Miller’s anti-literature,” perhaps referring to Miller’s intense mixture of art and life, fiction and journalism. Jean-Paul Sartre, in 1959, referred to “anti-novels” which, while they pretend to be novels, “make use of the novel to challenge the novel.” In connection with Ionesco one encounters the term “anti-theatre” in 1958 and “anti-play” in 1963.<sup>1</sup> Argentine poet Nicanor Parra used the term “anti-poem” in 1967.<sup>2</sup>

In the visual arts the prefix came into use early in the twentieth century. Tristan Tzara, an enthusiastic user of the prefix, had “anti-philosophy” and “anti-philosopher” (twice), “anti-human,” “anti-psychology,” and “anti-Dadaist” in his *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, all before 1920.<sup>3</sup> In 1921, in *New York Dada*, he uses the term “anti ‘nuance’” (“Dada is an anti ‘nuance’ cream”<sup>4</sup>). Elsewhere in writings around 1920 he says “anti-objective,” “anti-dogmatism,” and “anti-man.” His usage seems to merge the oppositional and exchange meanings.

In 1918, in the third issue of the magazine *Dada*, Tzara referred to Picabia as “the anti-painter”<sup>5</sup> and in a 1919 text on the same artist he used the adjectival form, “anti-artistic.”<sup>6</sup> In the same year he used the noun form, “anti-art,” in a description of a “Dada evening.”<sup>7</sup> Andre Breton used the noun form, “anti-art,” in his *Second Surrealist Manifesto* of 1930 in a passage where he apparently tries to distance himself from Tzara.<sup>8</sup> The term anti-art, finally, was not used by the Dadaists themselves nearly as much as it was used about them a generation later—though the Dadaists did often speak of the death of art, of being against art, disintegrating or destroying art, and so on. (“How often,” Berlin Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck asks, “did we roar: Art is dead, long live Dada!”<sup>9</sup>)

In the term anti-art in the twentieth century both the meanings “opposed to” and “instead of” are at work. To be an anti-pope one does not have to be a pope, one simply has to be against the pope. But “to be an anti-painter...” as one author has observed, “one must first be a painter.”<sup>10</sup> An anti-painter exists within painting and operates within it in such a way as to counter what has come to seem given or natural about it. “The anti-artists,” as an anonymous author wrote in *The Listener* in 1959, “are those who in their

work have attempted to deny or break with every conceivable canon of style, taste, or convention that may have been established by the practice of artists in the past.”<sup>11</sup> Anti-art is not, in other words, a non-art; it may simply be a case of art that attempts to turn the dominant art of its time upside down and expose its underside—the side that is usually repressed. It is apt to take confrontational and antagonistic positions, turning traditional premises against themselves. “Anti-art is art because it has entered into a dialectical dialogue with art, re-exposing contradictions that art has tried to conceal.”<sup>12</sup>

Marcel Duchamp, of whom the term may have been used more than anyone else,<sup>13</sup> was ambivalent about it. In an interview of 1963 he says, “Art or anti-art? That was the question I was asking myself when I returned from Munich in 1912 and had to take decisions: whether to give up painting, the painting one might call pure or painting for painting’s sake, and to introduce very different elements totally alien to painting.”<sup>14</sup> “Art or anti-art” would seem to be the phraseology of 1963 rather than 1912. Clearly Duchamp chose what he here calls anti-art. But in an interview of 1968, when asked if he was an anti-artist, he abjured the term: “The word ‘anti,’” he said, “annoys me a little, because whether you are anti or for, it’s two sides of the same thing. I would like to be completely—I don’t know what you say—nonexistent—instead of being for or against.”<sup>15</sup>

Regardless, the term has come to be closely associated with him. An article of 1945 is entitled, “Marcel Duchamp, Anti-Artist.”<sup>16</sup> A recent book about him bears the title, *Marcel Duchamp: Art as Anti-Art*.<sup>17</sup> One author refers to “Marcel Duchamp’s anti-art halo;”<sup>18</sup> another declares that anti-art is “Marcel Duchamp’s legacy.”<sup>19</sup>

In the art discourse in general, the term is used of Dada (which lasted officially from 1916-1921) and of certain events a generation or two later which were known at first as Neo-Dada because they revived the anti-art orientation and pursued it farther. As one author wrote in 1974, “Recent events and developments in the art world show that the dada spirit is very much alive.”<sup>20</sup> In both cases a turning to anti-art was precipitated by a massive war with which the old aesthetic art seemed somehow to have been complicit, and by which it seemed to have been discredited. Huelsenbeck explained, “We had found in the war that Goethe and Schiller and Beauty added up to killing and blood-shed and murder. It was a terrific shock to us.”<sup>21</sup> As Tristan Tzara put it, “The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but those of a disgust.”<sup>22</sup> And Hugo Ball on World War I: “It is...the devil himself that has broken loose now. Ideals are only labels that have been stuck on. Everything has been shaken to its very foundations.”<sup>23</sup>



The relation between the two periods may be described as roots and branches. The anti-art period associated with World War I established the main strategies, but without nuanced focus; the second anti-art period, after World War II, worked out nuanced ramifications of the blunter and cruder practices of the first. In between the two periods—in a world distracted in part by the more rudimentary problems of the Great Depression—the first revolution of anti-art more or less passed from memory. The first period, Dada itself, as Duchamp remarked, had been “like a brushfire, soon forgotten”;<sup>24</sup> the second period, Neo-Dada and what followed from it, lasted much longer and may have become a semi-permanent part of the way culture deals with art.

In the 1960s the term came into its own. Duchamp used it in 1963 in the former, or original way, referring to “Dada anti-art.”<sup>25</sup> George Maciunas in his Fluxus Manifesto of the same year said, “Promote living art, anti-art...”<sup>26</sup> Two years later, in 1965, the term was used in the second, or later way, to refer to events ongoing at the moment, in the catalogue of the XVI Salon de la Jeune Peinture in Paris. In 1966 the Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica began using it in his manifestos.<sup>27</sup> It came subsequently to describe the major developments of Conceptual and Performance Art, which may be regarded as its “triumph.”

THOUGH DUCHAMP IS ASSOCIATED WITH DADA, HE HAD WORKED out his anti-art strategies in 1913-14, two years before Dada was declared into existence in Zurich. His first works of what would come to be called anti-art (and perhaps the first absolutely) can be dated to those years. His trajectory from art into anti-art, then, is, as far as the record shows, the original or paradigmatic one. It can be seen as a reversal of course that unfolded in three stages.

First, before 1913, Duchamp had been a more or less conventional Modernist artist working in modes like Cubism, Futurism and Fauvism, and involved in the current issues, such as the widespread curiosity among artists at the time about the Golden Section and the fourth dimension. As he himself put it, “Between 1906 and 1910 or 11, I vacillated between different styles and was influenced by Fauvism, by Cubism, and sometimes I tried more classical things.”<sup>28</sup> Then in 1912-13 his advance along that line crashed to a stop in preparation to reverse. He renounced all ideas of schools and tastes and aesthetic preferences and, living a retiring life and producing no art for a while, thought it all over.

One year later, in 1913-14, his anti-art strategy had articulated its three

main pillars, which are (1) chance, (2) the Readymade, and (3) the procedure of creation by designation. Duchamp’s work of the next seven years or so laid the foundation for the art—or anti-art—of the 1960s and after throughout the western world and, in time, much of the rest of the globe. In Cleveland, Ohio, there was an Anti-Art Festival in 1999; in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2000, there was an International Performance Anti Art Festival. All such developments must be traced back to some personal inner decision made by Duchamp in his year of thinking things over. Yet most books on Duchamp fail to offer credible or even sober explanations for his swift and absolute reversal from art to anti-art in 1912-13.

A notorious psychoanalytic explanation was offered by Arturo Schwartz and followed by some others.<sup>29</sup> Schwartz held that Duchamp was incestuously in love with his sister Suzanne and, when she married in 1911, he underwent a psychotic break and thereafter attempted to kill the things he had loved before, such as art. Other authors who tend toward psychoanalytic interpretations of art, such as Donald Kuspit, have hypothesized that inadequate mothering instilled in Duchamp an inability to feel emotions, including aesthetic feeling, a problem that excluded him from real art and left him forlornly holding the snow shovel.<sup>30</sup>

A second proposed account emphasizes bitterness over professional failure. Duchamp, on this view, lacked talent as an artist, while both his older brothers did have genuine talent, for which he resented them; when the Salon des Independants, in 1912, rejected his *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, he reacted with resentment against the art establishment for forcing him to confront his failure as an artist, and proceeded to invent an anti-art practice that would both conceal his lack of talent and enact his revenge on the established art world.<sup>31</sup>

There are two problems about these “explanations”: first, that there is not a shred of evidence for either of them, and second that, contrary to art historical practice in general, these authors have not explained Duchamp’s work by the inner sense it makes or fails to make, but by supposed psychological causes of a type that would never be brought up in discussion of, say, Cézanne, though they may be available; so on two counts one has to wonder about the motivations behind these explanations. Nevermind the festivals in Cleveland and Jakarta, there is still intense and troubled feeling about anti-art.

Elsewhere I have proposed a different accounting for which there is at least some bolstering evidence in Duchamp’s own words, and of which an abbreviated rendition follows.<sup>32</sup>



IN THE SECOND OF THE THREE STAGES OUTLINED ABOVE, ROUGHLY the year 1913—the turnaround year—Duchamp, confessedly upset by the Salon's rejection of *Nude #2* in 1912, retired for a respite from the world of battling art styles and theories and took a part-time job as librarian in the quiet Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris.<sup>33</sup> Toward the end of that year, entering the third stage of the transition, he began to make artworks again, but this time as a dedicated and canny anti-artist, ready to make his move. One must pause over that second stage before the third will make sense.

Duchamp later said that he took the librarian position at Ste.-Geneviève out of disgust with art and art politics after the Independants' refusal to exhibit *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. The Cubist judges had decided the painting was too Futurist: Cubists do not portray sequential glimpses of a moving thing at different moments of its movement, but multiple views of a static thing at the same moment. "Cubism had lasted two or three years," Duchamp objected, "and they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it ... as a reaction against such behavior coming from artists whom I had believed to be free, I got a job."<sup>34</sup> It was, according to this account, not resentment over his personal rejection, but disapproval of the judges' eagerness to rigidify around a certain framework of taste, that caused him to withdraw from that milieu to think things over.

In the library, Duchamp sat at a desk for four hours a day with no duties but occasionally to give advice about where to locate a book. By his own account he read and thought a good deal and withdrew from social contacts, living quite solitary. He later recalled that during this time he "had had the chance...of going through the works of the Greek philosophers once more, and that the one which he appreciated most and found closest to his own interests was Pyrrho[n]."<sup>35</sup> The recollection has been ignored, as if on the assumption that one's preferences in philosophy are no more influential behaviorally than one's preferences in art; but Duchamp seems to have been serious about this preference and to have welcomed its influence on his life.<sup>36</sup> As he would later say, "I was thoroughly conscious...of a desire to effect a purgation in myself."<sup>37</sup> In this turning-point year, he welcomed an influence which would reinforce his own feelings of intellectual doubt.

Duchamp may have been pointed toward Pyrrhon in part by the tradition of Montaigne and 16th century neo-Pyrrhonism, which had somewhat naturalized Pyrrhon's attitude of extreme skepticism in France. Perhaps his mood was affected by his sister's wedding two years before—who knows?—and perhaps his disappointment in the Salon one year before had intensified

his already skeptical inclination. But such issues are irrelevant. The point is that he seems to have awakened from a kind of dogmatic slumber during his investigation of Pyrrhonism, and the way of thinking he constructed for himself thereafter, and stuck with for the rest of his life, must stand on its own as a thought-out position.

PYRRHON OF ELIS (CA. 365-275 B C) STARTED OUT AS A PAINTER BUT abandoned art for philosophy. "He had no positive teaching," says an ancient authority, "but a Pyrrhonist is one who in manner and in life resembles Pyrrho[n]."<sup>38</sup> Two sayings attributed to him have survived: first, "Nothing really exists, but human life is governed by convention." To exist, in the context of classical ontology, means to have an unchanging essence, so that statements about an existing entity are objectively either true or false. Instead, Pyrrhon suggests that things indefinite in themselves are made to appear this way or that by human conventions and opinions, which may claim to be based on essential truths, but are not.

The second saying reinforces this idea: "Nothing is in itself more this than that." The reality that we seek to delimit through our judgments and opinions, then, actually has no limits. According to Pyrrhon's teaching as reported by one of his students, Timon of Phlius,<sup>39</sup> things are indistinct from one another, and thus are not to be preferred over one another, but should be regarded with indifference. Without fixed essences, they are non-stable, and hence are nonjudgeable, or unable to be contained by concepts. If nothing is true, the Pyrrhonists felt, then nothing is false either; for the false can only be defined by its contradiction of the true. Therefore, Timon concludes, "Neither our perceptions nor our opinions are either true or false." Language, in other words, is simply irrelevant to claims of truth; the delimiting of reality is not its proper function, which lies at the simpler levels of practical locutions and social intercourse. Accordingly, Timon says, we should remain "without opinions" and "indifferent," beyond the tumult of the fluctuations of yes and no. Thus the Pyrrhonist moves into a posture characterized by "nonspeech" (*aphasia*). This, presumably, is why Pyrrhon wrote no treatise on his thinking, but taught by example, demonstrating his ideas in his behavior.

The "Law of the Excluded Middle," a principle of Aristotelian logic, holds that there is no middle position between A and not-A, true and not-true, and so on. Pyrrhonism confutes this, establishing a position that is neither affirmation nor negation but a kind of attention that attempts to remain neutral and impartial while still alert and vivid. This was the "indifference"



(*apatheia*) that would lead to “imperturbability” (*ataraxia*). The Pyrrhonists recommended an attitude of indifference toward not only philosophical questions but also the entanglements of everyday life, which are based on hidden philosophical presuppositions. It seems that Duchamp had a natural sympathy for this stance, and that reading about Pyrrhonism drove it out in the open for him, providing him with an intellectual basis for, and a sense of clarity about, his own skeptical inclination.

Duchamp seems, for example, to have focused clearly on the idea of the Excluded Middle (with or without the name). He once explained the famous door in his Paris studio, at 11 rue Larrey, which when it closed one doorway opened another, as “a refutation of the Cartesian proverb: ‘A door must be either open or shut’<sup>40</sup>—that is, as a refutation of the Law of the Excluded Middle. In a letter of 1929, he wrote, “Anything one does is all right and I refuse to fight for this or that opinion or their contrary”<sup>41</sup>—again a rejection of Excluded Middle, implying a third position in addition to a proposition and its contrary, A and not-A.

After his months of reading in the library, Duchamp began to develop a vocabulary with which to infuse Pyrrhonism into the discourse about art. He would speak often of indifference, and coined phrases such as the “beauty of indifference,” the “irony of indifference” and the “liberty of indifference.”<sup>42</sup> Pyrrhon’s recommendation to cultivate a neglect of opinions is reflected frequently in Duchamp’s discourse. Once, when asked about his “moral position” at a certain time in the past, for example, he replied, “I had no position.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, when discussing some critical notes he had written on various artists, he said, “I didn’t take sides.”<sup>44</sup> To Arturo Schwarz he explained, “You see, I don’t want to be pinned down to any position. My position is the lack of a position.”<sup>45</sup> “To talk about truth and real, absolute judgment,” he also remarked, “I don’t believe in it at all.”<sup>46</sup> The following dialogue took place with Pierre Cabanne:

Cabanne: One has the impression that every time you commit yourself to a position, you attenuate it by irony or sarcasm.

Duchamp: I always do. Because I don’t believe in positions.

Cabanne: But what do you believe in?

Duchamp: Nothing, of course! The word “belief” is another error. It’s like the word “judgment.” They’re both horrible ideas, on which the world is based.

Cabanne: Nevertheless, you believe in yourself?

Duchamp: I don’t believe in the word “being.” The idea of being is a human invention.... It’s an essential concept which doesn’t exist at all in reality.<sup>47</sup>

Duchamp’s position of no-position directly relates to Pyrrhonism, as does much else in the exchange. The critique of the concept of being, with its presumption that being involves essence, is central to Pyrrhonism (“Nothing really exists...”). The being/nonbeing pair are alternatives like A and not-A, and the Pyrrhonist “position” is outside such pairs. It is thus also, as Duchamp saw, outside the concepts of self, which supposedly is, and belief, which either affirms or negates. The Pyrrhonist “position” is an absolute, universal doubt—the position of a “lack of position.” A little later this attitude would become basic to Dada, of which Huelsenbeck wrote, “You cannot pinpoint the principles of dada... it opposes any ideology whatsoever.”<sup>48</sup> And also: “Doubt became our life.”<sup>49</sup>

This anti-philosophy laid the foundation for key areas of Duchamp’s work with which he proposed to articulate doubt in the realm of art; anti-philosophy led, in other words, to anti-art. When he was asked, for example, what determined his choices of Readymades, he replied, “It’s very difficult to choose an object, because, at the end of 15 days, you begin to like it or to hate it. You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of Readymades is always based on visual indifference and, at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste.”<sup>50</sup>

Two works of 1913-1914 reveal the main lines of the strategy. The first Readymade, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, mocked the ideas of aesthetic emotion, touch, craftsmanship, innovation, good taste, and sanctity. *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14—three strings one meter long dropped from one meter height, the configurations in which they fell to be used as future standards—pushed chance to the center of the artmaking process. These works appeared at the beginning of the third stage of the reversal, when, having been Pyrrhonized in the second, Duchamp returned to art in the third—but as an anti-artist championing “visual indifference” and “the total absence of good or bad taste.”

In terms of the art theory of the day, the rejection of taste leads to an anti-aesthetic; Duchamp’s particular form of anti-art was anti-aesthetic art—which meant particularly, at the time, anti-Cubism.<sup>51</sup> His answer to the problem of aesthetic art was the Readymade. “When I discovered Readymades,” he wrote in 1962 to Hans Richter, “I thought to discourage aesthetics.” But later artists, he continued, “have taken my Readymades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”<sup>52</sup> The Readymades carry Pyrrhonist indifference into the realm of



art, and with its arrival the judgment of taste went out the window. This is why a devotee of traditional sculptural values such as Rosalind Krauss refers to the Readymades as “sculptures” that Duchamp “slipped into the stream of aesthetic discourse.”<sup>53</sup> The scare-quotes on “sculptures” suggest that the claim is charlatany. The implication is that the lack of the artist’s touch, along with the renunciation of imaginative transformation, makes the sculpture of the found object inauthentic. Yet the Readymade has exerted more influence on the sculpture of the last two generations than all other models and influences put together. A negative judgment about it implies a wholesale rejection of the last two generations of art history.

For that era, not aesthetic feeling but Pyrrhonist indifference was the touchstone. Duchamp particularly fit this mold. If a true Pyrrhonist is, as the ancient text says, “one who resembles Pyrrhon,” Duchamp could well be given that title. The essence of Pyrrhon’s teaching, in the words of one ancient author, was that “he would maintain the same composure at all times”<sup>54</sup>—something frequently said of Duchamp. (One author goes so far as to say that Duchamp had “the sort of absolute indifference that mystics attain or seek to attain.”<sup>55</sup>) Similarly, the report that Pyrrhon “would withdraw from the world and live in solitude” recalls Duchamp’s often reclusive life-style. The Pyrrhonists never presented a positive teaching, save a Zen-like admonition to attend to the quality of every present moment without the distracting overlays of opinions or interpretations; and Duchamp never wrote a manifesto, or pontificated on what art should be, except by example. He turned from a so-called “retinal” art to an art with a philosophical function immediately after reading that Pyrrhon had quit painting for philosophy. He had, on the first plateau of the transition, been caught up in the stream of aestheticism that flowed through his family home and the society roundabout. Emerging from the second plateau (the library) onto the third (anti-art), it was as if he had awakened from a childish dream into plain everyday reality, and saw that it was enough. Still, despite his indifference, he evidently still cared to project this realization outside of himself before the eyes of the world.

DUCHAMP SAID HE WAS ENGAGED IN “A RENUNCIATION OF ALL aesthetics, in the ordinary sense of the word.”<sup>56</sup> The qualifying phrase “in the ordinary sense of the word” shows that this was not, as it has often been called, an “aesthetic nihilism.”<sup>57</sup> In European art since the 18th century, aesthetics “in the ordinary sense of the word” means the aesthetic theory briefly adumbrated by the third Earl of Shaftesbury and fully articulated by

Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), along with various German metaphysical elaborations by Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and others. This tradition was inherited by the British, especially Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and subsequently Americanized in a simplified form by Clement Greenberg. Whether Duchamp studied Kant along with the Greeks at his desk in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève is unknown and unimportant; unlike Pyrrhonism, the ideas in question were pervasively in the air; this was, after all, the prevailing system of aesthetics at that time and had been for more than a century. As cerebral an artist as Duchamp had naturally thought about it. According to Marquis, the collector and patron Walter Arensberg once “thought he discerned a pattern in Duchamp’s work. ‘I get an impression,’ he wrote, ‘when I look at our paintings of yours from the point of view of their chronological sequence, of the successive moves in a game of chess.’ Duchamp readily agreed to the analogy.”<sup>58</sup> It was the prevailing system of aesthetics, roughly Kantian, and its hold on Modern art, that Duchamp’s work was devised to checkmate. (No doubt Hugo Ball oversimplified it; still he got Duchamp’s point when he wrote, “Kant—he is the archenemy; he started it all.”)<sup>59</sup>

Duchamp focused his critique on two sets of ideas. First was the trichotomy of faculties that is embodied in Kant’s distinction among his Critiques: the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Critique of Judgment*. The idea behind the distinction is adopted from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle says that the human is made up of three faculties, the cognitive, the ethical (what Kant calls “practical”) and the aesthetic (taste or “judgment”) (e.g., *NE* II, VI 3-12). Kant’s basic view seems to be that these three faculties are innately separate and isolated from one another, as each of the senses is isolated from the others. As one cannot use hearing to test a perception of seeing, so the cognitive faculty cannot be used to confirm or refute a judgment of either of the others, and so on. Each faculty is alone in judging its proper domain. This is the root of formalism, the simplified approach that Greenberg derived from Kant’s theory: if only the aesthetic faculty can be relevant to judgments of taste, then nothing ethical or cognitive may enter in—only the unmediated response to forms and colors. When Duchamp declared (in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney)<sup>60</sup> that he wanted “to put painting once again at the service of the mind” he was directly attacking this doctrine, announcing that art can be based on the cognitive faculty as well as the aesthetic. This was the foundational principle of what would later be called Conceptual Art. The introduction of text into visual works would increase until a situation was reached in which



text alone could count as a work of Fine Art rather than of literature.

A second aspect of Modernist aesthetics that Duchamp wanted to reduce to inconsequentiality goes back to the section of the *Critique of Judgment* called the "Analytic of the Beautiful." There Kant posits what he calls four "moments," each comprising a related group of propositions. According to the first "moment" the pure aesthetic judgment or sense of taste has nothing to do with cognition or concepts. This, as already remarked, was perhaps the central target of Duchamp's revisions—the basis of his desire not to be "stupid as a painter." Kant's second moment attributes universality to the aesthetic judgment, which is held to be the same in all people, a *sensus communis* as Kant put it. Some disagreement may of course arise, but only because of subjective distortions of a faculty everywhere constant in itself.

In this view, which held centerstage from Kant through Greenberg, an artwork is objectively good or bad, right or wrong, depending on its conformity to the universal judgment of taste. But only the individual whose faculty of taste is not distorted can detect the universal and make the unerring judgment. This is the basis of formalism's emphasis on "quality" and its elevation of the critic, such as Greenberg, to an authority without appeal. The third moment argues that the aesthetic judgment is purposeless or functionless, that it is, in other words, above the tumults and desires of worldliness. This is the basis of formalism's distinction between high and low, or pure and practical, art. It is also related to the idea of art as a higher spiritual realm, above the baser instincts. And the fourth moment, rather like the second, posits the *a priori* necessity of the aesthetic judgment, which, properly exercised, is held to be necessarily correct, as assumed in the dogmatic authoritarianism displayed in their day by many formalist critics.

The four moments collaborate in defining the foundation of the Kantian or formalist doctrine, the notion of a special faculty of taste through which we respond to art. Being like a sense, like seeing or scenting, this quality is noncognitive and nonconceptual; it is innate and identical in everyone; it is a higher faculty, above worldly concerns; it is governed by its own inner necessity. It is, in brief, much like a soul. Duchamp, an anti-transcendentalist, was put off by this concept which posited a higher authority, beyond appeal, in certain aesthetic judgments. "I consider taste," he once remarked in an interview, "—bad or good—the greatest enemy of art."<sup>61</sup> "I tried to remain aloof from personal taste," he went on. When asked the motivation behind the Readymades he gave the Pyrrhonist response: "Indifference. Indifference to taste. The common factor is indifference."<sup>62</sup>

In addition to his vigorous rejection of the centerpiece of Kant's theory,

Duchamp evinces in his oeuvre a theoretical framework involving counterpositions, point by point, to the other leading elements of that theory. For example, the "pure" aesthetics implies that literature or language cannot be art, since words are conceptual entities; Duchamp's inclusion of linguistic elements in his work—punning titles and inscriptions, sets of notes—forces the dilemma that either these works are not art or art is conceptual as much as sensual. The Readymades take aim at the idea of the universal sense of taste; calling a urinal "art," for example, resulted in a rift of opinion so intense as to throw into question the idea of a *sensus communis*; they also deny the idea of art's noble separateness from the world, and the Romantic myth of Genius which demonstrates itself through innovation. The introduction of chance procedures illustrates a mode of artistic decision-making that takes literally Kant's injunction that aesthetics should lie outside human desires and prejudices, and yet is not even conceivably acceptable in Kantian terms. The arbitrary procedure of designation eliminates the function of the faculty of taste, which is fundamentally to recognize art works. At the same time, it lampoons the Kantian notion of the aesthetic judgment as "necessary." And so forth.<sup>63</sup>

Central to Duchamp's anti-art strategy was the procedure of creation-by-designation. If an artist designates something as art, he felt, that makes it art; nothing more is needed. If it is accepted that a certain person is an artist, and if he says a certain object is his artwork, there is no appeal. Who should know if not the artist? There is an assumption about language involved akin to the primary insight in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, that linguistic meaning depends upon usage alone; in other words, whatever is called art is art; there is nothing else that being art could possibly mean.<sup>64</sup> In a slightly broader sense, if something is contextualized socially as an art object, then it must be an art object, at least for that society at that time; the context serves as a designation. Duchamp designated his Readymades by signing them, as artworks are signed, and by contextualizing them, sometimes, in art exhibitions. Creation by designation, in a variety of formal modes, became the basic procedure of anti-art in the post-World War II period. Early Conceptual artists devised different methods of designation, the method being in effect a piece in itself, expressing the artist's sense of personal style.

Designation and indifference render the faculty of taste obsolescent. And that is the most significant element in Kant's aesthetic—the idea that taste is a universal constant, an unchanging faculty, an essence, something very like the Christian-Platonic soul. This is the element of his thinking that



most contradicts the Pyrrhonist position, which denies the possibility of essences (including the self) and abstains from all the judgments to which belief in them might give rise.

Aesthetics for Duchamp had nothing to do with some transcendently autonomous and self-validating soul-like faculty. Instead, he proposed a relativistic view of taste as “a habit. The repetition of something already accepted. If you start something over several times, it becomes taste. Good or bad, it’s the same thing, it’s still taste.”<sup>65</sup> Taste, then, is simply the shape of one’s limitations, the ingrained habitual system of prejudices that is the stumbling block to a generalized appreciation of life. The judgments made by people who believe in a transcendent faculty of taste are simply unwitting projections of their habits. As Duchamp told Cabanne, “One stores up in oneself such a language of tastes, good or bad, that when one looks at something, if that something isn’t an echo of yourself, then you do not even look at it. But I try anyway.”<sup>66</sup> His goal, then, was “to reduce my personal taste to zero.”<sup>67</sup> If the constrictions of habit, of “taste” and its belief system, could be eliminated, Duchamp felt, life could be a “sort of constant euphoria,”<sup>68</sup> a Pyrrhonist realm of beatific imperturbability and generalized openness.

Many of the qualities that critics hostile to anti-art have regarded as deficiencies in Duchamp’s oeuvre are calculated demonstrations of his point of view. The work’s visual unimpressiveness expresses a dismissal of the conventional retinal criteria of taste. Its appearance of internal inconsistency, its shifts of modes, genres, and materials, express a desire not to define or to delimit the space in which art unfolds. The slightness of the oeuvre, which psychoanalytically inclined critics have taken as evidence of emotional problems, seems rather to reflect Duchamp’s refusal to repeat himself, on the ground that repetition would establish his work as merely one style among many, competing with others for authority, like the dogmatic Cubism of the 1912 Salon. To create many works on the same principle is to be dominated by a dead habit. Duchamp once remarked, “I’ve had thirty-three ideas; I’ve made thirty-three paintings.”<sup>69</sup> Chance and the Readymade, Duchamp’s two great tactics for creating art that neither pleased nor offended his aesthetics of indifference, were his avenues for the discovery of objects that he had not been taught to see by his experience of looking at art. Aware that taste changes from one historical phase to the next, and thus cannot really be either universal or necessary, Duchamp referred to it as “a fleeting infatuation,” which momentarily “disappears.”<sup>70</sup> “Why,” he asked, “must we worship principles which in 50 or 100 years will no longer apply?”<sup>71</sup>

In addition to the Kantian faculty of taste, another major element of

“aesthetics in the ordinary sense of the word” was the myth of art’s sacredness promulgated by Kant’s successors. To Hegel, for example, the successful artwork was an embodiment of the absolute or the infinite; it represented, he wrote, the “spirit of beauty...to complete which the history of the world will require its evolution of centuries.”<sup>72</sup> According to Hegel’s contemporary, Schelling, art “opens ... the holy of holies... When a great painting comes into being it is as though the invisible curtain that separates the real from the ideal world is raised.”<sup>73</sup> For Schopenhauer, similarly, art was “the copy of the [Platonic] Ideas”—that is, the embodiment of eternal and sacred truths.<sup>74</sup> The Romantic tradition, which includes late Modernism, deeply incorporated this attitude. For Duchamp, however, art was not a link to the universal and permanent, a channel toward the sublime,<sup>75</sup> but a device with which to break mental and emotional habits, and to discourage the projection of one’s self and one’s opinions, or one’s culture’s opinions, as absolute. It was a vehicle of Pyrrhonist indifference. Where the Romantic artist was supposedly a kind of priest or mystic adventurer, Duchamp, in connection with quitting art, remarked that he was “defrocked.”<sup>76</sup> “I’m afraid I’m an agnostic in art,” he said. “I just don’t believe in it with all the mystical trimmings.”<sup>77</sup>

Duchamp’s works were a systematic undermining of the quasi-religious “aura” which Walter Benjamin was to discuss. Mass-produced, manufactured, everyday objects, such as the Readymades, have no “aura,” nor are they unique or original. Neither are the photographs and mechanical reproductions that frequently appear in Duchamp’s work. The use of chance also takes traditional aesthetic decision-making out of art, emphasizing its embeddedness in nature. The procedure of designation presents the faculty of taste as irrelevant and arbitrary. The technique of mechanical drawing (which Duchamp adopted in 1914) bleaches the emotionality out of images. Even Duchamp’s adoption of a female persona, Rose Selavy, was a negation of art’s Romantic-era male-heroic tradition.

Duchamp’s work, finally, is a precise and mature theoretical critique or a well thought-out chess game; the aim of the chess game was the overthrow of the Kantian aesthetic along with the demonstration of a Pyrrhonist openness as a space for the art of the future to move in.

THIS READING OF DUCHAMP’S WORK AS A THEORY EXPRESSED WITHOUT WORDS APPLIES EVEN TO HIS VAUNTED RETIREMENT FROM ART-MAKING FOR CHESS-PLAYING, WHICH SUPPOSEDLY HAPPENED IN 1923. THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN AMBIGUITY ABOUT THIS “RETIREMENT,” SINCE DUCHAMP CONTINUED TO MAKE WORKS IN A DESULTORY WAY AND DEVOTED HIMSELF SERIOUSLY, BUT IN SECRET, FOR YEARS TO



the *Étant Donné*, his last work, found in a private room of his apartment in New York after his death. It would seem that Duchamp's "retirement" was a gesture, not quite a reality, in line with his remark that the artist of the future will go underground.

Actually, the idea of retiring from art seems to have been common in the milieu of Dada. It was attractive in a negative way as the ultimate anti-art gesture. Huelsenbeck recalls that in those days he and Arp would talk a lot about Rimbaud because "he had abandoned art." "What did it mean," he would wonder, "to leave art behind?"<sup>78</sup> "Such an act," he concluded, perhaps along lines that parallel thoughts of Duchamp, "contained the possibility of a re-evaluation of art as such." "These reflections," he notes, "developed into the 'anti-art' sentiments anticipated by Duchamp and Man Ray in New York."<sup>79</sup> The idea seems to have been in the air. Ribemont-Dessaignes, in his *History of Dada* in 1931, remarked that "the case of Rimbaud was on the order of the day, and for a long time did not cease to preoccupy them [the Dadaists]..."<sup>80</sup> Hugo Ball's retirement from art and poetry in 1917 caught people's attention in that milieu. "My opinion on art," Huelsenbeck recalls, "was the opinion of those who abandon her like an unfaithful sweetheart."<sup>81</sup> In the second wave of anti-art, in the 1960s and '70s, Duchamp's retirement was interpreted as an art gesture, even an artwork in itself, and became a model for various artists (see especially the chapters on Baldessari and Venet below). It seems in his own day also the act had a certain stylistic éclat, and indeed it may have been understood that way by his fellows.

HISTORICALLY, DUCHAMP AND DADA SEEM TO HAVE BEEN SUMMONED into action by disgust at the events that were leading to and then comprising World War I—what Tzara referred to as "Dadaist disgust."<sup>82</sup> Not long after that war the European art world moved away from chance and the Readymade and back into the Kantian aesthetic of Picasso and Matisse, Bonnard and Vuillard. The faculty of taste was back in the saddle again for a long generation.

When in the early '60s Duchamp's reputation was reborn—especially in the United States, where he was now a citizen and had his first retrospective in '63 (at the age of 75!)—many young artists agreed that the principles of anti-art had not done their job thoroughly enough the first time, that the "brushfire" needed to be revived and continue its work. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, many artists in both Europe and America investigated how the incorporation of these principles into their own sensibilities and impulses could provide a map of the unknown terrain

of the future of art. "Happenings and Conceptual art..." as Jack Flam notes, "employ and to a certain extent systematize the symbolic and communicative modes invented by the Dadaists."<sup>83</sup> After more than forty years of obscurity Duchamp became, overnight, what Krauss called "the artist of postmodernism." As William Camfield observed: "...the burgeoning interest in Duchamp [in the '60s] coincided with exhilarating developments in avant-garde art, virtually all of which exhibited links of some sort to Duchamp."<sup>84</sup>

The most powerful of these connections was the linkage between the Readymade and the "found object." So overwhelming has the influence of this element been that one author argues that "Duchampian postmodernism" is based primarily on the Readymade, not on the rest of Duchamp's oeuvre.<sup>85</sup> This assessment seems accurate—though chance runs a close second. Formalist critics persist in saying the *Large Glass* is Duchamp's foremost work, because it retains pictorial surface and composition, but Duchamp himself called the Readymade "perhaps the most important single idea to come out of my work,"<sup>86</sup> and it has in fact turned out that way historically. "The readymades," Amelia Jones wrote, "break the Greenbergian 'circle of belief,' substituting for it the (anti-Greenbergian) *postmodern*"<sup>87</sup>; the Readymade is "paradigmatic of the inherently critical object," and, "The readymade gesture is seen to have precipitated the breakdown of modernism and the instigation of the radical other." In a similar spirit Max Kozloff called the Readymade a "radical metaphysical act," and Greenberg, knowing an enemy when he saw one, referred to Readymade art as "sub-art."<sup>88</sup>

Because of "Duchamp's emergence as the seminal influence on contemporary art since the 1960s,"<sup>89</sup> one author wrote that Duchamp "seems to belong to a younger generation—that of the post-1945 artists of Pop Art, Happenings, Op Art, Minimal Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, Postmodernism."<sup>90</sup> As another critic wrote, "The ghost of Duchamp haunts postmodernism."<sup>91</sup> Jones has recently described Duchamp as the "origin of radical postmodern practices," "authoritative source of postmodern art," "father of postmodernism," "source of American postmodernism," "paterfamilias of postmodernism," "authoritative origin of postmodernism," "originating paternal function for postmodernism," and so on.<sup>92</sup>

In 1963 John Cage wrote about Duchamp, "The danger remains that he'll get out of the valise."<sup>93</sup>

And so he did.



1. All the preceding exempla in this paragraph, and those in the preceding one come from the 1987 supplement to the OED, under "anti".
2. Nicanor Parra, *Poems and Antipoems* (New York: New Directions, 1967).
3. Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, English translation by Barbara Wright (London: Calder Publications, 1977), pp. 16, 19, 27, 38, 87, 104.
4. Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 216.
5. Tristan Tzara, in Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, English edition by Malcolm Green and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998), p. 28.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
8. Andre Breton, *The Surrealist Manifestos* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 124.
9. Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 64.
10. For source see note 1 above. It has been objected that this situation breaches Aristotle's Principle of Non-contradiction which says that nothing can be both A and not-A (or artist and anti-artist) at the same time. But anti- is not the same as non-. It might be more accurate to say that the anti-painter is anti-traditional painting, but he still paints, looking for a replacement mode.
11. See note 1 above.
12. Stewart Home, *Smile*, 3, 1984.
13. It has even been attributed to him, mistakenly it seems. Ursula Meyer, in "The Eruption of Anti-Art," (in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology* [New York: Dutton, 1973], p. 117), says, "At the eve of World War I, Duchamp coined the term Anti-Art," without giving a text reference. Simon Anderson, author of the article "Anti-art" for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), says, "Duchamp...is credited with coining the term," perhaps thinking of Meyer's statement, but again, like her, giving no source. For discussion of the origin of the term see Appendix 1.
14. "Interview with Jean-Marie Drot," 1963, quoted in *Marcel Duchamp*, exh. cat. Museum Jean Tinguely, Basel (Berlin: Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 23, n. 22.
15. Francis Roberts, Interview with Marcel Duchamp, "I Propose to Strain the Laws of Physics," *Art News* (Dec. 1968), p. 62.
16. Harriet and Sidney Jannis, "Marcel Duchamp, Anti-Artist," *View* V.1, 1945, reprinted in Joseph Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1975), pp. 30-40.
17. Jannis Mink, *Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968): Art As Anti-Art* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1995.)
18. Helene Parmelin, *Art Anti-Art* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), p. 29.
19. Hilton Kramer, *New Criterion* (October, 1995). Kramer goes on to say that anti-art arose from "a failure of spirit, certainly, and very likely a failure of talent as well."
20. Hans J. Kleinschmidt, "The New Man—Armed with the Weapons of Doubt and Defiance—Introduction," in Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, p. 1.
21. Quoted, without reference, in Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 17.
22. Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, p. 122.
23. John Elderfield, ed., *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 11.
24. Otto Hahn, "Marcel Duchamp Interviewed," *L'Express* (Paris) no. 684 (July, 1964), pp. 22-23.
25. Videotape, *Marcel Duchamp: A Game of Chess*, dir. Jean-Marie Drot, 1987.
26. Quoted by Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), p. 23.
27. See, for example, Helio Oiticica, "Position and Program," in Alexander Alberro and

Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art, A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 8-10.

28. "Marcel Duchamp," in *Ingenieur du Temps Perdu. Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* (Paris: Editions Belfont, 1967), p. 34.

29. Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), and Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp, Eros, c'est la Vie, A Biography* (Troy, New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1981). I should remark en passant that it is outrageous that Duchamp's works will go down to the future (since Schwartz's is the catalogue raisonné) with this idiotic and totally fanciful theory as a distracting piece of baggage.

30. Donald Kuspit, "Marcel Duchamp, Imposter Artist," in *Idiosyncratic Identities* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

31. Less influential accounts have focused on Duchamp's trip to Munich in the summer of 1912, of which he once remarked, "My stay in Munich was the source of my complete liberation" (Calvin Tompkins, *Duchamp, A Biography* [New York: Henry Holt, 1996], p. 99). Jack Burnham ("Unveiling the Consort," *Artforum*, March and April 1971; "Duchamp's Bride Stripped Bare," *Arts*, March, April and May 1972) argues that in Munich Duchamp consulted rare manuscripts from which he learned Hermetic and Cabalistic secrets that changed the direction of his life. De Duve sees Duchamp's trip to Munich as a way of distancing himself from the art-values of the School of Paris, freeing himself for the anti-School of Paris new work that would follow. See Thierry de Duve, "Resonances of Duchamp's Visit to Munich," in Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann, eds., *Marcel Duchamp, Artist of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 41-63.

32. In Thomas McEvilly, "Empyrrhical Thinking and Why Kant Can't," *Artforum* (October, 1988); republished, somewhat revised, as "Duchamp, Pyrrhonism, and the Overthrow of the Kantian Tradition," in *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), pp. 49-66.

33. Most authorities give 1913 for the commencement of Duchamp's employment at the library (for example, Octavio Paz [*Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare*, New York: Seaver Books, 1978], p. 185; Pierre Cabanne [*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1979, p. 114]; Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine [eds., *Marcel Duchamp*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973, p. 14]). At least one gives 1912 (Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Duchamp*, New York: Universe Books, 1986, p. 112). Lebel describes the period of employment as "early in 1913" (Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp*, London: Trianon Press, 1959, p. 27). Mink (*Marcel Duchamp: Art As Anti-Art*, p. 43) says the job ended in May, 1914, but Linda Henderson (*Duchamp in Context*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 31) points to a letter to Walter Pach in 1915 in which Duchamp mentions the job as if it were still ongoing.

34. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 17. Duchamp remarked that the Salon's rejection "helped me to totally escape the past...I said to myself, 'Well, if that's the way they want it, then there's no question about me joining a group; one can only count on oneself, one must be a loner.'" (*Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 52.) But he did not say it led to his development of anti-art.

35. Schwarz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 38, note 23. For a discussion of Pyrrhon's thought see Thomas McEvilly, "Penelope's Night Work: Negative Thinking in Greek Philosophy," *Krisis* 2 (1985), pp. 41-59. Reprinted in Thomas McEvilly and Roger Denson, *Capacity: History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*, (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association [G & B Arts International], 1996).

36. In fact it was very rare for Duchamp to speak in such terms of anyone. The only other philosopher he ever singled out in this way was the nineteenth century German anarchist Max Stirner (1806-1856), whose work he encountered in Munich right before taking the librarian job, as part of the "liberation" referred to in n. 28 above. Stirner, like Pyrrhon, was a philosophical skeptic, and in the book that Duchamp saw, *The Ego and Its Own*, speaks approvingly about



- Pyrrhon (English translation of 1915, p. 28). At the time, says George Woodcock, Stirner was much read by "rebellious autodidacts" (*Anarchism* [New York: World Publishing Co.], 1962, p. 99).
37. Interview by James Johnson Sweeney in exh. cat. *Eleven Europeans in America*, reprinted in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 141.
38. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Sayings of the Philosophers*, English translation by R. D. Hicks (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press [Loeb Classical Library], 1966), vol. 2, p. 483.
39. Timon's remarks are preserved in a text of Aristocles found in Hermann Diels, ed., *Poetarum Philosophorum Fragmenta*, fascicle 3, part 1, of U. von Wilamowitz, ed., *Poetarum Graecorum Fragmenta* (Berlin, 1901), pp. 175-76.
40. Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 227.
41. Letter to Katherine Dreier, 1929, quoted *ibid.*, p. 236.
42. See, for example, Paz, *Marcel Duchamp, Appearance Stripped Bare*, p. 48; Schwarz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 39; Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 182; Harriet and Sidney Jannis, "Marcel Duchamp, Anti-Artist," p. 36.
43. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 17.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
45. Quoted in Schwarz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 194.
46. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 70.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
48. Kleinschmidt, "The New Man," in Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, pp. vi, xviii.
49. *Ibid.*, p. xxxvii.
50. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 48.
51. As William Rubin noted, "Anti-art implied primarily anti-Cubism." William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 15.
52. Quoted in Alexander Keneas, "The Grand Dada," *The New York Times*, 3 October 1968, pp. 1, 51.
53. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), pp. 84, 72.
54. Diogenes Laertius, vol. 2, p. 477.
55. David Myers, "The Mystic," 1970, reprinted in Anthony Hill, *Duchamp: Passim: A Marcel Duchamp Anthology* (New York and Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach [G and B Arts International], 1994), p. 166.
56. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 42.
57. As in Keneas, "The Grand Dada."
58. Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 285.
59. Elderfield, ed., *Flight Out of Time*, p. 11.
60. James Johnson Sweeney, "Interview," *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, vol. 132, nos. 4-5 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946).
61. Katherine Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," in her *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
62. Hahn, "Marcel Duchamp Interviewed."
63. Thierry de Duve's book *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996) is a strangely ambiguous contribution to the discussion. The author attempts to stay on the fence about Modernism and post-Modernism, saying, for example, "the choice between the modern and the postmodern is a false one" (p. 325). Still, it seems clear that his bottom line is a personal commitment to Modernism. At the beginning (p. xiv) he says he will use "the modern when the issue at stake...is the appreciation of art: the postmodern when it is a matter of looking back, 'archeologically,' on modernity..." So the post-Modern relates to the Modern, and the Modern relates to art; the post-Modern does not really relate to art. Despite the author's attraction to the Duchampian position, a devotion to the Kantian tradition seems finally to have priority.
64. See Timothy Binkley, "Piece: Contra Aesthetics," in Joseph Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), pp. 25-45.
65. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 48.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
67. Quoted in Paz, *Marcel Duchamp, Appearance Stripped Bare*, p. 28.
68. Quoted in Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 96.
69. Quoted by Jacquelyne Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Influences in Western Art from Monet to the Present* (forthcoming, University of California Press).
70. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 71.
71. Quoted in Keneas, "Grand Dada." Carried to the limit, Duchamp's theory—for it is a theory—duplicates some of what it was intended to oppose. Like the Kantian doctrine of taste, it posits something like a free, pure, absolute faculty of mind, beyond habit systems and conditioning.
72. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, in Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press [Phoenix books], 1976), p. 445.
73. Friedrich Wilhelm Josef von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, in *ibid.*, p. 373.
74. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 448.
75. Duchamp sometimes fell into the sublimist kind of discourse, which was all-pervasive during his youth, as when he said, "Art opens onto regions that are not bound by time or space." (Quoted in Paz, *Marcel Duchamp, Appearance Stripped Bare*, p. 88.) But these remarks are contradicted by countless other statements he made. He felt, for example, that the cracks in the *Large Glass* brought it into the world: "It's a lot better with the breaks. A hundred times better. It's the destiny of things." (Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, p. 75.)
76. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
77. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant Garde* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1976), pp. 18-19.
78. Richard Huelsenbeck, "The Dada Drummer," in Kleinschmidt, ed., *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, p. 14.
79. *Ibid.*
80. Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, "History of Dada" (1931) in Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 105.
81. Huelsenbeck, "The Dada Drummer," p. 15.
82. Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, p. 13.
83. Foreword to Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. xix.
84. William Camfield, *Duchamp's Fountain* (Houston: The Menil Collection and Fine Arts Press, 1989), p. 88.
85. Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. xv: "...the American postmodern Duchamp has tended to be reduced to his readymades (and as the 'ready-made Duchamp,' he instigates the critique of the institution."
86. Quoted in Schwartz, *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 39.
87. Jones, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.
88. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 39, 37; Max Kozloff, "Duchamp" (1965), in *Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 121; Greenberg quoted at Jones, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.
89. Timothy Shipe in Kuenzli and Naumann, eds., *Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century*, p. 231.
90. Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "Introduction," in Kuenzli and Naumann, eds., *Marcel Duchamp, Artist of the Century*, p. 1.
91. J.G. Merquior, "Spider and Bee: Toward a Critique of the Postmodern Ideology," in *Postmodernism/ICA Documents 4/5*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986), pp. 16-18.
92. Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism*, pp. xi-xvi.
93. John Cage, "Statement Re Duchamp," reprinted in Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, pp. 66-69.

## Out of the Ashes

### *The Twentieth Century as Syllogism*

WORLD WAR II WAS A TERRIBLE DISAPPOINTMENT FOR human hopes. The air seemed to resonate with the Hegelian gong of the End of History. Everything seemed to have converged in a cataclysmic *reductio ad absurdum* of western civilization. Europe lay in smoking ruins, and in a sense it was as if western civilization had never existed—or had committed suicide. There was a despairing cynicism in the air, as of Gandhi's remark, when asked what he thought of western civilization, "I think it would be a good idea." And there was a despairing fear, too, as in Joseph Beuys's work with sleds pouring out of the back of a VW bus (*The Pack*, 1969), silently crying: "Flee, flee to the wilderness..."

Art, like everything else, seemed somehow to have failed. Surely if artists had produced enough beautiful objects these could have buoyed up the raft of civilization, keeping it afloat. In the years immediately following the war movements such as Abstract Expressionism seemed to be trying to make up for this failure. A flood of color poured over western culture as if to heal it. This was color in art, color released by artists who were desperate to find something helpful to do. Such phenomena as Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting were attempts to redeem history, to see the cataclysm as simply another appearance of the terror-sublime—an experience mankind had survived before and had even used as a subject for pleasing artworks.

It's true that the terror of the sublime, as Pseudo-Longinus had put it in the Roman Empire, was the terror of the end of the world—but only as representation. "Longinus" had said that in a sublime image the whole world might be turned upside down and torn apart<sup>1</sup>—much what had in fact begun to happen just before the Abstract Expressionists commenced their single-minded search for formulaic representations of the sublime. Perhaps (whispered an unspoken implication), by dealing with representations of the End, the real thing could be averted. Transcendentalist art proceeded to



work out its graphic schemes for an annihilationist metaphysics as a proxy for the real thing—you might call it a form of sympathetic magic.

Color began to intensify and expand, covering the canvas with more and more uncompromising thoroughness, first squeezing the figure, then engulfing and eradicating it, like a mushroom cloud. In 1947 Barnett Newman, seeking the sublime, painted the nearly monochrome *Onement I*, and in the same year Jackson Pollock's breakthrough came with the dripped and poured works *Full Fathom Five* and *Galaxy*. The absence of figures in these works was sinister—implying the end of humanity—but no one involved quite realized that yet. In *Onement I* the figures had already vanished into the ground, leaving only the seam where the surface was closing over them. The Pollocks showed the world in a serene yet frenzied meltdown, like a snapshot catching each thing in the process of becoming something else. These were end-of-the-world paintings. Though they seem to have been intended to heal the world's wounds with ministrations of the spirit through color, it was healing through forgetfulness, through oblivion, through denial, that they somewhat hiddenly proposed. Meanwhile, the colors poured out like bodily fluids from wounds.

What fauvism had prophesied but failed to accomplish came about in Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting: the aesthetic feeling rising from the presence of color at last became truly overwhelming. Newman spoke of wanting to discover how far you could "stretch a red," in a mood that led some time later to Jules Olitski's remark that he sought an effect as of powdered pigment flung into the air, the color saturating the entire space three-dimensionally, like fallout. Art and the viewer of art were drowning together in a swelling sea of sensibility. As the prophet of color, Yves Klein, indicated in the '50s, the individual self could dissolve into color like a particular disappearing into the universal.<sup>2</sup> That's what the closing zipper of *Onement I* had portrayed.

Such activity became wildly popular among the educated and privileged while the aftershock of Hiroshima still reverberated. The giddiness in the post-war mood was something like Goethe's Werther falling in love with the sublime and killing himself ecstatically. It seemed as if a self-destructive urge in the disguise of an ecstatic invitation had overtaken the culture unawares. Suggestions of death and the afterlife proliferated. In 1953 Ad Reinhardt's paintings became all black, while Robert Motherwell's seemed to show castrated testicles hanging over a ragged field ravaged by gouges and streaked with dark blood. Mark Rothko, at work in his studio on the chapel paintings with which he proposed to show "the infinity of death," inquired of visitors

whether they thought the world could last another fifteen years.<sup>3</sup> There seemed little difference between a world that had weltered in its blood and a world that had drowned in beauty. Finally, some survival response set in. Now there must be an attempt to wash the world clean of color for a while. The need for anti-art began to come clear once more.

This war more than most had clanged with a doomed finality, a world-ending type of cataclysm such as many mythologies have foretold: the wolf of unknowing coming out to devour the world at the end of the Icelandic cycle, the fire of Siva roaring at the end of a yuga, Berossus's ice thickening over the cries of the dying. But like such so-called endings in general, it didn't really foretell the end of the world—only of a period of the world: it was the end of Modernism that was announced.

What ensued was the drama out of which post-Modernism was born. It unfolded in three stages which can be compared to the three limbs of an Hegelian syllogism, in which the first two limbs mutually combust, as it were, to "sublate," rising like a phoenix as the third. The first limb, the thesis, was the aesthetic statement—the affirmation of the redeeming force of abstract art, especially of absolute color. The second, the antithesis, was a terrified reaction away from a redemption that operated through eradicating the sufferer along with the suffering. Finally, the third limb, or synthesis: a resolution of oppositions in a new thesis that compromises the old polarities and becomes the first step of a new syllogism—a way to go on. These three stages can be called Modernism, anti-Modernism, and post-Modernism.

IN TERMS OF THE THEORY OF ART, MODERNISM FEATURED THE IDEA that the aesthetic faculty was autonomous of or separate from the rest of the personality. This led (under Clement Greenberg's guidance) to the insistence that only shapes and colors could legitimately enter into a work of visual art, or be invoked in evaluating one. No ideas, words, or representations of things were to be allowed; no references to the world, no extra-aesthetic feelings such as anger or pity—in short, nothing that refers to anything beyond its own presence as a shape or a color. It was believed that shape and color, if successfully divorced from all reference and suggestion, would directly and immediately address the soul, which had been slumbering, and reawaken it. The soul, in this view, was to be known as the faculty of taste (or "judgment"), and was to be considered beyond any intellectual doubts or moral hesitations.

As sterile as it now sounds, this was the formalist position, solidly in favor of the sole legitimacy of abstract art, freed from the world by relinquishing (or, supposedly, rising above) the task of representation. It was



more or less the same as the fascist theory enunciated by Plato in his *Republic* and *Philebus*, where representational art, with its references to the world here and now, was to be banned, but abstract art, which supposedly referred to eternal truths in the beyond, would be permitted. In the formalist view also, abstract art was considered ultimately real because it embodied timeless principles, or universals, and tuning in to it could, supposedly, adjust the tuning of one's soul. In its rejection of representation, formalism was also much like the view of both Byzantine and Islamic Iconoclasts, who held that representational art was to be spurned for the triviality of its reference system, but abstract art, because it referred only to the Beyond, should be regarded as sacred. The idea was that only the Beyond is ultimately true, so the really true art can refer only to it. Art's ancient connection with religion grew secretly stronger in the glowing premonition Hiroshima offered of what William Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize address of 1950, called "that last red and dyin' sunset"—or what Newman called "stretching a red."

But questions remained. There was something wrong with the insistence on colors *and* shapes. Since the artist was supposedly not representing things, why were there shapes in the picture at all? Already in the nineteenth century, under the impact of Romantic urges, this question had been in the air. The Romantic soul, with its worship of the impulse toward pure freedom, adored the idea of dissolving itself into color, but the linear boundaries of shapes threatened to block its rush toward dissolution. The shapes turned out to be like prisons that kept the spirit from filling up entirely with the intoxication of color presence. It was for the sake of spiritual freedom that Eugène Delacroix announced "The Battle Between Line and Color," which was later mythified by Yves Klein who, seeking the dissolution of individuality, championed color and led the attack on line (and with it, on shape).

Indeed, line—as a residue of the banished figure—had been on the run since the First World War triggered the century's first mood of sublime obsession. Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* is the signature picture of that war, and it portrays the world erased, annihilated, sunken in the cosmic night of nothingness. Malevich gave the color a shape—but a shape that meant neutrality or nothingness, since its squareness simply echoed the frame, and the white border seemed more like a designer's margin than like the edges of a ground showing around a figure. Or: the black square can be seen as a ground which is sprung loose from the surface, and placed, like a figure, on another ground. The ground has not only sucked the figures down into itself like the world-ending whirlpool; it has become figure, ground, everything. If the picture is a window on the wall, as the Renaissance picture was said to be, then

this was a window into the void. It seemed to declare that there was nothing outside the window to look at. In this way it was not unlike Jannis Kounellis's black-masked windows which, in the wake of World War II, forbade looking on moral grounds: as if the world out there were not fit to be observed.

It took several generations to realize that abstract painting would not culminate in the doctrine of shapes-and-colors-alone—that in fact it was heading away from shape, toward a plunge into pure shapeless, infinitely expanding color. The obvious problem was that an expanse of color has to have *some* shape. So shapes, it seemed, should be dismissed or ignored in themselves and tolerated only as necessary vehicles for color. Still, it was extremely difficult to come up with abstract shapes that did not seem to some degree representational. "If you peep shrewdly," as John Crowe Ransom put it, you can see suggestions of representations (like faces in clouds) hiding amid the ranks of geometry or swirls of gesture. (Isn't there a hint of a horizon line in this Motherwell? Doesn't this Clyfford Still show a landscape ravaged as if by war or endtime? Isn't that Adolph Gottlieb painting a solar burst—maybe a cosmogonic moment or, maybe, a Big Bang end of the universe? Isn't Pollock's *The Deep* a representation of the Indefinite as a cosmic principle, like primordial Chaos at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—or at the end of the world, when everything sinks back into the swamp?) Finally, it came to seem that the only effective way to reject representation was by abrogating shape absolutely for color alone.

The post-War art that took this direction seemed to have locked itself into a closed room—however seductively colored—rather than deal with the painfully disappointing world out there. As a joke of the Abstract Expressionist era put it: Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shade, and Reinhardt turned out the light. They were immersed in color at the expense of losing the world "out there"—whose work-a-day nature paled in comparison with the purity and fulness of spiritual and absolute cosmic color. After the war, there were artists on both sides of the blood-stained Atlantic Ocean seeking the same total immersion in color, Rothko and Newman no more than Fontana and Klein. As the second half of the twentieth century commenced, color, with its theosophical association with pure spirit, took arms against the limiting rationality of line. Line divides space, as Klein put it; color fills it.<sup>4</sup> There was an eschatological analogue underlying the observation: the way color has the ability to expand till it fills all space parallels the way that in many spiritual traditions both east and west the individual soul, upon the death of the body that had contained it, is to expand infinitely till it becomes one with the World Soul, filling all creation.



Twentieth-century abstract art was linked from its inception not only to Kant but to a very different philosophical tradition, the Neoplatonic foundation that underlay theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Cabalism, the mysticism of the fourth dimension, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Most of these approaches reality were monistic, emphasizing the One over the Many, invoking a wholeness beyond fragmentation, and positing a metaphysical continuum which supposedly underlay the plurality of forms, a universal that overshadowed all particulars. Shape came to represent the Many or the realm of the particular (the figure), color the One or the realm of the universal (the ground). Gradually the realization dawned that the urge toward universality in art was embodied in a return to the ground—or what Klein called “the monochrome spirit.” Color reigned, as the monochrome spirit spread abroad like an inkwell spilling over. Its intoxicating presence seemed to deny the wasteland of Europe and to point instead to a rosy dawn approaching (or was it a “last red and dyin’ sunset?”). Unexpectedly, the two approaches—the Kantian and the Theosophical—turned out to be much the same. At just about the time our abstract painters had us drowning ecstatically in the sense of the purity of color, we found ourselves right back where the Theosophists had been a century earlier. Though the theosophical jargon had been edited out, the purely aesthetic theory was still based on the insistence that “real” art portrayed the mark of universals—putting it in the late Neoplatonic arena of theosophy. Late Modernism had turned out to be very old-fashioned, not to say archaic, indeed.

This was roughly the historical and spiritual situation that obtained as the art of the abstract sublime reached its zenith and its end. The second act opened when the Modernist view began to seem discredited.

NOT LONG AFTER WORLD WAR II, THE PURELY AESTHETIC APPROACH to art came to seem complicit with unhealthy political tendencies. The divorce between art and life—between the museum and the everyday world outside on the streets—had grown to alarming proportions. Meanwhile, the oneness that the monochrome represented came to be understood as a representation of the wholeness that culture was supposed to achieve at the end of history—the oneness that first Hegel then Marx said would prevail when problems like nationalism and class structure had been ironed out. The featureless surface of the monochrome represented the end of history that the West was supposedly leading toward with its arsenal of new weapons, its bloody pageant of wars and conquests. But now the end of history, which had seemed an appetizing prospect to Hegel, appeared to be morphing into the end of the world. Malevich had said of his *Black Square* that it

represents a desert beyond form—the desolate ground of the picture swept free of the triviality of the figure, the sublime bereft of the beautiful—and now the wasteland of the nuclear environment.

The claimed superiority of the West, which had bolstered its self-appointed role as leader of history, seemed after World War II to be revealed as consisting largely in its destructiveness. However it's phrased, the claim of western superiority—implicit in a nest of notions including the purely aesthetic theory of art—was discredited by the increasingly apparent inevitability of its destruction of the world through its sheer lack of self-knowledge. Europe, it turned out, was a dangerous leader. Its passion for aggrandizing itself at the expense of the rest of the world had to be drained away; speaking in terms of art, its color had to be drained as a dangerous distraction from the real concerns of the figure, and a dangerous coverup of the steely grayness of reality. Anti-Modernism, the second limb or antithesis of the syllogism, arose as a radical counterstatement to Modernism. In terms of art, it manifested itself as anti-art.

The term anti-art did not characterize the discourse of the 1950s, that staid and stolid (or-stunned) era. It had been used sparingly to describe events of the Dada era, and by 1962 would surge into prominence as a term to describe contemporary, rather than Dada, events. In 1962 Pop Art began in the United States and Nouveaux Realisme in Paris; almost at once, both were called Neo-Dada, and the term anti-art soon came into play. But in fact the signs of the reappearance of anti-art were visible in the late '40s and early '50s. While the thesis, the apparent reaffirmation of aesthetic painting, was still in the foreground, the antithesis was already growing, hidden within the thesis, as under the woodwork.

Formalist critics and historians feel that, as William Rubin put it, a “hearty reaffirmation of pure painting...followed World War II.”<sup>6</sup> As another put it, “after World War II, there was little appetite for a radical art that questioned or mocked traditional assumptions... Rather there was an audience eager for...the healing and civilizing powers of the visual arts.”<sup>7</sup> Both authors are referring primarily to Abstract Expressionism, which took center stage for fifteen years or so after the war with its supposedly healing bath of color.

But that is not the whole story. While Abstract Expressionism was acting out the tragic death of Modernism, a surge of anti-art was getting ready to usher in a new, post-Modernist era. It seemed clear to many that something beyond Kant's “four moments” was needed to redirect art's impact on society. On what might seem to a formalist critic the periphery of the stage, a



variety of new approaches to the project of anti-art were being worked out and implemented alongside the apparent reaffirmation of aesthetics.

On January 6, 1946, the anti-art movement known as Lettrism appeared in Paris, ironically when the Lettrist founder Isidore Isou and some colleagues broke up a performance of Tristan Tzara's play *Flight*; later that year Isou disrupted a lecture on Dada by Michel Leiris; in both cases he proceeded to read his own wordless poems in place of the announced activity. A new anti-art era was displacing the old. The emphasis on sound-poetry soon shifted to Lettrist painting, in which "the letter would be the basic subject of aesthetic contemplation."<sup>8</sup>

The following year, 1947, the Belgian Surrealist Michel Dotremont founded the Revolutionary Surrealist Group in rebellion against Breton's by-then reactionary view of surrealism. In the following year, in league with Asger Jorn, Constant, Karl Appel, and others, Dotremont founded CoBrA (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam), an anti-art group featuring text-with-image, the Readymade, and a conception of a new urban environment ("unitary urbanism") which would lead in turn to Situationism. In 1951 Arnulf Rainer exhibited an empty frame. Soon, Klein's *Le Vide* (an empty gallery) was answered by Arman's *Le Plein* (a gallery full of garbage). Meanwhile in the United States, at the same moment when Abstract Expressionism was getting underway and establishing its signatures in the works of Pollock and Newman, the Black Mountain College art program became the location where John Cage, Merce Cunningham, David Tudor, and a few years later Robert Rauschenberg, Charles Olson and others, added new layers of possibility to the expanding anti-art project.

Still under the woodwork, as it were, these were tiny quiet gestures that were overshadowed by the grandiose, ever-expanding canvases of the Abstract-Expressionists, especially Newman. In 1952 Cage presented, at Black Mountain, *Theater Piece No. 1*, an absurdist event that is regarded as the origin of the Happening. It has been little noticed that four of the white monochromes Rauschenberg had made in 1951 were used as stage sets, hanging from wires roundabout. But Cage noticed, and later in '52 he presented a work which he has said was inspired by the White Paintings, 4'33", in which a pianist sat at the keyboard for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a note, then stood up, bowed, and left the stage. It had to be a pianist, and he turned pages of sheet music from time to time. This is unmistakably a work of anti-art, with its pointed omission of the music itself and its redirection of attention to sounds which happen to arise in the environment. Among works of the first period of anti-art, 4'33" recalls

Hugo Ball's recitation, at the Cabaret Voltaire, of his "Fish's Nightsong"—a poem with no sounds whatsoever.<sup>9</sup>

Cage's 4'33" served, in turn, as the inspiration for Rauschenberg's *Erased DeKooning Drawing* of 1953. Rauschenberg took a heavily worked drawing of de Kooning's, 19 x 14½", and, working very hard, as he would say, with many different erasers, restored the blank sheet of paper. Again there are predecessors from the Dada-Surrealist era. One was a performance in which Picabia made drawings on the wall which Breton, following behind him, erased. In a work of 1930 Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld rented a space, filled it with artworks, and invited visitors to destroy them with an axe.

The physical destruction of what are recognized as works of art, and hence supposedly of high civilizational value, is the most simplistic and extreme mode of anti-art. It seems to assume the "against" sense of the prefix anti- rather than the "instead of" or "in exchange for" sense. But when it is understood that the work of art is destroyed in the name of art, that the destruction itself is designated a work of art, then the exchange sense comes into play, in which anti-art is the alter ego of traditional art.

These tiny but seminal works of the 1950s—in the United States a blank canvas, four minutes of silence, a hand erasing a page; in Europe a wordless poem, an empty gallery, an exhibition of garbage—linked the earlier and later eras of anti-art. On the one hand they are revivals of Dada ("Neo-Dada"), on the other they are the founding works, or prototypes, of the genres which would later be called *Conceptual Art* and *Performance Art*.

THE HIDDEN GROWTH OF THE ANTITHESIS WITHIN THE THESIS—its nourishment by negation—can be seen again in the theme of the monochrome or near-monochrome painting, the sub-genre that became prominent just after World War II as it had been both during and after World War I.

The monochrome theme points simultaneously toward art and anti-art, or Modernism and anti-Modernism. On the one hand, the whole evolution of abstract painting away from representation would lead ultimately to the elimination of the figure altogether in favor of the ground. Aesthetic experience would become an analogue of the dissolution of the individual soul into the World Soul, and so on. At the same time, the monochrome seems an anti-art motif, as it rejects much of the traditional equipment of painting, such as color contrast and combination, compositional values, figuration and abstraction. It seems designed, as one author said, "to debunk painting or to demonstrate its 'end'."<sup>10</sup> It has occurred, in other words, both as the culmination of the Modernist painterly investigations and as a polemical tool of the



anti-Modernist deconstruction of Modernist painterly values. Historically, as the last of the great Modernist motifs to arise, it was positioned to serve as either the culmination of Modernism or the first exploratory negation by anti-Modernism.

In nineteenth-century Europe painting increasingly involved a worship of the surface rather than the figures that occupy it. By the late works of Cézanne this was explicit, and the momentum of the onrushing ground in its attempt to overwhelm the figure carried over into the twentieth century. The cult of the activated surface featured the iconicity of touch and the brush-stroke. The infusion of the touch with expressiveness involved the evocation of what Kant had called “aesthetic feeling,” and as the ground asserted itself more or more strongly it intensified the Late Modernist subject matter of the sublime. The Late Modernist monochrome, in other words, despite the length it has gone in reductiveness, still retains several of the cultic values of the western tradition of painting. It also tends to retain a distinction between the picture and the support, tacitly affirming the traditional idea of the picture plane as a specially separate space, outside the regular world, like a sacred precinct. This applies to Malevich's *Black Square*, which, viewed from the position of the early twenty-first century, seems like the most iconic of World War I paintings.

What might be called the anti- or post-Modern monochrome, in contrast, rejected all the traditional painterly values and became one of the early tools of anti-art. This also goes back to the early twentieth century, as do all aspects of the monochrome thematics. In 1921 Rodchenko exhibited three canvases called *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color* and *Pure Blue Color* from which he attempted to exclude all incident and expressiveness, calling them the “last paintings.” In this use of monochromy he might be regarded as a proto-post-Modernist or a precursor of post-Modernism. Lucio Fontana's white monochromes of 1946 stand at the boundary between these two approaches, but lean toward the post-Modernist sensibility and its rejection of traditional painterly values. Clyfford Still's black monochromes of 1948 were still Late Modernist in surface treatment. Rauschenberg's white monochromes of 1951 were again poised on the edge. In the catalogue of their first showing he described them as “one white as one god”—an echo or more likely parody of the Abstract Expressionist quasi-theological way of speaking about paintings. But very soon, in 1952, they entered John Cage's world of Neo-Dada and were described as screens for passing shadows, for the world of flux rather than eternity.

However visually similar they may be, the Modernist and post-Modern-

ist monochromes point in opposite directions. In the work of a Modernist like, say, Rothko, who felt the basic subject of his work was tragedy, the monochrome or near-monochrome painting is a stark yet still sensual premonition of the end of the world. In the work of a developing post-Modernist like Yves Klein, on the other hand, it represents an exhilarating sense of the freedoms that a new age might bring—freedoms from division, from aesthetic habit, and from tradition.

Klein, who was influenced by Fontana and influenced him in turn, probably made his first monochrome paintings sometime in the period 1946-48, certainly by 1951. Painted with rollers, his mature IKB monochromes involved the renunciation of the value of touch; as the paint went all the way around the stretchers, the distinction between picture and support (or painting and sculpture) was eliminated. Though Klein projected different meanings upon them at different times, it seems that his first meaning was basically anti-art; the monochromes were meant—at least in large part—to discredit and mock traditional artistic values by their rejection of drawing, color manipulation, and composition. Residual Modernist themes like the sublime and the end of an age still clung round these paintings, but in a partially mocking way.<sup>11</sup>

SOON THE DADA MODEL OF ANTI-ART, WHICH HAD PRIMARILY BEEN known in the United States through rumor, began to be known more familiarly, as Robert Motherwell, in 1951, published an anthology of Dada texts, the first available in English.<sup>12</sup> Immediately thereafter the availability of the Duchampian model unfolded itself in stages right when it was needed—first when the Arensburg collection of Duchampiana was opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954, second when the Robert Lebel book on Duchamp appeared in 1959,<sup>13</sup> and finally with the Pasadena retrospective of 1963.

This was in a sense the beginning of post-Modernism in the visual arts. Many artists who knew they were turning away from traditional artistic models, but did not know exactly what they were turning toward, found powerful hints in Dada and in Duchamp's work in particular, hints that had not yet worked themselves out art historically though they had been there, waiting to be activated, for almost half a century. The three great hints (to repeat) were (1) the Readymade with its de-emphasis of “touch” and innovation, and its return of art to the everyday world; (2) the incorporation of chance procedures into art-making (with the accompanying values of chaos and surprise); and (3) the method of designating a previously non-art object as art. Along with these came Duchamp's emphasis on wit (with its natural involvement of language and in general of the project of returning art to



“the service of the mind”), the tendency toward the interactive (as in his remark that the artwork is completed by the audience), and the willingness to collapse the category of art completely into the category of life (as in his remark about every breath one takes being an artwork).<sup>14</sup>

Like puritanical reactions in general, the passion of anti-Modernism was as intense as that of Modernism had been, and it had a similar conquest orientation: it wanted desperately to conquer Modernism. Artistically, its two great tools for this project—the emerging genres of Conceptual Art and Performance Art—were both revivals of Dada. In their first decade or so (roughly 1965-75, the decade of the dominance of anti-Modernism), both Conceptualism and Performance took aim at specific parts of the Modernist legacy. In response to painting, Conceptual Art introduced various strategies of anti-painting (beginning with the monochrome) which, through critique and parody, reduced the aesthetic legacy to absurdity. In response to Modernist transcendentalism, Performance Art focused on the everyday and the body. The ambitions and prejudices of the professional artist—the mist of color in the air—had to be cleared away in order to see that there was a real world out there lying open with heartbreaking vulnerability, and that art, through its obsession with innocence and eternity, had celebrated this vulnerability and sanctified it with the mark of beauty—derived supposedly from the Beyond, in whose shadow the here and now faded from sight. Hypnotizing its devotees with this mark of beauty, art had become an obfuscation which distracted the mind from pressing social issues. It had become clearly and closely allied with a political position traditionally associated with theocratic states and rightly perceived as conservative. The spirit, rapt in ecstatic union with the Beyond, could not be bothered with sordid details such as poverty and class struggle. But the transcendentalism of Late Modernist abstract art would be forced to give way to anti-Modernist immanence, acknowledgment of actual historical situations, affirmation of the here and now. The association of the old aesthetic era with conservatism and the emergence of American capitalist hegemony would be opposed by anarchism, socialist deconstructionism, and a variety of revolutionary sentiments.

Artistically, painting had been the emblem of Modernism, and thus indirectly of colonialism. So complicit did it seem in the destructive intrusions of the West into the rest that painting came to be resented like the flag on the mast of a slaveship. Early on it became the site of contention for anti-Modernist artists. Duchamp’s feeling of 1913 that “painting is washed up”<sup>15</sup> was more widely shared this time around. For a decade or so, painting was banished puritanically. The thesis of Modernism was countered by the

antithesis of anti-Modernism, the thesis of art by anti-art, the thesis of painting by anti-painting. Thus, anti-Modernism emerged as a kind of dark alter ego of Modernism. It bore many of the same features but with a reversed hierarchy. As Modernism had been puritanical in its banishment of the figure, anti-Modernism was puritanical in its banishment of transcendental abstraction, and so on. This was an era of uncompromising statements, including the “hard-line” Conceptualism of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and the Art and Language group, among others, and the confrontational aggressions of Body Art as practiced by Chris Burden, Hermann Nitsch, Gina Pané, and others. Both Conceptualism and Performance, at this early stage of their development, regarded themselves as uncompromisingly puristic, as Late Modernist abstraction had been with an opposite ideology.

POST-MODERNISM EMERGED AROUND 1980 IN THE VISUAL ARTS, AS a synthesis of Modernism and anti-Modernism. It was to be, in other words, not just post-Modernism, but also post-anti-Modernism. It was to move beyond both stances of puritanical confrontationalism—both the universalistic assertions of Modernism and the universalistic negations of anti-Modernism—into a more relaxed position that would allow a wider range of options. Thus the synthesis cannot be said to have been in effect until the Return of Painting in the late 1970s. To Modernists this event seemed a triumphant restatement of a truth temporarily forgotten; to anti-Modernists it seemed a shameful submission to a falsehood already debunked. But it was not exactly either. It was the post-Modern compromise, which assumed an impure position that could live with inner contradictions.

The quality of inner contradiction was embodied in the two different forms post-Modernism developed in. Both were post-Modern in that they came after Modernism and regarded it as largely discredited—but the degree of claimed discredit varied greatly. The one trend, pre-Modern revivalism or neo-pre-Modernism, was the more radical in its rejection of Modernism. It involved an unhesitating rejection of the western values and traditions of the Modern era along with an attempt to re-establish cultural norms derived from non-western and pre-Modern cultures. It preferred to pretend that Modernism had never existed. This was the tendency of the counterculture in general, the Flower Child movement, and the hippy drop-out commune era. The second trend, which might be called post-Modernism-proper, was not so uncompromising in its rejection of the western tradition.

The crucial difference was in the relationship to Enlightenment values. The neo-pre-Modernist rejected the Enlightenment on the grounds that



its values covertly promoted the renewal of the problems they ostensibly worked against—Kant’s “Was Ist Aufklärung?” culminating in Auschwitz. From this viewpoint, the way Enlightenment values had been used to cow and subjugate non-western cultures in the colonial period served to discredit them—not to mention the threatened destruction of nature by science, and so on. Post-Modernism-proper, on the other hand, clings to Enlightenment values as the essence of the claim of the value of western civilization, while feeling that until this time they had not been put into effect properly. If they could be reapproached with less regional self-interest and less unquestioning reverence for western hegemony, the post-Modernist feeling is, they would still be of critical value.

The way things sorted out in the artistic realm, Performance Art became basically neo-pre-Modernist—dedicated to re-establishing contact with earlier forms of civilization—while Conceptual Art became post-Modernist-proper—dedicated to a reform, but not an abandonment, of the ideals that governed western relations with the rest of the world. This distinction relates to a rearrangement of the doctrine of the three faculties. Late Modernism, committed to the aesthetic faculty, had immersed subjectivity—indeed almost drowned it—in a flood of pure color. But after the flood began to recede, two survivors staggered up onto the beach, the outcasts previously excluded from the realm of art, the cognitive and ethical faculties. Now, with the discrediting of the aesthetic faculty, the other two strode into the breach. The cognitive faculty became the basis of Conceptual Art, with its believe in a more rational future, while the ethical faculty, with its yearning for a pre-rational mode of existence, became the basis of Performance Art.

Thus the second great era of anti-art got itself into formation and began its advance upon history. Its behests would be the behests of the time, with a communal or historical foundation, but would be carried out by individual artists, each in his or her own way.

The first such individual who will wander into the purview of this book (after Duchamp, that is) is Yves Klein (1928-1962). Like other artists of his generation, Klein had a layered sensibility, part Modernist, part anti-Modernist, and part post-Modernist. Those artists had affirmed the aesthetic in the 1950s, the anti-aesthetic in the 1960s, the cognitive and the ethical in the '70s and after. Each ideology created a part of the self. Klein celebrated each of these aspects with passionate affirmation.

One of those innovative figures who seem to have “done everything first,” he established many nuances of the deconstruction of painting, pioneered strong definitions of the process of designation, and combined in his persona

the traditions of the avant-garde theater, the dandy, the comic book, and the opera. Klein linked Dada and neo-Dada, and some of his works had roots in Lettrism, Situationism and the Gutai Group. When Jean Tinguely referred to him as a “messenger,” he meant a messenger from the future, summoning culture in a certain direction. Artistically the future he announced was Conceptual and Performance Art, two genres that were still unseparated and inchoate at the time of his death in 1962.

1. T. S. Sorsch, trans., *Classical Literary Criticism: Aristotle, On the Art of Poetry; Horace, On the Art of Poetry; Longinus, On the Sublime* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 111.

2. Yves Klein, “The War! A Little Personal Mythology of the Monochrome,” published in *Dimanche*, 1960. For my translation of selections from it see *Yves Klein (1928-1962), A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Houston: Rice University and New York: The Arts Publishers, 1981), pp. 218-19, and see also “Selections from the Monochrome Adventure,” *ibid.*, p. 220.

3. From a statement written and signed by filmmaker John Huston in Houston, Texas, April 9, 1977; Rothko Chapel Archives.

4. Klein, “The War.”

5. See Thomas McEvilley, “The Opposite of Emptiness,” *Artforum*, March 1987.

6. William Rubin, “Reflexions on Marcel Duchamp,” *Art International* (December 1, 1960), pp. 49-53, republished in Joseph Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1975), pp. 41-52.

7. Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 55.

8. Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling, Scotland: AK Press, 1991), p. 13.

9. See Annabelle Melzer, *Latest Rage the Big Drum: Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 42.

10. Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 427.

11. See Thomas McEvilley, “Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism” in exh. cat. *Yves Klein (1928-1962): A Retrospective*, republished as “Yves Klein et les rose-croix,” in *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1983), pp. 233-244.

12. Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, second edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

13. Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Trianon Press, 1959).

14. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), p. 72.

15. In Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *Salt Seller—The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand du Sel)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 160.





CHAPTER THREE

## Yves Klein

### *Messenger of the Age of Space*

*If you come back someday  
You who dream also  
Of this marvellous void  
Of this absolute love  
I know that together  
Without a word to one another  
We will hurl ourselves  
Into the reality of this void  
Which awaits our love  
As I wait for you each day.  
Come with me into the void!*  
—Yves Klein<sup>1</sup>

THE MOST FAMOUS IMAGE OF YVES KLEIN—THE STARTLING photograph of the artist, dressed in business suit and necktie, leaping into flight from a second-floor ledge on a quiet Paris street—is usually seen out of context. Yet with Klein, context is everything. Originally part of a literary document, the photograph contributed to an intricate mingling of visual and verbal signifiers in Klein's most characteristic style. Klein's imitation newspaper, *Dimanche 27 Novembre: Le journal d'un seul jour* (*Sunday November 27th: the Newspaper of a Single Day*), his contribution to the Paris Festival d'Art d'Avant-garde in 1960, headlined the phrase: "Theatre du vide" (*Theater of the Void*). Beside the headline was the remarkable photograph, captioned underneath: "Le peintre de l'espace se jette dans le vide!" (*The painter of space launches himself into the void!*) Characteristically two-edged, Klein's point was not merely self-advertisement, but provocation; it included an invitation to the readers to effect a Leap, or an analogue of the Leap, themselves. The poem excerpted above was found on the second page.

Klein's own fate in the United States has been the same: he has been as-

YVES KLEIN, *Leap into the Void*, 1960.



simulated out of context. Klein, who is widely regarded in Europe as the most important French artist since the Second World War, has remained, in the North American consciousness, primarily a showman and a clown. When he arrived in New York in April 1961, on his only visit to this country, the New York School was arrayed against the fading hegemony of the School of Paris,<sup>2</sup> and Klein, with his fanciful personae and self-ordained titles—Champion of Color, Proprietor of Color, Painter of Space—looked like Paris come slumming again. New York artists virtually boycotted his show of monochrome paintings in “International Klein Blue” (his own patented formula of blue) at Leo Castelli’s gallery. The art press, which did not bother to investigate the wider context of his work, found him easy prey. *Art News* called him “the latest sugar-Dada to jet in from the Parisian common market,” and “the George M. Koan of French Neo-Dada.” *Time* called his works “tricks” and his reputation in Europe “a fad.” “Have you ever been all blue?” inquired the *New York Herald Tribune*.<sup>3</sup> Six years later, John Canaday, reviewing the Jewish Museum show of his works for *The New York Times*, called him “a vaudevillian,” “full panoplied in cap and bells,” whose work is “only stuntmanship.” “I Got the Yves Klein Blues,” the headline on this story read. In reference to the same exhibition, the *World-Journal-Tribune* called him, “a Dali-junior grade.”<sup>4</sup>

When, after two months in New York, Klein moved on to Los Angeles for a show of his works at the Virginia Dwan Gallery, he found a somewhat friendlier reception. To this day in Los Angeles Klein is regarded as in some sense a “California” artist: particularly for his use of space and silence as primary materials, for his works in natural phenomena such as fire and water, for his use of his own body as the locus of the art event, for his reckless mixing of artistic codes and roles, and for his deliberate ridicule of his own serious works. But not even in Los Angeles was the labyrinth of Klein’s gestures, his poses, his mutually cancelling intentionalities, perceived as a coherent whole. His show was regarded as a one-liner, and so were the fragments of his broader career that floated across from Europe, usually inaccurately. There was little sense of his work overall, either its varied sensual appeal or its deep-structure and swift intellectual interplay; his reputation solidified around a series of Neo-Dada art jokes.

Klein had leapt past the American consciousness too quickly, and never had a chance to set it right. A year after his visit to America, he died of a heart attack at the age of 34. In the seven years before his death he produced over a thousand art objects in various media, as well as many prophetic works of nonstatic art, and numerous writings. His oeuvre has a mazelike coherence, with circular corridors and cul-de-sacs deliberately built into it.

While rooted in Late Modernism, its principal thrust was anti-Modernist. It includes objects and events in all media, interpenetrated, mutually referenced, and carefully layered into a semantic stack.

It was Jean Tinguely who called Klein “Messenger of the Age of Space,” meaning that he had come from the future to announce a new age. In art historical terms he might be renamed the Messenger of the Age of Anti-Art, who showed it forth in his own body to herald its dawning.

Klein was a dedicated craftsman (as well as a despiser of craft as an end in itself), and his works, even when conceptually anti-art, have a vivid and arresting sensual presence, a directness that, as Susan Sontag said in another context, “frees us from the itch to interpret.”<sup>5</sup> But in this case it was the artist himself who was never freed from the itch to interpret. He overlaid on his physical works a set of semantic dictions and contradictions, in the forms of essays, gestures, symbolic events, and photographs, which interacted with the physical works on many levels. His project was an aggression against the fundamental premises of art as known.

Klein personally detested all existing art vocabularies and felt that, if only they could be terminated, far more powerful and elegant ones might be found. He saw himself at the turning point of two epochs—the “Messenger” of the incoming age, as Tinguely put it.<sup>6</sup> His ambition was to terminate the existing forms of art by revealing their inner contradictions and breaking down their boundaries; at the same time, he set out to discover, or at least to proclaim, the way toward the new ones. The complexity of such a project was not lost on Klein, who once dedicated an all-blue painting in an Italian miracle-cult shrine with the prayer: “May the Impossible arrive and establish its Kingdom *quickly*.”<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, what happened to Klein’s reputation in New York was an appropriate consequence of his challenging and enigmatic style. Though he is known in this country primarily for his blue monochrome paintings, his career as a whole can be described best as a sustained seven-year-long performance, and Joseph Kosuth says rightly that he fits into Conceptual Art “somewhere.”<sup>8</sup> This indeterminate placement would have pleased the Painter of Space, who specialized in turning up “there” as soon as one had placed him “here.” He was an escape artist among critics, the escape system symbolized by the famous Leap—an image of primary hermeneutical value for his career—through which he sought (among other things) to escape from all closed categories.

The New York School’s descent into the underworld of monochromy, where the issues of Hell are worked out, portrays a voluntary confinement



in a closed room: “Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shade, and Reinhardt turned out the lights.”<sup>9</sup> But if Yves the Monochrome (as he called himself) is added to the formula, it acquires a paradoxical dimension of both self-destruction and escape, both the ending of one age and the beginning of another: “Newman closed the door, Rothko pulled down the shade, Reinhardt turned out the lights, and Klein jumped out the window.”

*Lines, bars of a psychological prison...are our chains... They are our heredity, our education, our framework, our vices, our aspirations, our qualities, our wiles... Color, on the other hand, is free; it is instantly dissolved in space... And that is why, in my work, I refuse more and more emphatically the illusion of personality, the transient psychology of the linear, the formal, the structural. Evidently the subject I am traveling toward is space, pure Spirit... By saturating myself with the eternal limitless sensitivity of space, I return to Eden.... —Yves Klein<sup>10</sup>*

KLEIN'S WORK, LIKE BOTTICELLI'S,<sup>11</sup> INVOLVES A FULLY ARTICULATED allegorical content arising from a traditional body of metaphysics that the artist systematically translated into plastic terms. This (bottom) level of the semantic stack was based on the Rosicrucianism of Max Heindel, which Klein had studied and practiced during six formative years of membership in the Rosicrucian Society (not the AMORC).<sup>12</sup> Klein's commitment to Rosicrucianism was probably strong during his adolescence, but by the early to middle 1950s it had come to function as a somewhat sardonic persona. His membership lapsed, never to be renewed, but meanwhile certain Rosicrucian ideas had entered—again somewhat sardonically—his artwork.

In Heindel's version of theosophical cosmology, Spirit (or Life) is identical with Space. It is represented by color (which, as Klein wrote, is “free,” because “it is instantly dissolved in space”), but especially by the color blue; it is infinite expansiveness with no internal divisions to affront its wholeness. Space/Spirit/Life permeates and contains all transient forms, thereby negating their apparent differences and boundaries. Human evolution, according to Heindel, is approaching the end of the age of form and solid matter, and soon will reimmerge itself in an age of Space/Spirit/Life that will restore the condition of Eden. This transition will involve the erasure of all boundaries, both outer (political, national, occupational) and inner (“our heredity...education...framework...vices...aspirations...qualities...wiles”). Accordingly the Age of Space/Spirit will be a return from the entanglements of lines to the openness of color, and especially of the Edenic/spiritual color: Blue. Klein took on the role of Champion of Color.

When Klein, in his first major shows, exhibited identical blue mono-



Yves Klein's Induction into the Knights of Saint Sebastian; INSET: Klein's declaration of himself as Champion of Color; Klein holding an IKB monochrome in the Saint Sebastian regalia. The text of the declaration: *Having been made a knight of the Order of Saint Sebastian, I espouse the cause of Pure Color, which has been invaded and occupied guilefully by the cowardly line and its manifestation, drawing in art. I will defend color, and I will deliver it, and I will lead it to final triumph.*

chromes in Milan and Paris in 1957 under the title *L'epoca blu* (The Blue Age, or Period), Pierre Restany wrote that the moment of confronting one of these all-blue paintings was a “moment of truth.”<sup>13</sup> The systematic Rosicrucianism of the works was one aspect of this “moment”: the viewer, in confronting an International Klein Blue monochrome, is staring into the depths of infinite Space/Spirit itself, gazing, as it were, into the coming age of Eden. But this “moment of truth” that Klein offered was more than the confrontation with the Allness-of-Blue: it required, as his later works make clear, the realization of higher levels of contradiction that rise out of the infinite when it is understood dialectically. (The All is made up *only* of contradiction—like Anaximander's *Apeiron* or the *Avatamsaka Sutra*'s “Net of Indra.”)

This dialectical critique was acted out on another semantic level as a critique of art theory. Before this new age can arrive—which Klein hoped to see in his own time—cultural codes must annihilate one another through their semantic and ethical contradictions, dissolving into the wholeness of Space. Klein's deliberate semiological inversions, subversions, and self-refutations are techniques to demonstrate this self-erasure as a meta-hermeneutics of the Leap. (In Zen meditation, which Klein had practiced both in France and in Japan, the Leap into the Void represents the moment of going beyond



all codes and interpretations, into the void where, as the Buddhist Prajna-paramita texts say, “one stands firmly because one stands upon nothing.”<sup>14</sup> The Blue Age exhibitions focused his project of deconstructing on the premises of painting.

*[Monochromism is] a sort of modern day alchemy practiced by painters, born of the tension of experiencing...a bath in space vaster than infinity... It is the only physical way of painting which permits access to the spiritual absolute.... My monochrome paintings are landscapes of freedom...*

—Yves Klein<sup>15</sup>

KLEIN WAS AMONG THE FIRST TO FEEL UP AGAINST THE WALL ABOUT up-against-the-wall art. His monochromes, though powerful and alive within themselves, were attempts to destroy “the painting” as known and to pursue its sculptural and environmental transformations. (In this sense, as well, they foreshadow much work of the '60s and after.) Klein never accepted the basic premises that a painting, whether illusionistic, geometric, or tachist, was (1) a more or less passive two-dimensional plane that waits for you to approach it, and (2) a field for personal expression by the artist. He wanted his paintings to come off the wall and invade the viewer's sensibility in the most violent way—and at the same time to eliminate the driving force of personality from the event.

It is remarkable that Klein's monochromes, which at first glance seem to be among the simplest paintings ever made, are among the most complex. Deceptively austere at first, their physical presence grows strangely rich. The delicately varied surfaces and textures of one unvaried and vibrating blue (or gold, yellow, red, pink, white, black, green) elicit a subtle range of what Donald Judd called “an unmitigated, pure, but very sensuous beauty.”<sup>16</sup>

But as this first moment of immersion in Klein's blueness fades into memory, the strong sensory impression convolutes into a question mark. Several of the qualities of these paintings are unusual: (1) they are hung on visible vertical supports some distance away from the wall, like sculptures; (2) their corners are rounded to stress their sculptural presence; (3) they are identical, like stamps, prints, or machine-made objects; (4) they are rolled, to remove any quality of personal touch. They seem to seek a zero degree of what was generally recognized as painting. On this level they are anti-paintings, functioning as critical forces as well as sensory immersions and prophetic allegories.

Besides alluding to Rosicrucian prophecy, the exhibition title (“The Blue Period”) was a parody of art critical categories. Further, the paintings

themselves were designed to confute category distinctions, and successive conceptual overlays (in Klein's writings) sought to remove them from the reach of all such terms as Minimal or Color Field. First was the Rosicrucian overlay. These paintings are Blue as Spirit-that-holds-all-things-dissolved-in-itself. And Blue Spirit does not just lie there. It invites you into it (invites you to *Leap*), and even more it contains you already. It comes off the wall instantaneously, permeating the surroundings with its atmosphere, and “impregnates” you with itself as a new, undifferentiated sensibility.

But, next, the paintings are removed from conceptual allegory or claims of ensorcellment by their return, ironically, to direct representation: they are neither more nor less than portraits of the cloudless sky as seen through Klein's studio window. With this image, the abstract, the figurative, the minimal, and the allegorical are conflated into a single hugeness that opens in all directions behind, above, below, beside, and in front of the picture plane.

Through this series of interpretive devices provided by the artist himself, the paintings become environments; more than limited environments, they are the engulfing space in which the earth itself resides. No longer passive on the wall, they invite you, as does a window, to look—or even to Leap—into the question mark of the dark and featureless sky. The “moment of truth,” then, is an existential confrontation rife with questions of courage and identity. (“Come with me into the void!”)

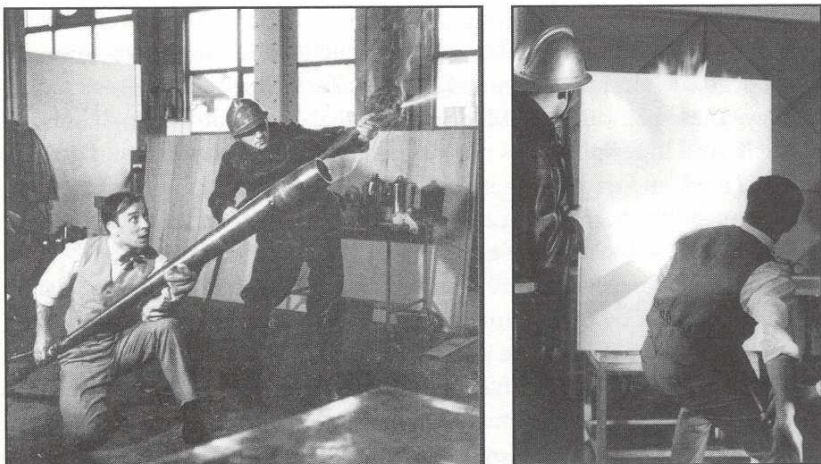
In short, these paintings take a stand upon nothingness. (“International Klein Blue” was later rechristened “International Klein Nothingness.”) Exhibiting them, Klein asserted a role (the painter's) that his controlled interpretation at once denied. “My works are only the ashes of my art,” he said, in a famous one liner whose reverberations can still be felt in European art.<sup>17</sup>

Seen in this way (as the artist directed us to see them), the blue paintings are an ethical imperative: it is not the window that is important, but the Leap through it. Not the abyss, but the entering of the abyss. Not the eros of Space/Spirit/Life, but the impregnation by it.

*[Artists who] wish to save their personality at any cost will kill their spiritual selves and lose their LIFE. [Art] should be like an open channel for penetration by impregnation in the sensibility of the immaterial space of LIFE itself...—Yves Klein<sup>18</sup>*

THE CIRCULARITY WITH WHICH KLEIN LEADS US THROUGH VARIOUS possible interpretations of his work, each of them cancelling one or more of the others, is itself part of the work, giving it cognitive shape. Each series of pieces leads through conceptual circuitry to others, a system closing itself in full circle on one level of the semantic stack only to reopen on another.





Yves Klein making Fire Paintings at the Centre d'Essais du Gaz de France, Paris, 1961.

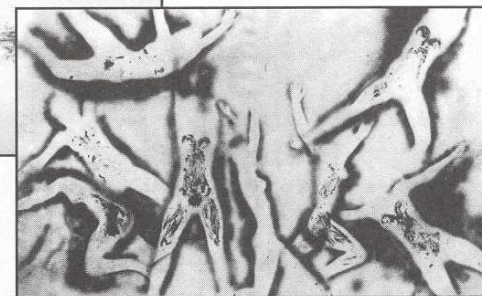
A recurring focus of the project was Klein's critique of the artist. On one semantic level all Klein's works are attempts to purify the art object of the "entanglements of lines" that are the artist's personality. The monochromes began it; but the hand on the paint roller was still too close to a signature. Other series seek to distance the artist even farther from his art.

The sponge works of 1957 and afterward are explicit mockeries of technique. "Painting is a mode of existence," Klein insisted; art should be made as effortlessly as the sponge absorbs its color, and viewed with the same lack of resistance as the boundaries of the self are invaded by new sensibility. As Klein had identified his blue monochromes as "portraits" of the sky, similarly he regarded his "Sponge Sculptures" as "portraits" of the viewers of those paintings, who, whether they realized it or not, had been "impregnated" by Life/Space/Spirit vibrating off the rippled surfaces.

In other works the elimination of direct involvement of the artist was pursued on the analogy of alchemy, in which the magician is seen only as the helper of Nature. The "four elements" must be invited to express themselves directly, with a minimum of interference from the artist. Strapping a canvas to the roof of his car, Klein drove from Paris to Nice and back in the rain, capturing on the prepared surface "the mark of the rain, of the stirring of the atmosphere." At the Haus Lange in Krefeld he exhibited a "Fire Fountain" and "Fire Wall," which have echoes in much later art based on the manipulation of natural phenomena out-of-doors. In the Gaz de France building, with a helmeted fireman on hand, Klein "painted" with a flamethrower, later add-



Yves Klein directing *Anthropometries of the Blue Age*, at the Galerie Internationale d'Art Contemporain, Paris, 1960.



YVES KLEIN, *Anthropometry* 96, *People Begin To Fly*, 1961. 250×400 cm. = 98½ × 157½".

ing color selectively to some of the partly dematerialized canvases. In these "Fire Paintings" (of which well over a hundred were made) the satire of the artist's "signature" or "touch" was pressed to the limit and fused with the alchemical theme of the pursuit of the natural elements in their pure state. In their rich tattered surfaces one glimpses what Friedrich Nietzsche called the "voluptuousness of hell."

Klein's classic works of this type were the "Anthropometries of the Blue Age," first presented to the public in an evening performance before a seated audience in 1960. The artist, in formal dress and white gloves, directed the event without touching the materials. At his gesture, a string ensemble began playing his "Monotone-Silence Symphony" (a single D-major triad in second inversion to be played for 20 minutes, then followed by an equal period of silence). As he gestured again, naked girls appeared carrying pails of International Klein Blue paint. With his gestural guidance they applied the paint to their bodies (becoming "living brushes") and pressed themselves against huge sheets of paper. When the performance was over, the "Anthropometries" remained as "ashes" of the process. Klein made nearly two hundred of these "living brush" works, sometimes spraying paint selectively around the models to create negative prints.

The "Anthropometries," hovering ambiguously between the media of painting and print, restate Klein's rejection of genre categories. They may also be seen as parodies of the traditional craftsmanly art of the figure. But the anti-art aspect of these works is absorbed in turn by its opposite—an ap-

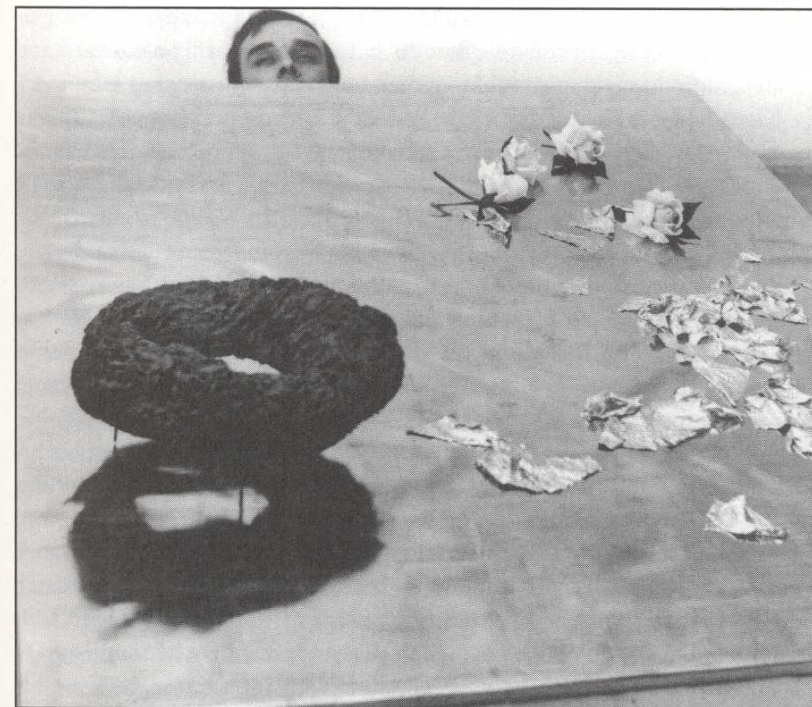


parent affirmation of aesthetic value—through the living grace of the works themselves, which unlock the flat surface and drift or fly from the wall with a wispy transparency. The hollow centers and disintegrating edges of the figures invoke the theme of dematerialization, as their postures of flight, foreshadowing the age of levitation, return us to the Leap.

The theme of impregnation by Spirit mingles with the critique of art theory in a series of pieces that resist categorization. The International Klein Blue Nike of Samothrace expresses (by simultaneous appropriation and mockery) a rejection of the linear, masterpiece view of art history, and asserts (with blueness) the underlying sameness of all things. Appropriation, by blueness, of the Duchampian “Readymade” and oceanic dissolution of the boundaries between the art and non-art realms are also involved.

Klein’s most commonly used personal title, “Yves the Monochrome,” extends this universal impregnation to the artist and dissolves the boundaries between artist and art work as each is reciprocally absorbed into the other. If seen in terms of Conceptual and Performance Art, the adoption of the title was itself a “piece” or a “work,” and as such it is characteristically self-canceling; the artist appropriates all space within himself, and at the same time, by designating himself an art object, takes his place as an object within space. A similar reading applies to the photograph of Klein gazing at an International Klein Blue globe of the world, which seems to float in midair: the world, which contains him, is appropriated by blueness and designated as a gallery object that he will display. The reciprocal appropriations and dissolutions of his works, his personae, and his world, form a shifting Conceptual/Performance piece whose inner life is the driving force of paradox and mutual containment.

For Klein all these works had the alchemical associations (rooted in Rosicrucian allegory) that culminated in the “Monogold” paintings, whose solemn and royal radiance suggests completion of the Great Work. Gold, alchemically, is a symbol of Spirit and as such equal to Space and a negation of separate individuality. One such work, *The Tomb—Here Lies Space* [*La Tombe—Ci-gît l’espace*], was the site of Klein’s ritual burial in 1962 (just three months before his actual death). The photographed event—in which, characteristically, art object, Performance, and Conceptual piece are conflated—restates the theme of ego-death and infinite expansion, of the Leap beyond signature: “Here Lies Space,” says the title; but it is Klein himself who lies buried there. By rejecting his personality and its role as artist, the artist has opened himself to the fullness of Space.



Klein, in 1962, beneath *The Tomb—Here Lies Space* (*La Tombe: Ci-gît l’espace*), 1960.

*In our present materialistic period we have unfortunately lost the idea of all that lies behind that word Space... we have entirely lost the grand and holy significance of the word.... To the Rosicrucians, as to any occult school... space is Spirit in its attenuated form, while matter is crystallized space or Spirit. —Max Heindel<sup>19</sup>*

*I seek above all...to create...this transparence, this void immeasurable in which lives the Spirit permanent and absolute, freed from all dimensions.... The absolute void...is entirely naturally the true pictorial space.*

*Space has given me the right to be its “Proprietor”...and has consented to manifest its presence in my paintings...my documents, my gestures.*

*The Void belongs to me. —Yves Klein<sup>20</sup>*

THE HYPOTHETICAL ENVIRONMENT POSTULATED BY KLEIN’S conceptually expanded monochromes was Space itself. Painting was terminated (hypothetically) by dissolving/expanding it into volumetric ambience. But whereas Blue, according to Heindel, is the filmiest coagulation of Spirit that can be perceived by the senses, transparent space is more direct: it *is* Spirit itself. The artists of the incoming age, Heindel had said, will create immaterial



works out of transparent space, which they will mold into specific configurations by projecting mental images onto it. These works will possess Life and radiate a more intense spiritual force than any material work has attained.

Klein had practiced Heindel's visualizations during his years in the Rosicrucian Society. In 1958, as the artist of the future, he began to act out this aspect of Heindel's prophecy, making, exhibiting, and offering for sale immaterial works in "the true pictorial space" of the Void. As always, the prophetic content was only one strand of his encompassing semantic net, beside a sophisticated critique of art, art history, and the artist as a self.

In April 1958, Klein presented the classic exhibition, *Specialization of Sensibility from the State of Prime Matter to the State of Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*, known as *The Void (Le Vide)*, in which the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris was emptied of furniture, painted white, and exhibited empty. Neither "exhibition" nor "environment" quite describes this piece, which like all of his work hangs carefully on the interfaces between categories. As his paintings were conceptually expanded into environments, his environment flowed over its boundaries into the zone of the performance, and the performance in turn transgressed the proscenium arch and entered politics. At the same time, the anti-art gesture of exhibiting an empty gallery was tinged with something like the theosophical feeling that underlay Late Modernism.

The invitations to *The Void* were mailed with International Klein Blue stamps, preempting government in the name of the Blue Revolution (and also presaging Mail Art). Two days before the opening, the windows of the Galerie Iris Clert were painted International Klein Blue, and an International Klein Blue canopy appeared before the entrance. Passing beneath it, Klein closed himself into the now-secret space, which no one else would enter until the opening. "Working carefully, as on a large picture," he painted the interior walls white to return the gallery space (through sympathetic magic) to the state of Prime Matter. Then he projected mental images onto the transparent space, creating immaterial paintings that were "stabilized" in mid-air by prolonged concentration. Meanwhile, his own presence filled the space with "an abstract but real palpable density existing and living in the space by and for itself."<sup>21</sup> The atmosphere of the place had now been purified, thickened, complexified, and stilled.

By prearrangement, Republican Guards in full array flanked the canopied entrance at the hour of the opening, implying the presence of a government in the void space where Klein waited alone. As guests arrived they were served an International Klein Blue cocktail (gin, Cointreau, methylene blue) that would cause them to urinate blue for a week (a sign of their impregna-

tion by Space); then they were allowed inside in groups of ten or fewer.

For one night it seemed that the whole Paris art world was eager to Leap into International Klein Nothingness. By 10:00 p.m. the narrow rue des Beaux Arts was jammed with two to three thousand people. Police and fire trucks were called to disperse the crowd. Inside, the Painter of Space bargained over immaterial paintings, concluding two sales. In a speech delivered about 1:00 a.m. at the famous Left Bank café La Coupole, he declared "in my modest person...four millennia of civilization have found their exhaustive conclusion."<sup>22</sup>

Like his gallery objects, Klein's immaterial works radiate meaning through various semantic directions and levels. The Rosicrucian allegory, as always, is obvious: it is an acting out of Heindel's prophecy of the imminent dematerialization of culture. But at the same time the facetious procedure of selling "pieces" of infinity subverts the Rosicrucian seriousness of the event, and the inner contradiction forces a semantic Leap to another level. On this new level also absences are reified. The act of displaying the gallery in which art works are seen rather than the works themselves follows from the Wittgensteinian/Duchampian "contextual" or "usage" definition of art. If placing an object in an art context, or otherwise designating it as art, makes it art, then it is in the context or designation, and not in the object, that the art-essence resides, and it is the context itself that should be exhibited, not an object within it. On this semantic level, *The Void* was a derisive critique of the art object, the art business, and the role of the artist. (In fact, Klein also reduces the Duchampian example to absurdity, by involving it in an infinite regress: the context is put in a context.) Spiraling down the semantic stack, this critique returns us to Klein's serious Rosicrucian strain: Space/Spirit is everywhere, he explained in an interview with Pierre Restany; it permeates the picture, the viewer, the gallery, the city, the universe. This permeation trivializes distinctions among objects and reveals the conventional art work as a mere entanglement of lines, desecrating both inner and outer space.

*The Void*, like *The Leap*, points toward the empty center of Klein's labyrinth, where all boundaries and divisions are dissolved. For Klein, the boundaries between art media and genres (abstract/figurative, concept/object, and so forth), or the wider boundary between art and life, were internal divisions within the stuff of Spirit by which the tangled self is strapped and bound. They were affronts to Life, which should be boundless like the sky through which the Painter of Space leaps into effortless flight. He parodied one boundaried zone after another, while contradictorily laying claim to each in turn. He invited all interpretations, in order to destroy them all. It



is this, finally, that makes the moment of confronting his works a “moment of truth.” And it is this (or so the Painter of Space hoped) that makes the attempt to categorize them impossible, because self-contradictory. Ancient mystical images of the knife trying to cut itself apply. By insisting, in his conceptual overlays, that each of his works drives past its own boundaries into the infinite, Klein extended them beyond the reach of differentiation and interpretation. By such strategy he hoped to terminate in his own person the entire preceding age of cultural evolution.

*At the end of our present Epoch the highest initiate will appear publicly when a sufficient number of ordinary humanity desire and will voluntarily subject themselves to such a leader.... After that time races and nations will cease to exist. Humanity will form one spiritual fellowship.... Before a new Epoch is ushered in...the physical features of the earth will be changed and its density decreased. —Max Heindel<sup>23</sup>*

KLEIN’S ATTEMPT TO WRAP ALL ART FORMS IN A NEST OF MUTUAL containments reaches necessarily beyond art into politics: all boundaries and divisions are affronts to Pure Color and the Monochrome Spirit. (*The Void* had already inaugurated the age of Space.) In 1958 Klein sent a letter to President Eisenhower (Mail Art again) informing him of the termination of the French national government by the Blue Revolution. In the next year he undertook Heindel’s project of decreasing the density of the environment for the age of spaced-out humans, in which levitation would replace gravitation. The “Architecture of the Air”—houses built of compressed air currents in which levitating humans would live in Edenic closeness to nature, passing through boundaries at will—was to be followed by the creation of a controlled climate over all of France. In a commingling of art and politics that prefigures certain of Joseph Beuys’s activities, Klein exhibited maquette drawings for these projects at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs; and, in conjunction with the architect Werner Ruhnau, he carried out industrial experiments (which failed to produce the air roof). In 1959 Klein presented at the Sorbonne his plans for a World Center of Sensibility that would make obsolete the archaic educational modes of the age of matter and would prepare humanity for the age of Space.

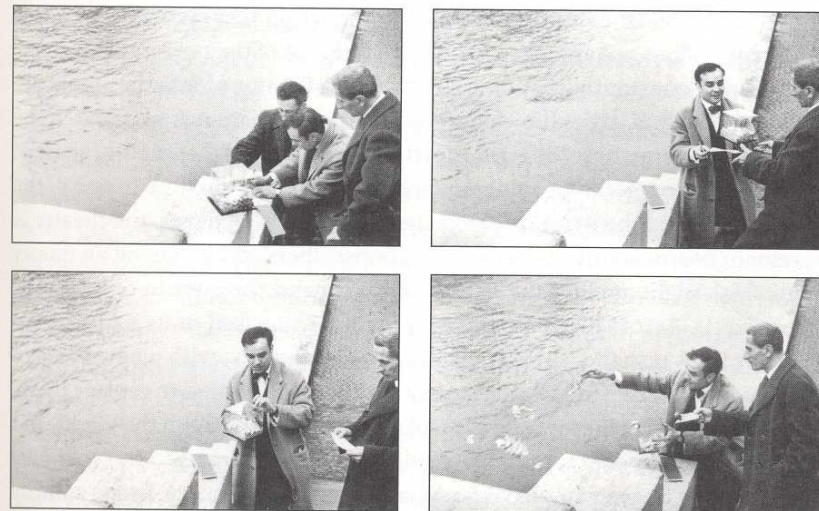
These gestures, or Conceptual Performance pieces, locate themselves, as usual, at a shifting place between art and politics. For Klein, the boundary between art and government, or art and science, was as petty and irksome as that between, say, geometric and figurative painting. Beginning in 1959, he acted out the establishment of the post-governmental age by the systematic

selling of *Immaterial Zones of Pictorial Sensibility*, that is, blocks of the Void—immaterial real estate of the age of Space, paid for in the timeless currency, gold.

Meeting Klein on a bank of the Seine, the buyer paid pure gold (a different weight for each Zone) to the artist, who gave him a signed receipt. Then the buyer burned the receipt while Klein threw half of the gold into the river, to return it to the matrix of potentiality. Only then was the Zone permanently relinquished by the Proprietor of Space and transferred to the buyer, who was left with no visible object or documentation except—in some cases—photographs. The “relinquishments” satirize the business of art and the sanctity of the art object, which is falsely predicated on its alleged separation from Life.

In the same year, as the first citizen of the age of Space, Klein participated immaterially in a group show in Antwerp, projecting a mental vibration into the space reserved for his work, then returning to Paris.

And the kaleidoscope of his interacting elements continued to shift. As Klein’s paintings flowed over into conceptual environments, and his environments into political strategies, so his political pieces flowed into the zone of revolutionary theater—a theater that attempts to overleap all divisions and establish the “Kingdom of the Impossible *quickly*.”



The ritual for a “Relinquishment” of a Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility, with Dino Buzzati, Paris, January 26, 1962.



*The theater which I propose is not only the city of Paris, but is also the countryside, the desert, the mountains, even the sky, in fact, the whole universe.*

*Why not?*

—Yves Klein<sup>24</sup>

KLEIN'S ASPIRATION TO RID THE WORLD OF ART—AS OF ALL BOUNDARIED safe-zones—led him to postulate the whole universe as simultaneously his studio, his material, and his stage. The dateline of his personal *Newspaper of a Single Day* read: "Yves Klein presents Sunday, November 27, 1960." It is virtually a *Fiat lux!* The artist, through his power to designate-as-art, has become godlike. He transposes entities at will across the perpetually dissolving boundary between art and life. For one day, the lead story read, every person in the world was cast as both actor and spectator in Yves Klein's Theater of the Void. It was "an historic day for the theater," which now included everything. All distinctions between art and life were suspended as their arenas became coextensive. The world was an art work, or theatrical production, because it had been designated as such, the designation then being offered as Klein's "piece" to the Festival d'Art d'Avant-garde. Piero Manzoni's *Base of the World* and other works of Conceptual Art involving universal appropriation follow from this prototype. The world is, for a "moment of truth," "made strange," "defamiliarized" (in Viktor Shklovsky's terms); a Brechtian alienation device is placed as a framework around the All.

Klein correctly wrote on the front page of his newspaper that the Theater of the Void was "the culmination of my theories." Characteristically, this culmination does not assume a fixed form; the rest of the newspaper restates the vision in constantly changing terms. In his theater of Life the actors are "to live a constant art exhibition, to know the permanence of being, to be here, there, everywhere," like the constantly moving, and escaping, artist of the future (who instead of going underground went to the sky). In one of the many unrealized theatrical projects described in these pages, the theater is to remain permanently empty—empty subscribers' chairs facing an empty stage. Each night at eight the lights will go up and the curtain open on the empty stage. Actors hired for the event will be apprised of its nature, then will drift back into the world to portray human beings, with a new sense of the solemnity of this role. As new ones are constantly hired to replace them, the process of reversing art and life will move onward through the world. The world is asked, in effect, to throw itself toward freedom, into the void, like the Painter of Space who, having repealed the law of gravity, Leaps jauntily upward in the front-page photograph.

*Today anyone who paints space must actually go into space to paint, but he must go there without any faking, and...by his own means: in a word, he must be capable of levitating...*

*I have opened to the monochrome space...into the immeasurable pictorial sensibility.... I have felt myself, volumetrically impregnated, outside of all proportions and dimensions, in the ALL. I have encountered, or rather been seized by the presence of, the inhabitants of space—and none of them was human: no one had gone there before me. —Yves Klein<sup>25</sup>*

FOR KLEIN, LEVITATION, OR BODILY FLIGHT, WAS THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY of all acts. And as such it must deal in paradox and circularity, which were the weapons of Klein's insurrection. Even his famous Leap is tangled, on the front page of his newspaper, in self-referential circularity. The caption above the photograph says: "A Man in Space"; and below, in the only other photograph on the page, one of Klein's blue monochromes is reproduced, in black and white, with the caption: "Space Itself." That is: he Leaps into his own painting, which is the open window leading out of the closed room of art and the self. But leading to where? In the photograph there is nothing but hard pavement beneath him.

In Paris in 1960 the rumor quickly spread that the Leap made famous by the photograph was performed over a net, the upper half of the scene then being montaged onto a lower half in which the camera, in the same setup, had photographed the empty street. Firsthand inspection of a print made directly from the negative confirms this rumor, and original photographs including the catchers have come to light.<sup>26</sup>

But the question does not end there and is not, in terms of Klein's career, a trivial one. In a sense, the final definition of Klein's intentions rests on the question of the historicity of this "practical demonstration of levitation" (as he called it). Was he sufficiently detached from his revolutionary theater to create it out of conceptual whole cloth? Or was his dedication to his symbolic gestures so complete as to require the bone-crunching fall after the devil-may-care "moment of truth" in mid-air? Clearly, Klein believed that in some cases it did not matter whether his projects were physically realized. But the Leap, in fact, was not one of those cases. A recent investigation of all evidence, including interviews of all known witnesses, indicates that Klein did indeed make his Leap originally (in January 1960) above pavement alone, only later reenacting it over a net for the cameras.<sup>27</sup>

Here Klein's art stands firmly upon nothingness. The Leap opens vacancies at all levels of his intricate intentionality: the photograph, as a "trace of the immediate" (a term with which Klein described many of his works), indicts the art object as unreal. The locus of art is Life, the untrammelled



expression of the immediate; the objects left behind are as dead as ashes and as distant as a photograph of a reenactment. For Klein, it was “indecent and obscene” to call objects outside oneself art; the artist is the location of the art event. “Painting is a mode of existence,” he wrote; “the fact that I exist as a painter will be the foremost pictorial event of our time.” In the Leap more plainly than in any other work, we see what he meant by *existing as a painter*. Aware of his responsibility, the man of the future ushers in the age of Space, demonstrating definitively the overleaping of all limitations.

*I am proposing to artists that they pass by art itself and work individually on the return to real life, the life in which a man no longer thinks he is the center of the universe, but in which the universe is the center of each man.*

Klein then utters a prophecy that has something in common with Duchamp’s prophecy (of about the same time) that the artist of the future would go underground:

*The true painter of the future will be a mute poet who will write nothing but recount, without detail and in silence, an immense picture without limit.—Yves Klein<sup>28</sup>*

KLEIN ATTEMPTED TO TERMINATE CRITICAL CATEGORIES BY EMPTYING them into one another. This approach was in part an attack on Modernism (which seemed old-fashioned to him), specifically on Modernism’s attempt to erase content by selective seeing. In his work, form and content are not treated as two entities, of which it is feasible (or even possible) to elevate one above the other, but as a single bipolar continuum where the reality of each pole is continually passing into its opposite. Through selective seeing it is of course possible to focus on one end of the continuum alone (and that practice is at times useful); but it is not possible to rank them since each is equally dependent on the other. The two terms in fact form a dependent pair, like left/right, up/down, inside/outside, yes/no: neither element in such a structure can be real in a universe in which the other is not equally real. Like two sticks leaning on each other, if one is removed, the other falls too.

Klein’s insistence on content ran counter to the zeitgeist of his time, which can be represented, for example, by Clement Greenberg’s insistence that “a modernist work of art, must try, in principle, to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly Klein’s insistence on the prophetic level of his work violates this “principle.” But on the other hand, Klein was very con-

scious of critical attitudes, and his work conspicuously fulfills the Modernist imperative that the artist’s attention should turn “in upon the medium of his own craft.”<sup>30</sup> There is, as always, reason to his duplicity.

The essentially dialectical nature of his work, in which content not only dissolves into form (as Greenberg and other formalists advised), but form into content as well, combines iconological allegorism with avant-garde criticism of the medium. Like a dedicated reductionist, he erases traditional signifying devices; then, playing the constructionist, he encodes this erasure as itself a signifier—of Prime Matter, or zero-expression—in a traditional metaphysical system. Dialectical balance affirms each limb and thus negates each by affirming the other. As in the ancient “Epimenides” paradox: if yes then no, and if no then yes. Klein empties the work while filling it, and fills it while emptying it. Paradox and circularity emerge as strategies to transcend the given terms, to reject the critical attitude that postulated an antinomy between them in the first place.

To a certain extent Klein, like Manzoni and Beuys, belongs in what some critics have called the Other Tradition in modern art—the tradition of artists whose work involves “extra-art [or anti-art] ambitions.”<sup>31</sup> But this category also is of limited relevance. As always, it is difficult to say where Klein “belongs.” He seems to have rendered dialectical the very distinction between formalist Modernism and the Other Tradition, allowing each a place in his work so that each could destroy the other, attempting to point toward an art beyond these and all other critical distinctions.

The question of content, slightly contracted, becomes a question of the place of the artist’s intentions. Klein attempted to conflate his intentions (expressed through essays, interviews, symbolic photographs, events, and rumors) and his “works,” to put them on a single footing as equal and mutually interacting parts of a metastructure. Before the legitimacy of this tactic can be determined, it is necessary to answer a prior question: where does the artwork end (and who is to draw the line)?

Is the monochrome painting inside the artwork, and the photograph of Klein, in knight’s suit, holding the same monochrome and preparing to do war against Line, outside of it? Is the text that Klein wrote to accompany this photograph inside or outside of the artwork? Are his various essays on the monochrome idea, and the titles of his shows, with their allusions to Heindel, inside or outside of it?

It should be remembered that in such questions we are not dealing with essences but merely specifying the rules by which the game is to be played. A few years after Klein’s death—after the recognition of Concep-



tual Art and Performance Art as legitimate mediums—gestures, events, and writings could be catalogued or “indexed” into the status of art works.<sup>32</sup> Klein’s own practice, foreshadowing the conventions of Conceptual and Performance Art, assumed that his photographed gestures and poses, his published writings, and his monochromes and other physical works were all inside the artwork, as interacting parts of it. The work itself was the set of complex interactions among these elements, not any one element to the exclusion of the others. Klein’s idea was to fuse concept and sensum so that each would lose autonomy, and the work become a vast shifting structure involving both conceptual and sensory elements in a meta-system. Insofar as his age was undergoing a transition from a sensory to an ideational aesthetic,<sup>33</sup> then Klein was indeed, as Tinguely called him, a Messenger of the incoming age.

Klein’s strategy of placing concept and sensum in interaction was designed to compensate for the weaknesses that he felt were inherent in a purely sensory art. The zeitgeist had argued that abstract art has only semiotic, and not semantic, ability. It can refer around within itself, in a nonverbal sign system that a so-called faculty of taste then receives, decodes (nonconceptually), and appraises, but it cannot refer outside itself, and it can make no bridge with the world. It is, in short, artificially isolated and as such, to Klein, an affront to the wholeness of Life.

Faced with an art that (supposedly) lacked semantic ability, formalists accepted the consequences and focused on morphology, neglecting (or claiming to neglect) all conceptual overlays as outside the work. Klein made the Other Decision: to reject art as presently known and restructure it in a corrective meta-system that would restore its semantic capability. And lest this restructuring become reactionary, he submitted it in turn to a dialectical deconstructing through inner contradictions.

A fundamental question is raised by these conflicting decisions. Critical insistence that the artist’s intentions are separate from, or outside of, his works (and vice versa) may be merely self-indulgence on the part of the critic, who wishes to replace the artist as the creator of content. (For all criticism, no matter how formalist, has contentual implications.) From this point of view, perhaps the soundest critical strategy would be to regard everything that the artist deliberately presents to the public as inside the work. But from the formalist critic’s point of view, Klein’s attempt to saturate his works with his intentions may also be seen (as it has been in Duchamp’s case) as a strategy to distract attention from their possible deficiencies, by clouding the critical gaze with intermediary concepts. Inevitably, the adherents of

this latter view must emphasize, perhaps hopelessly, questions of appraisal (the faculty of taste) rather than of explication.

Like Duchamp, Klein despised the faculty of taste because its decisions are so variable. Produced, he reasoned, by cultural conditioning rather than by nature, they will be trivialized, or even rendered absurd, by the passage of time and the ascendancy of different cultural codes. In fact, the problem goes even deeper, since questions of taste are not tactically answerable; they are distanced, perhaps infinitely, by prior questions that they beg (and that in turn beg others). We must first decide, for example, about the place of the artist’s intentions, the limits of the art realm, and so forth. And these decisions in turn must fall back upon the faculty of taste—or habit, or entanglements of lines—for these questions also beg others. For example, is the mind only a user of sense-data? Or is it also (as Buddhist psychology teaches) a sense in itself, with its own sense objects (concepts), and its own quite legitimate aesthetic delight in them? And that question in turn begs others.

Jean Tinguely called Klein “the greatest provocateur I have ever known.”<sup>34</sup> And surely Klein’s work, while answering every question, questions every answer, provocatively. This winding dialectical path leads, through infinite regress, to an unbounded free zone. Inner space opens with the realization that (as an ancient artist of the dialectic proclaimed), “Every opinion is nullified by an equal and opposite opinion.”<sup>35</sup> Or, as Yves Klein the Provocateur put it: “It is necessary to be like untamed fire; it is necessary to contradict yourself.”<sup>36</sup>

1. Yves Klein, in *Dimanche: The Newspaper of a Single Day*, p. 2. There is no definitive edition of Klein’s essays. The mss., when I visited them, were in the Klein archive, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. I will refer to published versions whenever possible. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Klein’s writings are my own. A facsimile of *The Newspaper of a Single Day* may be consulted in Giuliano Martano, ed., *Yves Klein: il Mistero Ostentato* (Turin, n.d.), insert.

2. See, e.g., Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 12–26.

3. *Art News*, May 1961; *New York Herald Tribune*, April 16, 1961; *Time*, January 27, 1961.

4. *New York Times*, February 5, 1967; *New York World Journal Tribune*, February 5, 1967. The

almost worshipful tone adopted by Ronald Hunt in *Artforum* for January 1967 didn’t help: the cultic atmosphere was perceived as part of Klein’s “vaudeville.”

5. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Delta Books, 1981), p. 11.

6. In *The inner and the Outer Space*, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1965), n.p.

7. Typescript in Klein archive, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

8. Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 100.

9. Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), p. 77.



10. Yves Klein, "The Monochrome Adventure," typescript in Klein archive, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Selections have been published in various exhibition catalogues, including *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1967) (which I quote).
11. See, for example, E.H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of His Circle," in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Dutton, 1972).
12. The Rosicrucian Society (based in Oceanside, California) should be distinguished from the Rosicrucian Order, or AMORC; it became a separate organization, under the leadership of Max Heindel, around the beginning of the twentieth century. The relationship between Klein's writings and art works and Heindel's writings is analyzed in detail in my essay "Yves Klein and Rosicrucianism," in the exhibition catalogue, *Yves Klein (1928-1962): A Retrospective* (Houston: The Institute for the Arts, and New York: The Arts Publisher, 1982, and, in French translation, Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983).
13. Pierre Restany, "L'Epoca blu: il secondo minuto della verita," in *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. (Milan: Galleria Apollinaire, 1957).
14. For example, in *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, trans. Edward Conze (Bollinas, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), pp. 97-98.
15. Klein, "The Monochrome Adventure."
16. Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 68.
17. The sentence appears in several of Klein's writings; for example, Yves Klein, *Le Dépassement de la Problématique de l'Art* (La Louvrière, Belgium: Editions de Montbliard, n.d.), p.3. Hereafter *Dépassement*.
18. Klein, "Discourse on the Occasion of Tinguely's Exhibition in Dusseldorf, January 1959," in *Dépassement*.
19. Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmoconception* (Oceanside, Calif.: The Rosicrucian Society, 1937), p. 247. Hereafter *Cosmoconception*.
20. Yves Klein, "Attendu que j'ai peint..." in *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 1969), pp. 38, 40; *Dépassement*, p. 2; letter of Klein to Yamazaki, February 15, 1960, Klein archive.
21. The quoted phrases are from Klein's own description of the event in *Dépassement*, pp. 4-13.
22. Klein, *Dépassement*, p. 14.
23. Heindel, *Cosmoconception*, pp. 305, 311.
24. Klein, "Theater of the Void," in *Dimanche: The Newspaper of a Single Day*.
25. *Ibid.*, p.1; *Dépassement*, p. 2.
26. The author has copies of these photographs, though they are not currently available for public view.
27. This evidence is reviewed in *Yves Klein: A Retrospective*.
28. Klein, *Dépassement*, p.21; Musée des Arts Décoratifs catalogue, p. 22.
29. Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, p. 139.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
31. See, for example, Douglas Davis, *Artculture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 134-138.
32. For "indexing" see Timothy Binkley, "Piece: Contra Aesthetics," in Joseph Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).
33. As, for example, Davis puts it, *Artculture*, p. 49.
34. In Martano, *Yves Klein; il Mistero Ostentato*, p. 110.
35. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.202, my translation; for the text see *Sextus Empiricus*, trans. and ed., R. G. Bury, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press [Loeb Classical Library], 1933), vol. 1, p. 118.
36. "Truth Becomes Reality," in *Zero* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 1973), p. 88.

## 2

## Conceptual Art



## Anti-Art as Cognition

### *Themes and Strategies*

THOUGH THE MODERNIST OR KANTIAN THEORY HELD TO THE belief in three separate but equal faculties, in fact the separation of these faculties from one another was not equal. Art's ancient connection with religion kept it secretly affianced with the ethical faculty, as in Wittgenstein's dictum, "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same thing."<sup>1</sup> The art and poetry of the Romantic era were still crypto-religious, and Abstract Expressionism, that last gasp of Romanticism, though it paraded as a secular activity, was (as Harold Rosenberg clearly understood) hiddenly a religious movement.<sup>2</sup> So art and religion, in the Late Modernist era, were still complicit. But from the point of view of either art or religion, reason was regarded as the enemy. Early in the twentieth century, the British critic Clive Bell expressed the opinion that religion was art's true ally, while science was its eternal enemy.<sup>3</sup> One way of describing the anti- and post-Modernist shift is that art moved away from its old alliance with religion and toward a new alliance with science (especially the social sciences).

It was the cognitive faculty, epitomized as science, that the Romantic-tradition had excluded above all from the art context. Yet, an earlier stage of the western tradition had not seen an essential opposition between either science and art or science and religion. Science, as a temple of the order in nature, was itself a kind of religion to the Pythagoreans and Platonists of ancient Greece. It is said that when Pythagoras discovered the Pythagorean theorem he sacrificed an ox to Demeter.<sup>4</sup> The mathematical ratios that dwell deep in nature, governing the rules of harmony and astronomy, were also understood to structure the aesthetic principles engraved in the human soul. Art, religion, and science were understood as cooperating in the project of uncovering the universals that governed them all. The aura of each of these channels overflowed into the others.

In our time, when the authority of the Modernist paradigm has waned,



the aesthetic qualities of mathematics and science have been remarked on by many. According to *The New York Times* (1/25/2000), physicist Steven Weinberg “received the [1999] Lewis Thomas Prize, awarded to the researcher who best embodies ‘the scientist as poet.’” Another *Times* article noted that

In “The Artful Universe” (Oxford, 1995), the astronomer John D. Barrow argues that “the arts and the sciences flow from a single source...” The geneticist Enrico Coen, who has just written “The Art of Genes” (Oxford University Press, 1999), uses painting as a metaphor to describe how organisms generate themselves. Beautiful natural patterns...and their mathematic origins are explored in Philip Ball’s “The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern Formation in Nature” (Oxford, 1998). [Edward Rothstein] chimed in with “Emblems of Mind” (Avon, 1996), examining how music and mathematics create patterns that develop out of similar styles of metaphorical thinking.

It is also not hard to see that philosophical ideas exercise an aesthetic appeal, as Rudolf Carnap observed early in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Zeno’s “Paradoxes” provide an obvious example, embodying the infinite regress aesthetic of Bachian/Escherian labyrinths of orderly thought. There are other, less mathematically ordered areas of philosophy that exercise different but still aesthetic appeal: the down-to-earth still-life effect of an analytic argument based on Ordinary Language philosophy, or the symphonic grandeur of a Hegelian text, or the lyrical spareness of an argument by Wittgenstein.

IN ADDITION TO THE ARISTOTELIAN-KANTIAN TRICHOTOMY, WHICH separates the aesthetic from the cognitive, the general neglect of what might be called the aesthetics of thought arises from the tradition of mind-body dualism. From Plato to Descartes it is assumed that sense data and mental operations take place on discretely different metaphysical levels. In this view, which has become the basis of Western common sense, the mind is held to function purely as an organizing faculty synthesizing sense data into a rounded impression of the world. Descartes divided all that exists into two categories, the material (*res extensa*), that is, the body, including the five senses and the objects they sense; and the immaterial, which is specified as mind (*res cogitans*). A consequence of Descartes’ thought is the idea that mind, being immaterial, can have no intimate connection with the arts that, like painting or music, work through the senses. Earlier, the radical division of the human faculties into material and immaterial components was of central importance to Plato because on it rested the idea of the soul, a non-extended or nonmaterial component of the human self, not subject to the changes of matter and hence inherently eternal. Plato, influenced, it seems, by Egyptian traditions, regarded the soul and its adventures in the afterlife

as a central subject of metaphysics. This lineage is the pedigree of formalist art theory, which is constituted primarily out of concealed references to Platonic idealism and, ultimately, to the Egyptian vision of a society beyond change based on a heavenly society that is immaterial. Plato, an aristocrat who saw that a changeless society was in the interests of his class, imported this doctrine into Western thought.

Mind-body dualism, in other words, is not the only way of looking at the constitution of the human self; it is a hidden theology with certain social interests, as is the formalist aesthetic theory based in part on it. There are other approaches that do not recognize it at all. The phenomenalist view, for example, rejects mind-body dualism; since sensations are known only as mental impressions, there is no way to distinguish sense events from mind events. As Maurice Merleau-Pont observed, “There are no senses, only consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> The abhidharma psychology, of Indian and Ceylonese Buddhist origin, recognizes two different aspects of mind. On one hand, it is regarded as an organizing faculty presiding over the synthesizing of sense data; on the other hand, as a sixth sense whose sense objects are concepts in precisely the way that the eye’s sense objects are sights. It is the mind’s function as a sense that accounts for its pleasures, such as the pleasure of appreciating mathematical formulas, the pleasure of playing chess, the pleasure of wit. Scientists and mathematicians have declared that the pleasure they take in their work is essentially an aesthetic pleasure. Certain modern philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, and Rudolf Carnap, have suggested that philosophical arguments exercise a subjective aesthetic appeal. This view eliminates the distinction between the cognitive and aesthetic categories, which now appear to have extensive, perhaps complete, overlap.

In terms of Conceptual Art, it should be noted that this adjustment in our thinking about the human faculties eliminates the traditional critiques, such as Max Kozloff’s complaint in this context that “Conceptual Art[’s]... questioning has no form.”<sup>7</sup> The idea that cognition lacks form is based on the old mind-body dualism which separates the mind from the senses, the channels through which form is sensed. Yet the formal nature of thought can be demonstrated merely by thinking of logic or mathematics. James Collins’ distinction between “things and theories”<sup>8</sup> is equally a disguised form of mind-body dualism. Theories *are* things; they are what Edmund Husserl called noematic objects, that is, mental objects. Every thought or concept is an object, and every object has form and aesthetic presence. (What does a centaur look like? An angel?) There is, in other words, an aesthetics of thought with its own styles and its own formalism.



THOSE WHO INSIST ON CERTAINTY OF KNOWLEDGE RESIST RECOGNITION of the aesthetics of thought, since to accept it would cast doubt on the distinction between truth and beauty (again a disguised form of mind-body dualism) and especially on the category of truth in and by itself. It implies that one adopts an opinion on the basis of an aesthetic decision as well as a truth-related one, and that one's beliefs about reality are in part projections of aesthetic preferences. The difference, for example, between a mind that prefers simple accounts of things and a mind that prefers complex accounts may be analogous to different preferences in visual composition. Seen in this way, the history of philosophy becomes a branch of the history of art, with different ages or trends featuring different styles of intellectual formalism. Greek philosophers recognized this aspect of thought much more openly than have Christian-influenced European thinkers, with their special commitment to the concept of truth as the foundation of dogma. A Greek genre of philosophical literature was called the *paignion*, or "game"; it was a special place for the construction of paradoxes, infinite regresses, circular arguments, both-and-neither arguments, yes-and-no arguments, and other delicacies of an art that isolated the effects of different types of thought for essentially aesthetic appreciation. No less a work than Plato's *Parmenides* is sometimes put in this class, as is Gorgias' *On Truth or On What Is Not*. The Megarian school specialized in Conceptual Art objects of this type, and Sextus Empiricus compiled an encyclopedia of them which still exists. (It is one of the most interesting and least-read of ancient Greek books.)

The aesthetic of the infinite, though not prominent in the tradition of mind-body dualism from which the modern visual brand of formalism arose, is an example of a particular formalist moment in the history of the aesthetics of thought. It demonstrates an intellectual aesthetic of the sublime rather than the beautiful—for these distinctions apply to thought as much as to painting or music. The beautiful is dependent on explicit self-identity, on the preeminence of the figure over the ground, and hence on implications of the solidity of selfhood; the sublime, however, is based on dissolving the figure into the ground, on a claim of the primacy of the ground over the figure, and of the universal surround of nature over the individual self. In representational painting one thinks of the encounter with the sublime as a tiny human figure lost in the awesome ruggedness of mountains, electrical storms, or oceans.

In the aesthetics of thought the sublime is experienced in the way the infinity concept interposes enormous abysses of nonidentity into the world of other concepts, abysses that threaten constantly to spread and absorb every

identity into them. In language, for example, a word derives meaning from the differences between it and all the other words in its language; if that language system were infinite the word would never establish its meaning, since the chain of differences contributing to that meaning would unfold forever. The abysses of the infinite appear inside language as the infinite regress of signifiers that prevents the signified from ever being directly confronted. If one attempts to define a word A by saying it means B, when B is also a word or a group of words, then one has slipped from one signifier to another, without really touching the signified. One is involved in an infinite regress or displacement and will never directly confront the signified, slipping from signifier to signifier forever. Thus, the infinity concept opens abysses in thought like those vastnesses of nature which Edmund Burke called the sublime. Thinkers who have featured the infinity concept as a working tool, from Zeno of Elea to Jacques Derrida, bring the mind to a confrontation with the unknown and the unknowable that threatens individual selfhood with dissolution—that is to say, to a confrontation with the sublime. The aesthetic of the finite, on the other hand, emphasizes definition, categorization, and clarity of outline as in the constructivist thought of Aristotle or Leibnitz, and relates to the experience of the beautiful rather than the sublime. Useful parallels may be drawn between preferences in the aesthetics of thought and in visual aesthetics. Philosophers who construct highly articulated models of the universe might be compared to painters of complex land- or cityscapes, or to abstractionists like Mondrian whose works feature order and hierarchy; philosophers who occupy themselves with deconstructing models of the universe show an aesthetic range that extends from the sublime to the minimal, like American painting in the '60s. Conceptual Art involves both the constructing and the deconstructing aspects of the aesthetics of thought, in a mode distinctly its own.

DUCHAMP'S AMBITION WITH REGARD TO THESE MATTERS MAY BE described as two-fold: he wanted to sever the underground but still effectual connection between art and religion, and conversely to bring the cognitive aspect of aesthetics into the open, as encapsulated in his famous remark about wanting to put art back in the service of the mind.<sup>9</sup> In short, he wanted to divorce art from religion and connect it to philosophy. One problem he seems to have felt keenly is that if art is only aesthetic—with nothing of the cognitive or ethical involved—then it can only be decoration. (All the signed styles of Abstract Expressionism can now be seen as fine wall-paper patterns.) "I don't want to be stupid as a painter," he said.<sup>10</sup> By wilfully rejecting cognition, the supposed enemy of the aesthetic, the artist, he felt,



became stupid by choice. Duchamp chose otherwise. His supposed quitting of art-making for chess signified quitting the service of the aesthetic faculty for that of the cognitive. He saw the Romantic-aesthetic tradition of art as tainted by crypto-religious baggage, as if it were a kind of mystery religion. There were various ways of negating this status. Duchamp's introduction of humor into the artwork, for example, signalled "Conceptual art's desire to dissolve the autonomous status of the aesthetic object."<sup>11</sup>

In the period of questioning and casting about that followed World War II, classical Conceptual Art arose in association with "the renewed reception of Duchamp in the 1960s,"<sup>12</sup> and adopted basic principles from his example: creation by designation, hostility toward painting, substitution of chance for the judgment of taste, and collapsing of art into life by means of the Readymade. Additionally, as part of his return of art to cognition, "Duchamp prefigures Conceptual art's 'linguistic turn.'"<sup>13</sup>

The prominence of language in Conceptual Art has led to a confused belief that it may be a kind of philosophy or literature. What is commonly called philosophy is the activity either of stringing concepts together in the hope they will lead to a conclusion, or taking them apart in the hope that false conclusions will be removed. While Conceptual Art does in some cases have actual purposes of a social or political type, it does not usually exhibit those philosophical purposes. It more often holds concepts up as objects to be beheld with an appreciative regard that has the same claim to disinterestedness (and no more) that has traditionally been posited for the act of regarding, say, paintings. What has been called literature, in turn, tends to feature narrative structure or its significant absence, and often demonstrates a concern for the sound of language; Conceptual Art for the most part relates to neither of these values so much as to the values of wit and critical insight, which, though they are not absent from literature, are generally embedded in the complex of literary qualities rather than foregrounded and independently focused.

In any case, the presence of language within the frame of the visual artwork does not need justification; it is not a radical break with established art practice but reflects a tendency that has been present for centuries and which it has been the special genius of modern times to confront and force into the open. Before around 1920 the role of the linguistic element in the visual piece was somewhat hidden. An image appeared with a title, but the title was usually outside the frame of the image, like the proclamation of a transcendent god who stands outside his creation and issues statements of metaphysical definition to it. The idea that language, as a cognitive element, stands over and above the perceptions of the senses was thus reflected in the structure of

the artwork. In western art in general, when words appeared within the frame they did not exercise the function of wit and criticism, as in Conceptual Art, but either the function of naming, as in Greek vases or in the names "Mater" and "Magdalena" shining in the halos of women in the Avignon Pieta, 1455; or the function of a stage prop, as in the letters "INRI" above the figure of the crucified Christ, the inscription on the pedestal on which the Madonna stands in Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna of the Harpies*, 1517, or the newspaper being read in a painting by Cézanne. Gauguin placed titles inside the frame, though usually in a corner out of the way of the figures; Van Gogh, Lautrec, and others of the later nineteenth century sometimes did the same.

Around 1908 Picasso and Braque began to include fragments of language or even whole passages of newsprint in their paintings as primarily plastic elements, not there to be read but to remind one, as it were, in a gestural way, of the whole presence of the cognitive realm in the texture. This trend picked up momentum in Futurism. In 1912, Gino Severini, for example, included in his paintings words like "valse" and "polka" as comments on the movement of the image. Two years later, Carlo Carrà made "free word paintings" of collaged bits of newspaper, music, and advertising. It was in Dada-related contexts that this trend really came to self-awareness. Kurt Schwitters, like the Cubists, used language fragments primarily as plastic elements, to be seen rather than read. But John Heartfield, Duchamp, Magritte, Raoul Hausmann, and others, began, in the 1920s, to use language-within-image in specifically conceptual ways. Duchamp's combination, in *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, of an altered found photographic reproduction with a mysterious but essentially linguistic message, foreshadowed the structure of countless Conceptual artworks to come. Magritte focused on a critique of the relation between linguistic and visual representation. In *The Key of Dreams (La Clef des songes)*, 1930, he shows objects with captions that do not apply to them in any ordinary way. Common-sense attitudes like linguistic reification and image reification are deconstructed in such works. Linguistic reification means the assumption that one's own language, that is, one's conditioned mind-set, is an accurate map of the real; image reification, the belief that one's culture's conceptions of plastic representation accurately portray the outside universe. In Magritte's critical paintings, as the verbal representation is declared to have nothing to do with the visual, or the visual with the verbal, so neither connects with a thing being referred to. Human beings are left alone with their experiences, the grids with which to control them being canceled by mutual contradiction. Magritte's *The Treachery of Images (Le Trahison des Images)*, 1928-29, which shows a picture of a pipe with the statement "This



is Not a Pipe,” makes this even more explicit: a representation of a pipe, Magritte seems to mean, is not a pipe. The project of relentlessly focusing attention on the language-image relationship, and the related project of critiquing naïve acceptance of modes of representation as equivalents of the real, became fundamental and lasting themes of Conceptual Art.

The impetus begun with Dada, and lost somewhat in the resurgent formalism, returned with the works of Jasper Johns and others of his generation. Johns’ famous *Flag*, 1955, in which the image extends all the way to the edge of the support, conflates the realms of real object (painted flag) and representation (painting of flag). A similar splitting of meaning occurs in such other works of his as *Grey Alphabets*, 1956, and *Numbers in Color*, 1958-59. These letters and numbers seem meant not to be read, as in Magritte, but to be looked at, as in Schwitters; yet one cannot help but read them to an extent, as mental focus shifts between the symbolic and plastic orders. The symbolic order began to assert a claim to primacy in the ’60s with works like Arakawa’s *Look At It*, 1965, where names of objects are offered in place of images. In 1963, Gene Beery showed word paintings heralding the transition they were involved in, with such messages as “Sorry This Painting Temporarily Out of Style Closed for Updating Watch for Aesthetic Reopening.” In that same year Flynt published his essay defining “concept art.” The genre had been crystallized in part by the 20th century’s long and intense analysis of language. Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* was roughly contemporaneous with Duchamp’s early Readymades. This aspect of Conceptual Art has led to a series of events, from Duchamp’s puns to Michael Snow’s later anagrammatic respellings of his own name. The fact that Conceptual Art was born in part from the tradition of language analysis is one reason why artists’ books became an important conceptual genre. The book expresses the desire to reinstate the mind in artistic activity, to focus on the relationship between word and image, and to eliminate the traditional art object. Finally, the project of constructing such an inexpensive and transportable means of communicating concepts visually made these books truly international and translinguistic.

IN THE 1950S AND 1960S, A KIND OF PROTO-GENERATION OF CONCEPTUAL ARTISTS extended the boundaries of the art category not by stylistic change but by alteration of the art discourse directly; they forced the usage of the word “art” to expand to include things formerly outside its scope, through the process that Atkinson and Baldwin would later call “declaration.” This procedure goes back to the example of Duchamp, and finds its strongest justification in the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the late ’50s and early

’60s, the procedures of designation and contextualization were foregrounded in the works of Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Ben Vautier, George Brecht, Dennis Oppenheim, and others. Duchamp had physically signed Readymades; Klein instituted a looser fashion of designation by “signing” the sky in fantasy—a project which Marinus Boezem realized literally with a skywriting airplane in 1969. Manzoni signed human beings and exhibited people on a sculpture stand. Vautier explicitly universalized the procedure, designating everything an artwork. These acts of designation are themselves works of Conceptual Art; their material is the mind-stuff of the art-beholder, specifically the shift between ordinary focus and art focus that takes place. Klein extended Duchamp’s rudimentary insights into contextualization by exhibiting an empty gallery in 1958; this gesture implied that if it is the context that makes an object art, rather than any qualities of the object itself, then it is the context that should be exhibited. Analysis of the relationship between an object and the environment in which it is seen became a continuing theme of Conceptual Art. Daniel Buren’s early stripe works, for example, combined the idea of painting-as-Readymade with a relentless focusing of different art contexts—the gallery, the museum, the street.

Designation and contextualization were the early tools of Conceptual Art. Once the category of art had been opened up to receive whatever an artist might put into it, formalism’s aspirations to universality and objectivity were replaced by a forced focus on relativism and the critique of meaning. Formalism’s belief in the autonomy of the artwork was answered by the Frankfurt School’s emphasis on social conditioning, just as formalism’s belief in essence was answered by linguistic analysis and the Saussurean awareness that meaning derives strictly from differences within a bounded system. To clear the air of the archaic forms of thought embodied in formalism, Conceptual Art was rigorously 20th-century, which is to say rigorously critical. Octavio Paz has remarked that in the 20th century there is no thought, only criticism; critical and analytic modes have been characteristic of movements as diverse as Freudianism, linguistic philosophy, Marxism, and semiotics, among others. Jean-François Lyotard characterizes this critical-analytical trend of our time as a symptom of the Freudian death wish, which is to be understood not as a self-destructive impulse but as a tendency to dissolve patterns of meaning and personal identity which balances out the tendency to rigidify those things—a tendency that was dominant in the 19th century.

IN A CLASSIC ARTICLE FROM 1967 IN WHICH THE TERM “CONCEPTUAL ART” is said to have first appeared, Sol LeWitt stressed the goal of “avoiding



subjectivity.”<sup>14</sup> Conceptual Art in general has focused on eliminating certain kinds of self-expressiveness. This project was of the first importance not because self-expressiveness is the enemy but because western art had come to be locked into certain shades and clichés of self-expression—those of the Romantic transcendentalist—as if they were the necessary essence of art. But artists like LeWitt, Dan Graham, and Carl Andre were in touch with the critical currents of modern culture and wished to exercise responsibility and intelligence in the mode of art. For this reason, Conceptual Art adopted an expressive stance more like that of science and technology. It veered away from the mood of religion, which Clive Bell had said was art’s essential zone, to that of science, where Bell had said it could not survive. As art had recently used analogues of the procedures of religion, now it would use analogues of the procedures of science. This reorientation arose in part from the influence of Minimalism, with its focusing of materials as themselves and of systems of presenting and thinking about them. The investigation of the expressive potential of technological means has brought with it a steadily advancing technological look derived from the camera, which is everywhere; from the photocopying machine, as in the famous *Xerox Book* put together as an exhibition in 1968 by Seth Siegel and John Wendler; from the audiotape and videotape, as in the works of Graham, Nam June Paik, Dara Birnbaum and others; and more recently from the digital light sign, as in the works of Jenny Holzer—and so on.

Along with the reorientation of art toward science and technology came a new emphasis on analytic and critical methods. The Duchampian-Magrittean tradition had already focused on the question of representation and established a position antagonistic to the processes of linguistic reification and image reification. The question of photography’s relationship to convention and reality became a third strand of this project of transcending or at least focusing subjectivity and point of view. These relations were the subject of Joseph Kosuth’s formulaic *Proto-Investigations*, first exhibited in 1972, though dated by the artist to 1965. *One and Three Chairs*, for example, presented a chair, a life-sized photograph of the chair on its site, and the dictionary definition of the word “chair.” Kosuth’s subsequent use of the dictionary and thesaurus as materials extended his focus on the naïve assumption that one’s language has the same shape as reality. Donald Burgy’s *Name Idea #1*, 1969, directs attention to the fact that things and words change in different ways and at different rates. Robert Morris’ exhibiton of a card file, *The Card File*, 1962, pointed to the fact that systems of arranging knowledge are also arbitrary attempts to project patterns of order and



JOSEPH KOSUTH, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965.

meaning onto the world. Something similar is conveyed in Bernar Venet’s work of the late ’60s and early ’70s, in which he exhibited a series of technical books on subjects including astrophysics and mathematical logic as objects of nonspecialist regard. In a variety of ways Agnes Denes’ works using symbolic logic as a material, Hannah Darboven’s permutation drawings, and Lee Lozano’s *I Ching Charts*, 1969, belong in this company. This area of conceptual work presents conventions of vision, language, and knowledge as objects for neutral regard, removing the sense of inevitability from them and ambiguously hinting at an attitude of freedom beyond. This project has been one of undermining the conventions with which our culture orders experience and projects special meanings onto it.

The central subject of such analysis is the question of whether artistic canons are objective or relative. Formalism implicitly assumes that aesthetic values are at some root level universal and objective, and would be similarly perceived by all developed faculties of taste. This view ignores 20th-century studies of language and behavior, which suggest that cultural and individual conditioning are factors in all judgments of taste, not just those of the supposedly uncultivated; the claim to an unconditioned exercise of judgment is



virtually contradictory, since judgment necessarily involves canons and these, as Saussure's study of language demonstrated, can only define themselves in relation to a finite surrounding system. Duchamp's Readymades were an attempt to break open this sanctum sanctorum by forcing realization of the relativity of aesthetic feelings. The still-repeated cliché that Duchamp's intention in the Readymades was to demonstrate that aesthetic beauty can be found anywhere seems plainly incorrect. He was attempting, as he said in various interviews, to find objects that would be neutral or meaningless in terms of taste. This project was both a critique of formalist theory, with its privileged faculty of taste, and an attempt to transcend the limits of subjectivity in the form of personal habit. Taste, he felt, was not an independent faculty with inborn knowledge but a conditioned habit arising from cultural surroundings. What one is trained to enjoy as art one will enjoy as art. The same force that made Pavlov's dogs salivate at the sound of a bell makes the art enthusiast shiver with ecstasy before a painted cloth. An art tradition, then—like, say, European painting—is an arbitrary communal habit based on hidden social and economic forces as much as on aesthetic inertia. Tradition exists when a whole culture has acquired a communal habit and rewards the indulging of it. Habits arise as ways to tame the unknowability of experience, but to tame unknowability is to flee the sublime—which Burke described as dark, formless, isolate, unapproachable without loss of self-definition.

DUCHAMP EVIDENTLY FELT THERE WERE THREE THINGS THAT ONE could do about the fact that one was at the mercy of a habit. First, one could go on reinforcing that habit and indulge the pleasure of satisfying it until it came to seem like a given or natural or inevitable part of life. That is how he saw the practice of traditionally aesthetic visual art. Second, one could break the old habit and start a new one which in time would run the same course from acquired habit to apparent absolute truth; this is what he thought the Cubists among others were doing. Third—and this is what the Readymades were about—one could attempt to find ways to a stance beyond aesthetic habit. This was a genuinely new conception of the art object, which was now to be regarded as an instrument to pry apart the structures of habit without leaving anything newly enchanting in their place. The Readymades were objects designed to be unaccountable in terms of our culture's aesthetic habits. They offered a pocket of freedom from art based on habit, and from a life of believing that one was beholding transcendent forms when in fact one was mechanically acting out a habit one had not even chosen to acquire. This general intention—of deconditioning, deconstructing, creating things

unaccountable by any easily available model—permeates the practice of Conceptual Art, at least that of the first generation.

Unaccountability is important because it stymies attempts to tame and control the rawness of things by corralling them into manageable categories. It is an openness to freedom and mystery, involving as it does a submission to givenness, a relinquishing of the belief in the effectiveness of one's categories and the fullness of the map of one's language. Recognition of it is a necessary part of the analytic adventure of modern culture. The *objets provocateurs* which the Futurists and Dadaists featured were transitional devices opening the way to unaccountable objects; they were themselves accountable by their consistent function of provocation. Countless Conceptual Art objects of later date have striven for pure unaccountability. Both Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers were engaged, in much of their object-making, in the attempt to arrive at truly unaccountable objects that can find no place in the habit-systems of viewers, including the habit of shock. Broodthaers' mussel-shell works, like *Panel of mussels (Panneau du moules)*, 1965, and *Mussels in white sauce (Moules sauce blanche)*, 1966, and his eggshell works, his suitcase full of bricks, and many others, are unaccountable objects that resist aesthetic appreciation from any habituated stance and render foolish most attempts at discursive interpretation. These objects, one feels somewhat eerily, might be meaningful to some unknown aesthetic from some unheard of species or culture. The point is to see reflected there the arbitrariness of one's own object preferences. Beuys's fat works, sausage works, and such, function to separate his work from the vestiges of aesthetic habit and suspend it in a zone of unknowability and unaccountability. So convincing are the works in this respect that the artist's autobiographical accounts and explanations seem both unconvincing and irrelevant. The range of conceptual objects that belong in the category of deliberate unaccountability is large, comprehending also, for example, James Lee Byars's work of 1968 in which a mile of gold thread was sent into outer space on helium balloons; the characteristic Byars-esque invocation of the angelic sphere and attempt to reconnect heaven and earth are recognizable, but after the accounts are given there is something left over that they do not account for. Many of the Flux-Boxes by Brecht and others are designed either to be unaccountable in terms of our usual categories or to imply new half-defined categories whose intentionality we can barely grasp. Unaccountability is found in forms as various as Gordon Matta-Clark's vertically sliced house and Wolf Vostell's *Berlin Fever*, 1973, in which cars clustered in groups of ten drove as slowly as physically possible alongside the Berlin wall for half an hour.

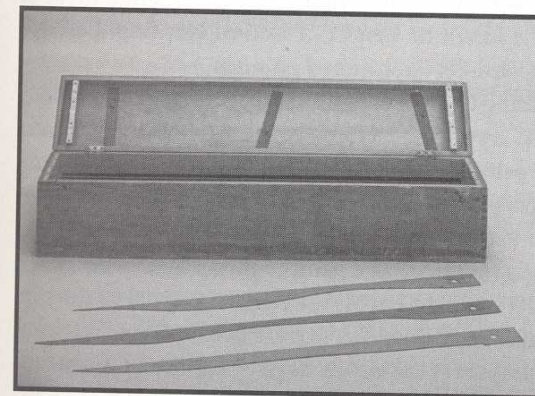


THE ASSAULT ON THE PREMISES OF LINGUISTIC AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION, conjoined with the presentation of unaccountable conceptual objects, comprised a sweeping program of focusing on the idea that meanings are projected onto the world of raw information, not inherent in it. The other side of this coin is the recognition of the neutrality of information, which has only those meanings that the mind projects upon it. In Christine Kozlov's *Information: No Theory*, variously dated 1969 to 1970, a tape recorder placed in an otherwise empty gallery recorded the ambient sounds on a two-minute loop; at any moment it preserved the sounds made within the last two minutes. In making no selection by form or content but treating all information as equal, she eliminated the meaning projections by which one ordinarily distinguishes one piece of information from another as more meaningful, relevant, or useful. On Kawara, in *I Got Up*, 1970, mailed postcards that reported the time he got up every day for a year to a select group of recipients. There was no implication that the knowledge might be useful or even interesting to them; information was purveyed for its own sake, with no particular application of it in mind, parodying the declining tradition of art for art's sake. In Kawara's *Today*, 1966, the artist made a painting of the day's date each day for a year (subsequently extended), parodying the tradition of painterly expressiveness and of the arbitrary perfection of the art elements in the work. Countless other conceptual pieces have involved expressions of the neutrality of information, including aesthetic information. Vito Acconci, in *Step Piece*, 1970, stepped onto and off of a stool as many times as he could each morning for a month, recording and later publishing the numbers. Christopher Cook's *A Book of Instants*, 1970, is filled with a list of apparently unrelated or arbitrary times, such as "November 21, 1844, 9:40 a.m." Jan Dibbets' *Robin Redbreast's Territory Sculpture*, 1969, presents information designated by the movements of a wild bird. Robert Smithson's guided tour of "the monuments of Passaic," 1967, confronted the art audience with the idea that Passaic, New Jersey, had replaced Rome as the Eternal City, and with information about certain monuments there. The presentation of raw or unordered materials is not a meaningless activity; it is the useful promulgation of a view of meaning as imposed arbitrarily on materials from without, for reasons not inherent in the materials themselves but in human plans and ambitions for them.

ONE FORMALIST PROJECTION OF MEANING THAT CAME UNDER special attack was the idea that the artwork was autonomous in the sense of being outside social and economic causes and conditions. This view

was countered in the '60s and '70s by the widespread dissemination of the so-called Frankfurt criticism in the works of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and others. These critics felt that the artwork had been coopted by the processes of the market, which created the myth of autonomy to conceal this fact. The impression of autonomy was maintained as a pious fiction by the use of a special aurifying environment and by the apotropaic utterances of formalist critics; the outside world was identified as secular and the inner temple as sacred, along the lines of Bell's insistence that art belonged in the area of culture with religion, not with science.

One strategy for presenting the artwork as embedded in, rather than autonomous of, the ordinary causal networks of human life has been the introduction of chance procedures which leave the work vulnerable to forces outside the artist's intentions. Chance procedures in the art-making process can produce artistic forms that are freed from the tyranny of conditioned habit. As the tradition of introducing chance elements grew, it developed a certain formalism of its own, based on the increasing elegance or expressiveness with which chance was introduced. To incorporate chance into the *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14, Duchamp created a quasi-scientific procedure like that of an experimenter, dropping a meter-long piece of string three times from a height of one meter, and recording the three curves that it made upon landing; these curves were then incorporated as elements uncontaminated by hand and taste into a variety of later works by Duchamp, including the *Large Glass*. The quasi-scientific air of the procedure accords with what Duchamp called the precision of the random, and with the fact that here it is not a desire to control that is being acted out but a desire to invite the world to state its own projects, in the manner of a scientific



MARCEL DUCHAMP,  
*Three Standard Stoppages*  
(3 *Stoppages Étalon*), 1913-14.  
Assemblage: three threads  
glued to three painted canvas  
strips  $5\frac{1}{4} \times 47\frac{1}{4}$ ", each mounted  
on a glass panel  $7\frac{1}{4} \times 49\frac{3}{8} \times \frac{1}{4}$ ";  
three wood slats,  $2\frac{1}{2} \times 43 \times \frac{1}{8}$ ",  
 $2\frac{1}{2} \times 47 \times \frac{1}{8}$ ",  $2\frac{1}{2} \times 43\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{1}{8}$ ",  
shaped along one edge to match  
the curves of the threads; the  
whole fitted into a wood box  
 $1\frac{1}{8} \times 50\frac{7}{8} \times 9$ ". Katherine S. Dreier  
Bequest. (149.1953.a-1) The Mu-  
seum of Modern Art, New York.



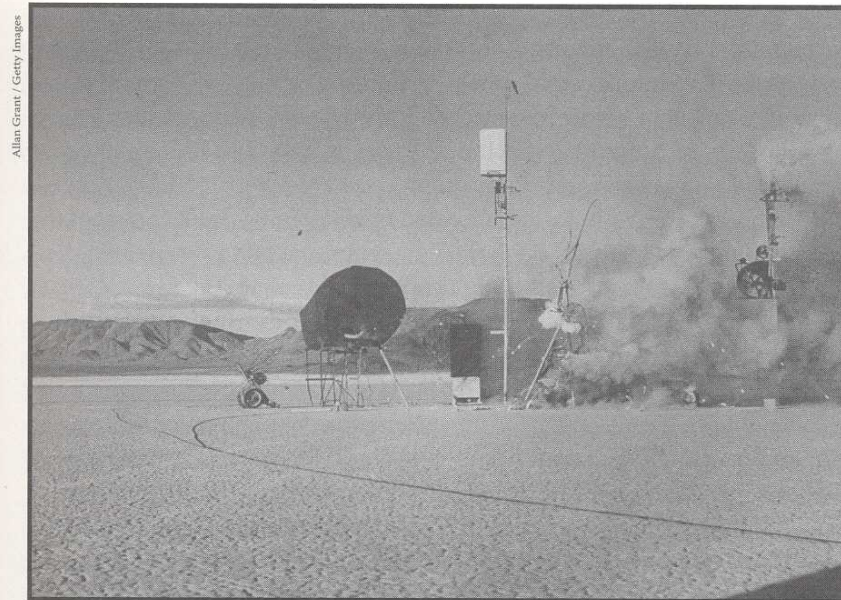
experiment. In Klein's rain paintings, powdered pigment flung into the air was applied to a canvas on the ground by raindrops. In Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969, a dump truck released a load of hot asphalt down a slope, where it cooled and hardened naturally. In Richard Serra's *Splashing*, 1968, molten lead was splashed along the base of a wall in a gallery, where it cooled and hardened in random shapes.

The experiment-like procedure of the *Three Standard Stoppages* is echoed in the quasi-scientific instructions, as if to a laboratory assistant, in one of Duchamp's texts:

"Theory":  
10 words found by opening the dictionary at random by A  
10 words found by opening the dictionary at random by B

These two sets of words have the same difference of "personality" as if they had been written by A and B with an intention. Or else—it matters little—there would be cases where this "personality" may disappear in the neutrality of A and B. That is the best case in terms of Duchamp's fetishization of indifference. Duchamp seems not to be instructing the reader to carry out this work, but the tone is the same. Such laboratory-type instruction becomes a basic element of Conceptual Art in its studied displacement from the realm of pseudo-religion to that of pseudo-science, and in its deliberate shift to a more impersonal mode of expressiveness. It relates to the procedural rules by which John Baldessari made his Conceptual photographs of balls thrown into the air recording their happenstance configurations, to Mel Bochner's measurement pieces, to the technological look of many Conceptual installations, and so on. LeWitt, in the essay of 1967, had prescribed execution according to a completely predetermined plan, with no impulsive alteration in process, as an antidote to the romantic myth of self-expressiveness, which reached its height in Action Painting. LeWitt's principle still holds in, for example, quotational painting.

Another way of underlining the fact that the artwork is not autonomous but involved in ordinary causality is to site it directly in the flux of the changing world. Buren had his stripe paintings carried around the city like advertising signs, and sited them as flags flying over Paris. Maura Sheehan, in her "Urban Alterations" of the late '70s and early '80s, designated public parts of American cities as art, usually by adding monochrome paint to them; these works were meant to deteriorate in observable time with the normal activity of the city. Time, in other words, was used as a material. Robert Janz has sited works in the middle of a flowing stream and at the waves' edge by the ocean. The incor-



JEAN TINGUELY, *Study for an End of the World*, 1961.

poration of time and change into the work, like sitedness in the world, reveals its contingency. Euan Burnet-Smith has made sculptures held together in a matrix of ice, which deconstruct themselves in about three hours. Bochner structured a piece around the growth rate of a tree, Wolfgang Laib around the seasonal production of pollen. Eleanor Antin had herself photographed naked every day, in full-front and profile, while on a diet. These works feature acceptance of natural scales of time, like the rate of ice melting or of urban decay; time is also used as a material to be shaped or manipulated. Jan Dibbets preannounced a moment when he would appear on a certain balcony in Amsterdam and make a gesture of greeting. Douglas Huebler offered a reward for the capture of a wanted criminal, presumably accelerating the process. Jean Tinguely made exploding artworks like *Study for an End of the World*, 1961, and *Study for an End of the World, No. 2*, 1962. Graham's *Yesterday/Today*, 1975, presented a video monitor showing activity in a nearby room while an audiotape recorded in the same room exactly 24 hours earlier was played.

Ephemeral works are in part an attempt to avoid the processes of commodification and fetishism in which artworks favored by the formalist ideology seemed so deeply implicated. Many sited works also



avoid the system of commercial galleries and collectors, as does the use of the public mail as distribution system, a practice pioneered by Klein, Ed Higgins, Ray Johnson and others in the late '50s and still much in use today. The frequent involvement of Conceptual with Performance Art is a related means of enmeshing it in the real time of embodied human activities while simultaneously avoiding the commodifiable object. Richard Long's and Hamish Fulton's photo-documented cross-country walks hover at the interface between concept, performance, sculpture, and photography. Oppenheim contrasted experiential and conceptual time in *Time Line*, 1968, in which he walked through the snow along the boundary between two time zones, in the gap between two times yet leaving a trail as proof of passage. Linda Montano performed a piece of seven years' duration, in which she immersed herself constantly for one year in the symbolism of each of the centers recognized by Indian occult neurology, listening to its tone, dressing in and visualizing its color, and speaking each year in a different accent intended to embody the sense of the center then in effect. The scale of this piece raises real questions about the relation between art and life.

TRADITIONAL GALLERY AND MUSEUM SETTINGS ARE DESIGNED TO eliminate the sense of embeddedness in a socio-economic world and to create in its place a sense of ethereal-eternal presence like that valued in religious buildings. Yet, even within the gallery or museum setting, ways have been found to breach, if sometimes only gesturally, the traditional separation between art and life. In 1969, Hans Haacke installed a UPI news ticker-tape in the Museum of Modern Art, bringing the entire world, or a manifestation of the entire world in all its political and social problematic, inside. Bochner, in *Compass: Orientation*, 1969, drew the four cardinal directions on the gallery floor, emphasizing that the gallery was located in a surrounding world and that the work seen in it could not be autonomous and transcendent. In Lawrence Weiner's *A Wall Stained with Water*, 1969, the gallery was shown as found but, as the title indicates, with a focus on the inadvertent sign of its vulnerability to external forces that involve it in change and decay. In 1968, Smithson began exhibiting heaps of natural gravel; the material was conceived as, to a degree, bringing its outdoor site with it into the gallery. Mary Kelly located her work, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-79, in the net of causality by rooting its content in autobiography, specifically in the development of her child.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF BOTH THE FRANKFURT CRITICS AND LOUIS Althusser, the impulse arose to make artworks that would not only avoid

the traditional channels of commodification and fetishism but reveal them as well—artworks that would pry apart the unidirectionality of the culture industry and turn its own elements and strategies against it. The critique of the culture industry has prominently featured a critique of photography and an appropriation of advertising styles. Les Levine has placed socially oriented works composed of photographs and verbal messages on billboards and in the advertising spaces of subways. Victor Burgin has made photographs designed to look like advertising, adding texts intended to criticize the culture industry through its own look. Haacke has altered texts on advertising photographs in ways designed to reveal the tacit cooperation of the system of art commodification with the institutions of government and industry. Barbara Kruger's works of the '80s are a looser and somewhat more expressive variant of this mode. Birnbaum, Richard Prince, and others have variously incorporated the semiotics of advertising into their work.

Photography in this context is not art photography as such; sometimes it is its antithesis. Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and others have kept their photo-documentation amateurish in style and quality to avoid aestheticizing and commodifying effects. The use of instant photography has been favored for its emphasis on ephemerality, and the use of self-photography for its relation to images of solipsism and self-consciousness. The camera has had a kind of role as epistemological model; the once widespread belief in its objectivity has been discredited in part by the efforts of artists like Haacke and Burgin to reveal its uses as an instrument of propaganda and mystification. The wry critical composites of photographs and texts by Gilbert and George, Bill Beckley, and others tend also to reflect photography's involvement in the culture industry and its proliferation of illusions.

CONCEPTUAL ART'S DECONSTRUCTION OF FORMALIST ART THEORY and practice culminated in what has been called "the dematerialization of the art object." To a degree this was an unrealizable ideal; since the brain is a material thing and its operations have a chemical aspect, even mind-objects or language pieces are kinds of material objects. Nevertheless, there was a real meaning to the project, which was another expression of the fundamental idea of self-consciousness: if consciousness is of itself, then subjectivity is the object—the object, as an other, is eliminated. Klein, who first applied the term "dematerialization" to art, exhibited empty space several times, beginning in 1958; but he did so only after convincing himself that he had projected mental vibrations into it that were actually material, though of a material too fine for ordinary senses to perceive. He conceived



of these works in traditional genre terms, calling them invisible paintings and sculptures. In 1967, Buren and others exhibited visible paintings, but in a locked room where no one could see them. In 1968 Robert Barry exhibited his studio space, seemingly empty but actually filled with various electronic waves. In 1969 he stood in front of an audience and attempted to communicate to them telepathically the appearance of a work which they never physically saw. William Anastasi removed parts of gallery walls rather than adding something to the space. As the other side of dematerialization, Conceptual Art has analyzed the context in which the art object had once been contained, focusing on the system of market-related processes that surrounded it like a net. Michael Asher removed the partition wall dividing the gallery's exhibition space from its sales space, revealing, through subtractive means, the market system which surrounds the artwork while concealing itself. Haacke exhibited the market histories of paintings by artists like Edouard Manet and Georges Seurat. Broodthaers, Anastasi, Asher, Buren, and others have made works in which the wall label identifying the piece as art was the piece itself.

Related to immateriality and subtraction is the empty or hidden piece, which goes back to Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise*, 1916, and Picabia's painting presented to a Dada evening audience in its wrappings in the same year. Manzoni produced a line thousands of meters long, rolled it up, canned it, and buried it in the ground. Robin Winters, in 1984, installed his drawings under the bricks of the gallery floor. Douglas Davis, in 1974, buried a functioning video camera that recorded its own burial. A work of Bruce Nauman's was a concrete cubical chamber, with no entrance, buried in the ground, with a video camera operating inside it so the empty and buried interior could be seen in an aboveground monitor. The idea for this piece goes back through several stages to Klein's exhibition of the empty gallery, and forms part of a subgenre including Barry's exhibition of a closed gallery ("For the exhibition the gallery will be closed," read the sign on the door), Byars' Imaginary Museum, and various other pieces by Barry, Ian Wilson, and Tom Marioni in which the invitation to the show was in fact the artwork. In Barry's piece of this type, when one arrived at the Paul Mainz gallery in Cologne a sign on the door said "Paul Mainz gallery invites you to an exhibition by Robert Barry at Art and Progress, Amsterdam" for the following month. Art and Progress similarly would post on the door an invitation to galleria Sperone, Turin, the next month, and so on through seven galleries in different countries.

THE THEME OF IMMATERIALITY, HIDDENNESS, AND EMPTINESS IMPLIED as its corollary the positing of mind-stuff or consciousness as the true art material. Artworks had always been thrown onto the screen of consciousness to be perceived; now the screen itself, and its various processes, were to be made both the subject matter and the material of art attention. The theme of consciousness, and of its reflexive activity as self-consciousness, has been basic to Conceptual Art from the beginning—it has almost been its emblem or logo. Self-consciousness is a concept next door to solipsism, which is the idea that consciousness is only consciousness of one's self, and solipsism in turn is next door to tautology, which is the statement of self-sameness or identity. Conceptual Art has taken the rendering of these concepts as its special province. In 1963, Anastasi exhibited *Microphone*, a tape recorder that played back an audiotape on which the sound of its own operations had been recorded. The next year he exhibited photographs of gallery walls hung on the walls they represented, filmed a wall and projected the film onto the same wall, and so on. In 1968 Ian Burn photocopied a blank sheet of paper, then photocopied the copy, and so on through a hundred generations, presenting the results as a book; the page's moments of awareness of itself developed into a form and a content. A performative icon of elementary self-consciousness is found in reports of Allan Kaprow's private works of minimal human gesture performed without audience, documentation, reportage, existing only in the medium of immediate self-awareness.

In more detailed investigations it was possible to focus and isolate specific emotions, thoughts, or thought processes, such as imagining, relating, comparing, visualizing, or perceiving. When one turns a Huebler dot or line over 45 degrees in one's mind, then 90 degrees, and so on, it is the operations of consciousness that one is made aware of. One watches one's mind perform these simple turning movements as if watching a child learning to perform such movements with its hands. The unfamiliarity of one's own mental processes becomes apparent—how uninspected they are, and yet how susceptible to or available for inspection. The turning of one's own mind-stuff is focused, isolated, and presented to one's attention as an object. Something similar, though with added inner tensions, is produced by Dibbets' "Perspective Corrections," which he first did in 1967-69, in which objects are presented in ways that seem to deny perspectival foreshortening while in fact they are being seen perspectively but their shape is other than what one had thought. One corrects the corrected perspective and then recorrects it again. Here mental processes are the material or medium. There is a certain formalism to this type of work. Weiner's early word pieces often involved the isolation



of specific mental operations triggered by linguistic directions, such as *to the sea, on the sea, from the sea, and bordering the sea*, all 1970. Such work investigates parts of speech, in this case prepositions, concentrating on the single mental operation that differs from one prepositional formulation to another. Like turning one of Huebler's imaginary lines around in one's head, one similarly turns Weiner's tiny word pieces, or turns that part of the conceptual stuff which registers distinctions such as those between prepositions. Noematic or imaginary objects become artworks by deliberate impetus of the mind-stuff in a certain direction, the bestowing of the impetus being the art act. Weiner's piece entitled *Floatable Objects Thrown into Inland Waterways One Each Month for 7 Years*, 1969, is not a performance to be acted out, but a complex image to be constructed and beheld in the mind. Byars has presented the receiver's imagination with less specific suggestive phrases like *The Perfect Book*, 1981, or *The Exhibition of Perfect*, 1983; from such hints the viewer obtains a kind of transfer of mental atmosphere. Somewhere between the hidden and the imaginary falls Barry's piece *Psychic Series*, 1969: "Everything in the unconscious/perceived by the senses but not/noted by the conscious mind/during trips to Baltimore,/during the summer of 1967." Or, "Something which can never be any specific thing," 1969. Or, "It is wholly indeterminate, has no specific traits, is entirely ineffable, is never seen, and is not accessible," 1970. Such encapsulations of indefinite millions of data encompass whole shelf-loads of unwritten novels in their brief suggestiveness. They have something of the evocativeness associated with the fragments of Presocratic philosophy or of early Greek lyric poetry.

TO A CONSIDERABLE DEGREE THE COMPLEX OF STRATEGIES FORMING Conceptual Art was first defined negatively, as an anti-art, by the complex of strategies it was attempting to replace, those of formalist painting and sculpture. Its early form was to a degree determined, or controlled, by the form of what it was criticizing. This aspect has been acted out in a series of pieces in which the artist claims to retire from the practice of art (that is, from formalist commodity-making) as a demonstration of his or her real seriousness about art in a broader or deeper sense. Again, Duchamp was the great prototype—or anyway the myth that he quit art for chess-playing, thereby apparently laying claim to a superior cultural and intellectual position. In the period of first-generation conceptualism such gestures were a common motif—a material, really. Baldessari gave an exhibition that consisted of the ashes of his paintings in 1970. Venet predicted in 1967 that he would quit artmaking four years thence—that is, the instructions for his

projected series of pieces ended that way. In 1963 Robert Morris issued a "Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal." In 1981 Ian Burn wrote "Memoirs of an ex-conceptual artist." In 1985 Ben Vautier sent a postcard saying, "No more art," to which Joseph Beuys replied with a postcard saying "I here resign from art." In 1965 a group of painters including Daniel Buren took down their paintings from an exhibition and distributed a flyer saying "We are not painters." And so on. Beuys's piece *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated*, 1964, is a kind of reverse example of this genre, expressing his frustration at Duchamp for a confused dichotomy that he left for later artists: if nonart has been declared art, then quitting art is not really quitting. What can be the distinction between practicing art by practicing it and practicing art by not practicing it?

It was this kind of dichotomized thinking that caused Conceptual Art to be called "anti-art." But the term "anti-art" was never exactly right. Conceptual Art is not innately inimical to formal object art—it may be used that way, but it is not innately so; it is itself a formal means with its own characteristic range of objecthood. The fierceness of this dichotomy was a result of the history of the theory of art more than of the history of art. It was a kind of Manichaeian split forced by the repressive practice of formalist theoreticians and critics who artificially attempted to ban language and concept, and with them thought and discourse and in fact culture and psychology, from the visual arts. The puritanical excesses once performed in the service of Soul were paralleled by the formalistic excesses in the service of aesthetic feeling. The conflict between faith and reason was replayed on a small stage in the realm of art, and reason lost. Reason became the old antagonist again, now called not Anti-Christ but Anti-Art.

In a sense the polarization of art over the form/content, or senses/mind, issue was fortunate, because in trying to back away from conceptual aspects of the art experience several things were achieved. Abstract types of representation not formerly prominent in the western tradition were to an extent worked out, and such advocates as Clement Greenberg developed a vocabulary and discourse to describe them with impressive clarity—indeed, with the almost spooky clarity of a discourse that does not see beyond itself. Even more important, a new genre—or rather one that had always existed but had not before been made explicit in discourse—was forced out into the open. Born in the heat of combat, and with the brand of the Anti-Art upon it, the new medium—Conceptual Art—seemed to promise a new future. This future unfolded through two different strategies.



IN THE 1960S MANY ARTISTS JUST EMERGING FROM ART SCHOOLS found themselves in the environment of Abstract Expressionism, which seemed foreign to them in many ways. They saw their course as the single-minded deconstruction of the old paradigm. Modernism had to be taken apart plank by plank and abolished without regret. A strategy emerged whereby Conceptual Art would be a kind of epistemology, through which cracks in the cognitive apparatus might be focused and inspected, somewhat like the effects of reflecting on a koan. Out of this impulse arose the classical Conceptual Art, which has been called “strong,” “hardline,” “analytic,” and “exclusive.” Alongside this strategy arose another, called variously “weak,” “synthetic,” and “inclusive.”<sup>15</sup> Generally the two tendencies appealed to different artists and generated different groups which, aware of an ideological divide between them, became more or less parties.

In the hard-line group, artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry, Bernar Venet and the Art and Language Group seemed, especially in the anti-Modernist decade, to be working on Duchamp’s injunction to put art back in the service of the mind. As the aesthetic faculty had been expressed puritanically by late Modernist abstractionists, so now the cognitive faculty was expressed puritanically. The “complete break from formal aesthetic considerations”<sup>16</sup> was underlined by various reversals. Whereas art and science had formerly been in opposition, “the subject of Venet’s work is the documentation of science.”<sup>17</sup> Whereas cognition had been despised in comparison with direct aesthetic apprehension, now “books have become an increasingly important medium for Conceptual Art, often taking the place of exhibitions.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas art’s ideological agenda had been hidden beneath the decoration of its aesthetic surface, artists such as Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke “turned the violence of the mimetic process back onto the ideological apparatus itself.”<sup>19</sup> What had formerly seemed the metaphysical autonomy of the artwork gave way to “an inquiry... into the ontological status of the art object...” Whereas language, as conceptual and hence cognitive, had formerly been excluded from the artwork, now “a self-reflexive inquiry into art’s linguistic structure...could itself be an artwork.”<sup>20</sup>

Such work was anti-Modernist anti-art, meaning that it was primarily concerned with clearing and sterilizing the field rather than with reseeding it with new forms. “Strong” or “exclusive” or “hardline” Conceptualism was based on “restricted, analytically focused and explicitly philosophical definitions.”<sup>21</sup> It was undiluted by elements of other media, such as painting and sculpture; it tended to be exclusively based on language, or on language in combination with photography (“photo-text”). It tended to reject represen-

tation in favor of an insistence on tautology—on each thing being itself and nothing else. Works like Anastasi’s *Microphone*, 1963 (a tape-recorder playing the sound of its own mechanism), reduce art to cognitive directness and simplicity with only residual elements of aesthetic design. Often this work seemed to sense the sublime underlying the mysteries of cognition, as it had once loomed over the aesthetic. This was an aspect of its anti-Modernism, reproducing the traits of its enemy, like drinking its blood.

SO-CALLED WEAK, OR DILUTED OR INCLUSIVE CONCEPTUALISM embodied a different strategy. It avoided the pitfall of simply reversing the Modernist hierarchy of the faculties but leaving hierarchy itself in place. It acknowledged a “diverse and historically inclusive use of the term Conceptual art”<sup>22</sup> and did not feel itself to be polluted by entering into hybrid media with other genres, such as Conceptual painting, Conceptual sculpture and installation art. Basically it accepted all three faculties as necessary to the human being. Strong Conceptualism was formalistic in the sense of Aristotelian logic, which dealt with the forms of argumentation without attending to the contents. The more diverse, hybrid and inclusive Conceptualism was more concerned with content, and spread around the world in the wake of post-colonial issues. In other terms, the distinction is described as between “self-reflexive Conceptual art and the more issue-based global Conceptualism.”<sup>23</sup> In terms of logic there is a parallelism with the distinction between deduction, which is puristic and formalist, and induction, which is conditioned and bound to content.

In most historical overviews, strong Conceptualism seems to have made the original statement which was later diluted by weak Conceptualism. But in fact the two strategies appeared almost simultaneously. In 1961 the American Fluxus artist Henry Flynt had invented the term “concept art,” meaning an art whose materials were concepts rather than paint, metal, wood and so on; the term was published in 1963.<sup>24</sup> The slightly revised form “conceptual art,” used by Sol LeWitt in an *Artforum* article of 1967,<sup>25</sup> was adopted widely, and at about that time hardline Conceptualism such as the *Proto-Investigations* of Kosuth began to appear. But almost immediately a counterstatement was made by John Baldessari, Bill Beckley, and others who refused to treat cognition with the kind of reverential hush with which the aesthetic faculty had once been treated. Their work, reintroducing humor as a respectable part of cognition, was the first sign that Conceptual Art was not going to be limited to a puristic or hardline mode but could expand its range by allowing in other elements than strictly formalized cognition.



During this very early phase of hybridization there was an implied reminder that humor had been one of the key parts of the Duchampian legacy, which hard-line Conceptualism, with its quasi-religious veneration of the purity of consciousness, had omitted.

Hard-line Conceptualists disliked the mockery of the cognitive sublime by Baldessari, who employed humor, especially in the relationship between photo and text—and whose work Kosuth called “cartoons” of Conceptual Art.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it could not be denied that the Duchampian legacy, which presided over it all with a kind of ultimate authority, had foregrounded humor and mockery as a means to disparage the solemn and transcendental, or to put them into a more realistic context.

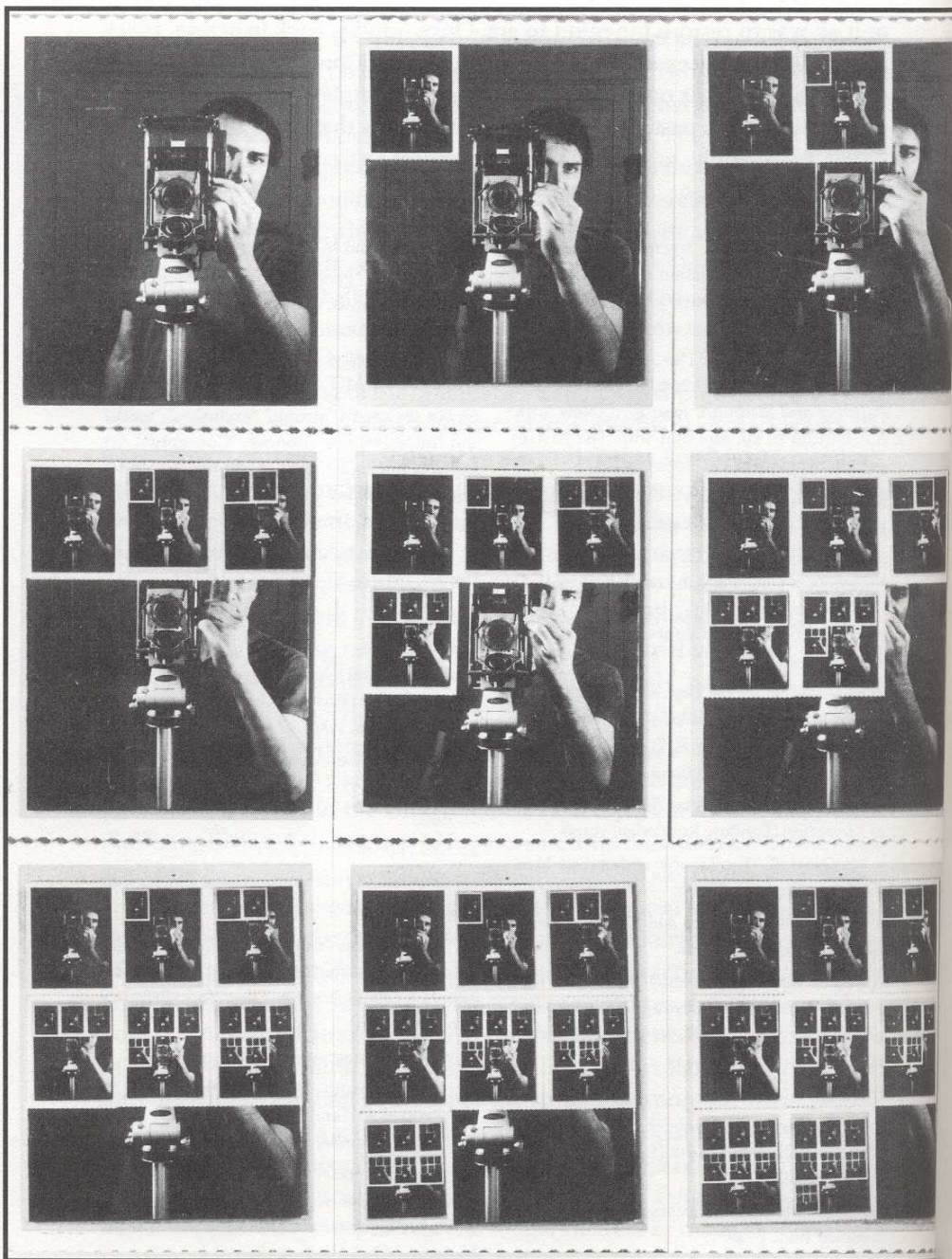
The first loosening of the boundaries also mingled Conceptualism with Performance (as in the many photographic works by Baldessari where the artist plays a part beyond clicking the shutter). James Lee Byars created another early mode of inclusive Conceptualism in the late 1960s, contributing his delicate atmospheric combinations of Conceptualism and Performance, and at the same time introducing a multicultural aspect through the influence which Shintoism had exerted on him in Japan.

Inclusive or hybrid Conceptualism has expanded steadily, fusing with other media, forming new genres such as Conceptual sculpture (as with the work of Jannis Kounellis and Rebecca Horn) and Conceptual painting (as in the work of Sherrie Levine and Mike Bidlo). After the self-conscious dawning of post-Modernism in the art discourse in the early '80s, a somewhat younger group of artists began to concentrate on multiculturalism and post-colonial issues in the United States; Renee Greene, Mel Chin, Maura Sheehan, Elaine Reichek and others created installations of Conceptual sculpture dedicated to promoting critical insight into situations from history and the news. “The need for an urgent response to social and political conditions encouraged artists in the Soviet Union, South Korea, China, and parts of Africa to abandon formalist or traditional art practices for conceptual art.”<sup>27</sup> As Conceptual Art fused with far-flung cultures, sub-genres such as post-colonial installation work have come to be practiced round the world. In recent years hardline or exclusive Conceptual Art has faded somewhat into the ever-expanding presence of the softer and more inclusive modes. To some this seems a weakening of the force of the Conceptual approach, which seems to be dissolving into reformed practices of traditional media such as painting and sculpture. But whether there is a puristically separate, hardline genre of Conceptual Art no longer matters as much as it did forty or fifty years ago, when art was nearly suffocating for want of it. The purpose

of it all was to restore the mind to art. Once mind is back in action, every medium that truly exercises it becomes a form of Conceptual Art. But this does not mean that one can let the original principles go now, like things whose purpose is past. The forces and conditions that once attempted, so nearly successfully, to remove art from critical self-consciousness are still alive and active.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logioco-Philosophicus*, English translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1972), 6.421, p. 71.
2. Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” in Henry Geldzahler, ed., *New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970* (New York: E.P. Dutton in conjunction with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969), p. 345.
3. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons [Capricorn Books], 1958), pp. 63-64.
4. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols., English translation by R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press [Loeb Classical Library], 1966) vol. 2, p. 345 (viii.12).
5. For example in *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Metaphysics*, English translation by R. George (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).
7. Max Kozloff, “The Trouble with Art-as-Idea,” *Artforum*, Sept. 1977, p. 37.
8. James Collins, “Things and Theories,” *Artforum*, May 1973, pp. 32-36.
9. James Johnson Sweeney, *Interview with Marcel Duchamp*, in Lucy Lippard, ed., *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), pp. 141-142.
10. Ibid.
11. John Bird and Michael Newman, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 2.
12. Peter Osborne, “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” *ibid.*, p. 48.
13. John Bird and Michael Newman, *ibid.*, p. 2.
14. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* (Summer, 1967), pp. 79-84; republished in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 12-17.
15. For the terms “strong,” “exclusive,” “weak,” and “inclusive” see Osborne, “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” pp. 48-49; for “hardline” Conceptualism see Bird and Newman, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, p. 10.
16. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972), p. xi.
17. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
18. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
19. Benjamin Buclou, in exh. cat. *l'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989), p. 53.
20. Osborne, “Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy,” p. 5.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
23. Bird and Newman, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, p. 10.
24. Henry Flynt, “Concept Art,” in LaMonte Young and Jackson McLow, eds., *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (New York: Privately published, 1963).
25. LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.”
26. Joseph Kosuth, “Art after Philosophy, II: ‘Conceptual Art’ and Recent Art,” *Studio International* (November, 1969), pp. 160-161.
27. Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss in exh. cat. *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: The Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. vii.





WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Nine Polaroid Photographs of a Mirror*, 1967.

CHAPTER FIVE

## William Anastasi

### *Talk About Dumb*

**M**CEVILLEY: *How did your connection with Duchamp begin?*

ANASTASI: I remember hitchhiking to the museum in Philadelphia at age thirteen or fourteen. It was the first time I had ever gone to a museum. I don't know why I went. The Arensburg collection was already there. What struck me about it was not only that Duchamp's work was different from everybody else's, but that every Duchamp was so completely different from every other Duchamp. I thought either this guy's completely lost, or I'm completely lost.

*M: Were you reading books about art in Philadelphia at that time?*

A: No. But by the mid-50s I was buying Skira books, all of them that I could get my hands on in Philadelphia, everything from Lascaux to Mondrian. I didn't read them, but I tore them to bits and mounted the color reproductions on museum board. I literally covered almost up to the ceiling all the walls of every room—kitchen, bedroom, living room, dining room—a hundred or more Skira pictures in every room. I had discovered in listening to music that repeated exposure to a piece by, say, Mozart or Beethoven, just increased my love for it; this was a naive attempt to test that experience with pictures.

*M: What was your exposure to literature like in this period?*

A: By the time I was twenty I had discovered *Finnegans Wake*, and I would read that aloud. Learning to read that aloud was quite an important influence. I'm still doing it. I'm on my second time through the book. My word paintings now are divided into three categories: words that are in that book, words that are not, and words that are in it only once. There's a concordance, you know. The words that are not in it at all are interesting, like "degenerate," "self-pity," "athlete." You could make quite a poem, which I'm going to do, using the words that are not in *Finnegans Wake*.

*M: What other literary influences are you aware of?*



A: Kafka. I don't remember when it was. I was reading either "Description of a Struggle" or "In the Penal Colony," and I thought, This guy is really other. Gradually I came to think that we may have had in this century someone who in some respects was the greatest writer who ever lived. He himself said, What I am doing is not literature, and he was right, his work is a special case. I can at any time be brought into another world by reading Kafka, especially if I do it aloud. I do all my reading aloud now except newspapers and shopping lists.

M: *You moved to New York about 1960?*

A: It would have been more like 1962.

M: *What about your first one-person show?*

A: That was in 1964, at the Washington Square Gallery, on La Guardia Place. An enormous space. I showed a lot of different things there. There were some big color paintings of Donald Duck on corrugated cardboard. When I was a kid I could draw Donald Duck from memory. So I thought it was kind of automatic. It was the closest thing to automatic drawing I could do. I also showed collages made by ripping up and re-folding used cardboard boxes. And *Sink*, a piece from 1963. Water was poured on a piece of blue steel. It was wonderful how much it wanted to rust. I pour water on it and within an hour I've got blisters of rust. When the water's all evaporated I douse it again. The title *Sink* has to do with the diminution of the plate of steel as it inevitably rusts away.

M: *Aside from drawing a familiar icon from childhood, did you attempt in other ways to attain an automatic mode of drawing?*

A: In 1963 I did drawings in India ink that I called *Constellations*. I did them blind, closing my eyes and listening to Wanda Landowska's recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, not following the sound, but just using it as a period of time so I would know when to stop. I did 96, one for each Prelude and one for each Fugue. The drawings were made of dots. I found that if I didn't look where I was putting the dots, it turned out better than if I did look.

M: *You got better results with your eyes closed?*

A: A thousand times better.

M: *Results that your eye liked better?*

A: Anyone I showed them to liked them better, anyone. Then in 1964 I started doing blind drawings that were scribbles instead of dots.

M: *What were you aware of in the art of that time?*

A: I knew Guston's work, and DeKooning, Pollock, Newman, Rothko.

M: *You knew that these guys were the masters of an age that was kind of ending, right?*

A: I don't know that I knew it was ending.

M: *But you were already introducing elements of randomness or renunciation of control—the blind technique, for example—that would seem to suggest a sense that an age was ending and things were changing in an unpredictable way.*

A: I was very dumb then as far as these things are concerned. It might have been intuitive.

M: *Weren't you already involved in sound pieces at that time, say 1964?*

A: Yes. In 1963 I did a piece called *Microphone*. On 8th Street I put a monaural tape recorder in a closet to eliminate as many external sounds as possible and hung a microphone above it and recorded the sound the recording mechanism makes; the empty reel got filled with a recording of the recorder recording the recorder. Then I played it back through the machine at the same volume as the sound the machine makes. You have two versions of the same sound going in and out of phase with one another. Since the electrical cycles which determine the speed are not constant, you get a symphony of constantly changing relationships.

M: *It's a favorite of mine. The tape recorder recording its own sound is an image reduced to the essentials of perception, to an absolutely basic and irreducible consciousness. It reminds me of Aristotle's idea of the essence of reality as "the thought that thinks itself," or "the cognition that cognizes itself." The idea is that if you strip away all the static that makes the world of form and change, what would be left finally is an absolutely fundamental consciousness that underlies everything yet has no content since all it does is know itself; it goes round and round just being aware of itself all the time. And this self-knowing consciousness is the engine driving the universe. Microphone seems to embody that perfectly in an image. I have the sense that these kinds of resonances are really present in the pieces, though at the time you made them you probably were not conscious of them.*

A: Not conscious.

M: *Yet intuitively this piece involves the idea of stripping down to a really fundamental sense of what there is.*

A: Yes.

M: *And what is left is this consciousness that is just knowing itself or its own activity or its sound or atmosphere or whatever.*

A: The tape recorder was a very nice way of doing that. It might be the first technology that very easily did that. If you did it with a record, say, it wouldn't be as compact. Here the head that records it and the head that plays it are the same. So what I did is very dumbly saw that something



existed to show something that didn't really exist before.

M: *Were you consciously influenced by Cage's work yet?*

A: I knew about Cage when this idea came to me. By 1965 I already had the recording of the *Aria with Fontana Mix*. I don't think it would have occurred to me to do this if I hadn't known about him. It was clear that he was absolutely on the edge, maybe more than any visual artist I knew of.

M: *Cage seems to have showed visual artists ways out of the conventions of the New York School, conventions so strong they might have been almost impossible to get out of by purely visual means. Did you know of Cage's work using silence, 4'33"?*

A: I don't think I knew of it yet, though I think I did by the time the wall on the wall came along, two years later.

M: *In any case, the central element of Microphone—this embodiment of solipsistic consciousness—doesn't seem to derive from Cage's work. It's a very different idea from recording ambient sound and so on. Yet you've said that you think Microphone came in some way, in part at least, from your knowledge of Cage's work.*

A: It's just as though he gave carte blanche that I and so many people tried to use.

M: *He gave permission, yes. And also may have directed you toward using the tape recorder.*

A: I met Cage in 1965, when I was preparing for the *Sound Objects* show at Virginia Dwan's gallery. That was when I had a studio on Greene Steet. While I was working on these things there, Virginia asked me if I would contribute a drawing to a charity exhibition. I agreed, and one day she called and said someone was coming to my studio to pick the drawing up. It turned out that Cage was involved with this charity, and I was incredulous when he himself showed up at my studio. He had heard, probably from Virginia, that I was making sound pieces, and he said that was why he had come himself—he was interested in hearing them. At the moment he came I was trying to devise a way to have the different sounds play in sequence and he gave me very good advice, which I foolishly did not follow, to play them all at once. The gallery was afraid they'd be hard to sell individually if we did that. None of them sold anyway.

M: *Sound Objects, 1966, was your second one-person show, and the first of your four shows at Dwan's, right? In a picture of the installation it's hard to see what the pieces individually are.*

A: These were objects exhibited along with the sounds they made. One is an inner tube; the speaker plays the sound of the air coming out of it.

Another was the sound of a large glass jug falling and breaking on a cinder block; you see the broken jug and the block, and you hear the sound of the crash. Another one was a barrel that I chopped up, and beside it the axe I used; the tape plays the sound of that action. The breaking glass sound takes just a second or two; the chopping takes a few minutes. Another one was a pulley and the sound it makes. Another was a fan, and a tape of the fan's sound. Another was a power saw, another an inflated tube and the pump that inflated it. Another a pneumatic drill and some asphalt it broke up, and the sound.

M: *I've always thought of these works of yours, and some other later works, as involving the theme of tautology—the kind of statement where the subject and the predicate are the same, and no information is added to the assertion of identity. Tautology, A is A, is kind of like solipsism, the idea that only oneself exists. Microphone is a masterpiece of tautology and solipsism. The sound objects are right in there too: the tape recorder that records itself, the thing and the sound it makes.*

*Tautology was one of the great themes of classical Conceptual Art as it has occasionally been a great theme for philosophers. It comes and goes in the history of thought, the fascination with tautology.*

A: Someone said to me once, "Everything is everything." For some reason I'm reminded of that.

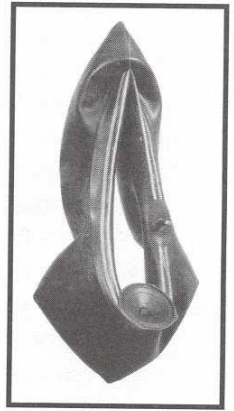
M: *Tautology stresses what logicians call the First Law of Thought, that everything is itself, which is the opposite of everything is everything. Everything is everything is a definition of infinity, and tautology is the opposite of infinity. It's the insistence that each thing is itself and is nothing but itself, and expresses itself only as itself; so each object in the world becomes almost completely isolated by the puristic reduction of cutting away from it everything except its selfhood.*

*I'm wondering where this impulse was coming from at that time. It must have something to do with the ultra-expressionist art of the moment that was passing, like Action Painting and existentialism. The theme of tautology in early Conceptual Art may come out of the kind of solipsistic self-obsessiveness, and obsessive introspection, of the expressionist artists of the late '50s, the New York School.*

A: It could be an intuitive reaction against it.

M: *Or an intuitive extension of it.*

A: Yes, in its way.



WILLIAM ANASTASI,  
*Innertube*, 1964



M: *The obsession with tautology in Conceptual Art has something to do with the critique of representation that was really, perhaps, its main theme—that one thing cannot represent another, because each thing is irredeemably and uncompromisedly itself.*

*The Sound Objects show embodied the analytic quality of early Conceptual Art. It makes one think of the relationship between image and sound, or between the visual and the auditory modes of perception. Conceptual Art in general approached this topic through language, in a tradition that goes back to Magritte. You know, in the painting that shows the pipe and the words “This is not a pipe”—the most obvious point is that it’s a representation of a pipe, which is very different from being a pipe. A major concern of Conceptual Art in its youth so to speak was the critique of representation as somehow lacking reality compared with real presence. And at the same time there was this concern with the incongruency between different modes of representation, such as the visual and the verbal. They’re both supposed to represent the same thing, but they’re not alike at all. So the whole question of the relationship between modes of representation and between them and the presented thing arises.*

A: It’s dumb. I mean at the time I wrote, as a kind of policy about making art, “One, just one. And simple. As simple as simple. Even dumb.” The *Sound Objects* are like that. It’s one and it’s dumb. It’s the nose on your face.

M: *That’s the tautological part, that dumbness as you call it. It’s so basic. It’s like you’re looking around for something but it’s too close to you to see, it’s like your own skin.*

A: I like dumb things. If it’s dumb in the right way it’s brilliant. I tried to make it as dumb as I could.

M: *It’s very dumb indeed, Bill.*

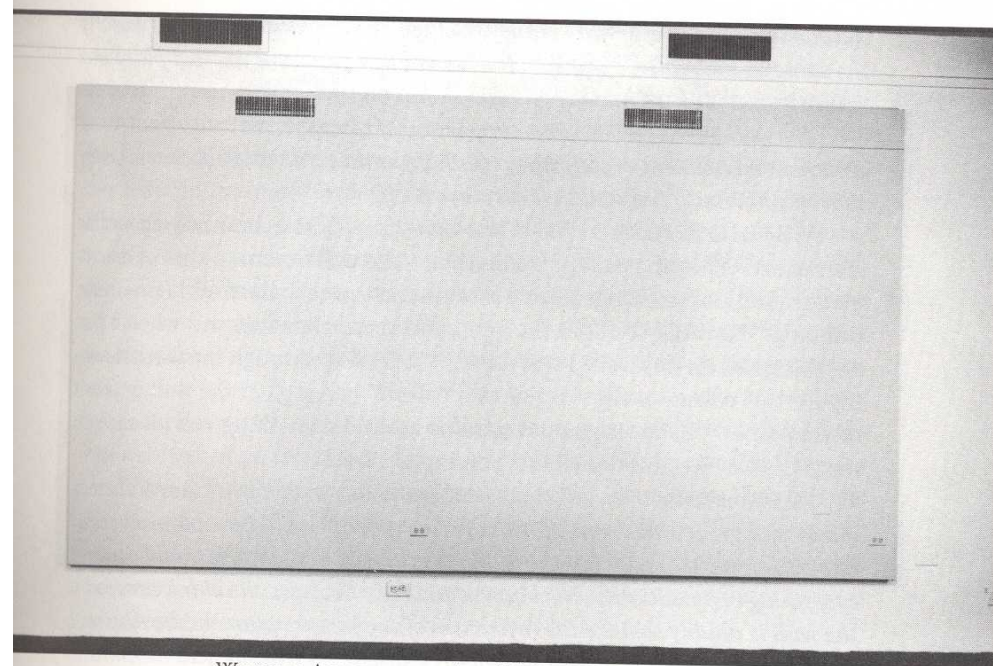
A: Thank you, Tom.

M: *Can you describe your second Dwan show, in 1967?*

A: Every wall of the Dwan gallery had a silkscreened photomural of itself, slightly smaller than itself, mounted on it. Six walls in all. I called the exhibition *Six sites*, or, familiarly, the wall on the wall.

M: *The wall on the wall seems to sum up the preoccupations of classical Conceptual Art: the relationship of the context to the thing; the dichotomy between presence and representation; dematerialization and tautology.*

A: For me the meaning of the wall on the wall is expressed in a Kafka quote which I discovered when that show was up. I didn’t find it in a book of Kafka but in a book of quotes. (I’ve never yet found it in Kafka.) It goes: “You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen.



WILLIAM ANASTASI, west wall from *Six Sites*, 1963

Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”

M: *For all its dumbness this work—let’s take the wall on the wall as the quintessential example of it—knots together a whole cluster of complicated issues. There’s the tradition of the painting as a window into another reality. You hang the painting on the wall and through the painting you see right through the wall. The wall on the wall caricatures that idea. You look at the picture on the wall and you’re still looking at the wall. It’s interesting what Gregory Battcock wrote in ARTS magazine (Dec.-Jan. 1971): “William Anastasi offered paintings that seem to acknowledge the obstructive character of painting by making paintings of the walls that the paintings were to be placed upon. Thus the covered up area, the area that traditionally suffers at the expense of the imperialism of painting, was acknowledged to exist and actually illustrated.” That’s interesting about the covered up area; that’s the area that the illusionistic depth of the painting is supposed to almost annihilate, to metaphysically transcend. The wall on the wall is an ultimate parody of*



that denigration of everyday reality. You look at the illusion and it's exactly the same as the reality behind it. It does not free you from the real place but returns you to it with intensified attention.

The wall on the wall is like a translation of Microphone into visual form. Another embodiment of solipsism: the thought that thinks itself, the recorder that records itself, the wall that displays itself.

A: Brian O'Doherty, in *The White Cube*, says, "...the show had a peculiar after effect. When the paintings came down the wall became a kind of ready-made mural and so changed every show in that space thereafter." I remember thinking, "How old-fashioned it's going to seem after I do this when I put anything else on this wall." I was saying, "Why skip through the world looking for this corner or that corner to idealize?" Just look at the wall in front of your face. Whenever you put a frame around something you idealize it; that's the way we emotionally respond to the frame.

M: In one sense the wall on the wall represents potentiality. As Mallarmé made that great statement that the perfect poem would be a blank sheet of paper, seeming to mean that containing nothing in actuality, it would contain everything in potentiality. The blank wall is like that and the blank canvas on the wall is doubly so. Like the mysticism of the picture plane in the Abstract Expressionist era, that the picture plane was like a metaphysical membrane from which images could emerge or on which they could be born. The wall on the wall is like a questioning of the wall's surface, almost a request that it express its intentions, or intimate its future, the pictures that will hang on it hereafter. So it has a relationship to Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and to the monochrome painting in general.

A: In a way yes, and in a way no. Didn't Rauschenberg say the *White Paintings* were to show the viewers' shadows?

M: He said that at times; but when they were shown at the Betty Parsons gallery in 1951 he said they were "one white as one god"; he saw them then, or anyway described them, as religious surfaces.

A: With that I feel a greater affinity to this—but there's still quite a difference. I think of Cézanne. He was the first in our hemisphere to realize that the artist was leaving out the reality of the flat surface. Before him artists considered the canvas surface as the one thing exempt from their consideration of the world—it was merely a battleground, and in that sense taken for granted—an arena for their three dimensional tricks. Cézanne was saying that that flat surface is a part of nature too, and an extremely important part. Once that was said it was inevitable that an all white painting would sooner or later happen.

M: The reductionism of it is meaningful. In terms of the philosophical attitude that this period of art unconsciously expressed, there's the sense, as we've discussed before, that an ideological framework is being erased or dissolved, and that there's a very difficult question of how to find one's way to an open space or to another framework. One possibility is through a solipsistic emphasis on tautology which extends the Abstract Expressionist obsession with introspection—just going inward and inward constantly, always dumber and dumber, until somehow you come out into a new reality. But another possibility is to multiply and complicate everything until everything becomes infinite and everything is everything. Because infinity is an open space, a potential space with things not yet separated out into identity and actuality. In Egyptian mythology they talk about the primal ocean which was there before anything (this is one source of the opening passage of Genesis). All the gods were mixed up together in the ocean like a soup. Then separation started and first one form then another popped up out of the surface. Then in time each thing undergoes meltdown and sinks back into the soup. The finite figure returns into the infinite ground again. So these themes of tautology, which is the remorseless entrapment of your selfhood in itself, and of infinity, which is the opposite, these themes are actually intensely related.

A: So the question is which way are you going, buddy—into the surface or out of it?

M: Yes, there's a connection with the Abstract Expressionist mysticism of the surface, isn't there? The salvific or redemptionist feeling toward the surface. Barnett Newman's mature work was about this, too. I understand when he first showed the zip paintings at Betty Parsons' in '56 or so there was a joke that went around to the effect that the monochrome with the central stripe looks like an elevator door—but is it closing or opening?

A: Which way you going, again.

M: Yeah. But let's think about that connection with Abstract Expressionism. It was a very metaphysical mode of aesthetic feeling. And of course this work of yours and certain other work of its time, the classical early Conceptual Art, renounced that mode of aesthetics and that style of metaphysics. Yet still there is a continuity, in the shared idea of the surface as a membrane of potentiality. And in the reductionism of the work, which, like Minimalism, is a continuation of the hidden mysticism of Greenbergian formalism.

Greenberg said that each art mode should strip away everything that is unnecessary or non-essential to it. The Minimalists did this with sculpture and painting. This work does it with cognition and conceptualization. Microphone is like a block of stone. Its simplicity is breathtaking. It's like



when Lao Tzu says, *They want sculpture? Give them the unhewn block—or something like that.*

*Yet the idea of the religious surface is both straightforwardly asserted by the wall on the wall and outrageously parodied by it, because it doesn't posit a beyond. It secularizes the religious or utopian idea.*

A: The connection with the site had a religious power too. The big argument between Virginia and me at that time was, is it art if it goes on another wall? I said it was only a souvenir then. I said I don't know if it's art even on your wall; but I do know that on another wall it clearly becomes a souvenir of a piece that no longer exists. That was at the age of thirty-three. At the age of fifty-six it doesn't seem so clear.

Another thing that was occurring to me at the time was the Platonic idea that in a truly civilized utopian situation art would not be necessary. In the '60s it seemed to me that the individual death that we all had to contemplate in the past had now changed so that we had to contemplate collective death as well; now the hardware was in place to effect that. I remember sort of ironically telling people, Oh this is bomb art.

M: *The wall on the wall you called bomb art?*

A: Yes. I meant bomb art because the nuclear age had changed everything. I mean, just looking ahead to the morning after, if we ever did it, we would realize instantly how unnecessary decoration is and how wonderful plain reality is if it's accessible. It's like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, when the girl gets to come back, and she realizes how fast everything went, and she wants to slow it down. She just has the privilege of being at the breakfast of her family and she can't believe how beautiful and how rich it is. Like the Kafka passage. The bomb seemed to put this idea in our consciousness in an even clearer way. So I remember thinking maybe it's too late, because of this situation which has never happened in history before, maybe it's too late, as I've said earlier, for artists to keep skipping through reality choosing this corner or that corner to idealize.

M: *It's what Theodor Adorno meant when he said that after Auschwitz to write poetry is obscene.*

A: That's exactly it. So it was as though for a moment, as an artist, I had sensed a little bit of the morning, the day after. I thought, you show me a wall and I'll show you a beautiful work of art, you show me a place where you want the art to go and I'll show you the place itself as the art.

M: *So is the wall on the wall bomb art in the sense of wiping the slate clean?*

A: Not really. It's as though I had already read that Kafka quote. What

was amazing to me was that I discovered that quote while the wall on the wall show was up. John has said that his favorite piece of his own music is 4'33".

M: *Did you know about that piece at the time?*

A: I'm pretty sure I did.

M: *I think that the whole tradition of the monochrome painting in the 20th century has to do with the theme of the violent end of the world. Wiping the slate clean, melting down all images. There was this first wave of monochrome activity right after World War I, with Malevich and Rodchenko and so forth. Then another wave of it right after World War II with Klein and Manzoni and so on. It seems to me that the monochrome wave of the '50s was about something, namely about the nuclear endgame. Though they talked about them as metaphysically charged icons of the absolute, this absolute involved the end of the world of form. It was all bomb art in a sense. All that reductionism.*

*Art in our century has been preoccupied with the idea of the end of the world—because of the Hegelian idea that history would end soon, which involves the end of the world as we know it. Often this is not very conscious, as in metaphysical paintings of the '50s, with titles like Newman's Day Before One and Pollock's The Deep. It was really conscious in some works of Tinguely's, those pieces in which he got a lot of stuff together in the desert in Nevada and blew it all up; he called them Studies for an End of the World. That's the purest piece of bomb art I know of. But in many ways, some overt, some hidden, some partially realized, the whole era was preoccupied with the theme.*

A: I think Marcel had something to do with that. By around 1914 his works were saying, Forget it, you guys. It's over; you're through. He made it the end of a world instantly. Everything everyone else was doing became old fashioned instantly. One thing he did not address, which is the subject of the wall on the wall, is how old-fashioned it is to bring in another reality and hang it in front of this reality. Did I tell you about his visit to the *Six Sites* exhibition? Virginia introduced me as the artist who had done these paintings. As he was shaking my hand he simply said, "Yes." Then he went to the guest book which people were signing. Half of the left hand page was filled. He didn't sign there, or on the blank right hand page; he turned the page and signed in the middle of the next right hand page of an otherwise blank spread. As soon as he left Virginia closed the book, put it away and put another one out.

M: *There is another sense in which Duchamp's work can be seen as a part of this end of the world theme. When you put, say, a snow shovel on the wall*



and a label next to it, it's like you're showing archeological remnants of a destroyed civilization. This was found there, and this and this—just random ordinary everyday stuff. The place where random everyday stuff is exhibited is in archeological museums.

The theme of the void and the theme of entrapment in finiteness have both been keynotes of the last generation or so. Back to Plato, or in a sense even back to ancient Egypt, one has had available the idea of epistemological entrapment—that we're entrapped within our own minds and within the limitations of our minds, or within our own sets of projections and preconceptions. But in the 20th century the idea of entrapment also got the external meaning of the genuine end of the world. We're evidently trapped within a set of epistemological projections so successful that they have created a physical entrapment that is exactly equivalent. So the trap and the void are two faces of a coin. The trap leaves you facing the void; the void offers a way out of the trap but you're not sure you want it that bad.

All of that great art of the '50s—they didn't really see it yet. They thought they were breaking through the epistemological entrapment to the metaphysical beyond. Actually, it was right there in the most material historical way right around them.

A: They were breathing it. It was coming out in their work.

M: It was coming out in their work, but in this dreamlike metaphysical way, without the raw ugly presence like the smell of burning hair or something. I think that part of the huge change which was happening in the '60s, and which we are seeing so clearly and acutely embodied in your work of the time, is that we were beginning to get the feeling that the joke's on us. We had all this art about the sublime and the absolute and suddenly we realized that all it means is more Hiroshimas; that those great metaphysical paintings are about World War Three. The idea of musing about entrapment was no longer just a philosophical game.

A: The Cold War was in full swing. It would be less of an issue now because the guy who has his finger on the button on the other side seems to have other problems. So we're suddenly not—at least temporarily, and I'm sure it's temporarily—at this moment it doesn't seem the issue's so hot. Because our madman isn't matched with their madman, which had always been the case, what we were used to.

M: And art, ever, somehow, obedient, for all its rebelliousness, moves into the aesthetics of fulness and freedom and away from the void and the trap. But soon it will have to swing back, suspiciously sniffing as it were, not really convinced.

You see, the wall on the wall is ambiguous to me in this respect. On the one hand it's your idea that paradise is here and now, just look at the wall in front of your face, and on the other hand it's like a gleaming white corridor of escape.

A: Which way you going, buddy.

M: Well, it's kind of that. But it's more like there are two ideas conflated here, not two directions in the framework of a single idea. There is a view that attributes depth to the wall, and one that attributes flatness. If we think of the surface of the wall on the wall as either a source or an exit, then we are positing a depth to it as was done in old style illusionistic painting. If we regard it as the wall before your face and hence the only possible paradise, then it has no depth but you are just left looking at its post-Cezannean flatness. It's on the edge, as it were, between these two views, feeling both as real.

#### REVERBERATIONS

M: This whole nexus of themes has to do with the fact that in that time ideas of selfhood and free will were changing—I mean the shift from Modernism to post-Modernism. Modernism believed in free will; selfhood felt stronger than the context in which it found itself, so selfhood could supposedly take hold of the context and change it. In recent decades many lost that faith and came to feel that the self might be dominated by the context rather than the other way around. I really think that's what this work, and other works of the time on the themes of solipsism, tautology, context, and so on, are about.

A: Which brings us to this piece: *Free Will*, 1968.

M: This is a favorite of mine. It's a video camera looking at the corner behind the monitor, which then shows the image of the corner behind it. *Dumb*. Really dumb.

A: This is as dumb as it gets.

M: I also love its companion piece, *Transfer*, in which the monitor broadcasts a one-to-one scale image of the plugs on the wall that it and the camera are plugged into. In the same way that the wall on the wall is dumber than Kosuth's piece with the chair, this piece is dumber than Paik's version using the Buddha figure. Your versions have a more mute simplicity.

A: The Paik piece seems baroque by comparison to *Transfer*.

M: Too smart.

A: Yeah, it comes across as dumb, then it outsmarts itself. You want to talk about dumb...

M: That'd be a good title for the show.



(Laughter.)

M: *What is Maintenance 1?*

A: I got two Hasselblad cameras, I designated one as model, and the other one shot it head on. Then the photograph is blown up to full scale. It's a one-to-one scale photographic version of a camera like the camera which took the picture.

M: *So it's like the camera is looking at itself, or its twin anyway, as the tape recorder records itself, the wall hangs itself, and so on.*

A: *Maintenance 2* is a photograph of my camera reflected in my eye. That is, it's a photograph of my eye in which the camera that is taking the picture is clearly reflected. *Maintenance 3*, finally, is a photograph of my face reflected in my eye. It's done with a mirror.

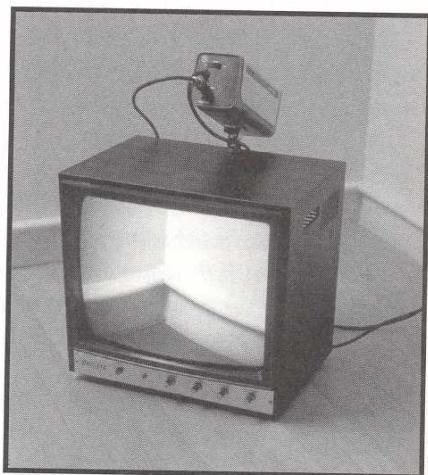
*Congress*, 1968, is the same thing—both Hasselblads shooting each other simultaneously. Which way you going, buddy.

*Umbrage* is a one to one scale photograph of the shadow of the camera which is taking the photograph.

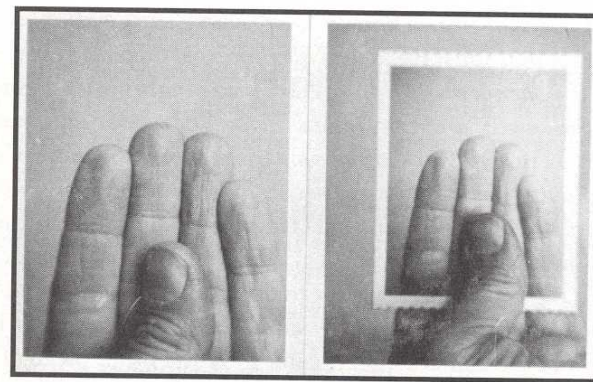
In *Nine Polaroid Photographs of a Field of Wall*, as in the wall on the wall, a wall is covered with photographs of itself.

M: *But this time there is even more implication of infinite regress because there are more generations of photography. You put the photograph of the wall on the wall then photographed it again.* *Nine Polaroid Photographs of a Mirror*, 1967, is even more that way.

A: My feeling was to cover the mirror with pictures of itself and let the chips fall where they may.



WILLIAM ANASTASI,  
*Free Will*, 1968



WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Untitled*, Polaroid photographs, 1967

M: *It's also a work with suggestions of infinite regress. But even more so is Untitled, 1967. It's a Polaroid photograph of a hand, beside it a Polaroid photograph of the Polaroid photograph of the hand, being held by the hand. All in one to one scale, I imagine.*

A: As close as I could get it.

Another *Untitled*, 1967, is similar. It's a composite of Polaroids joined with tape. The first photograph which is taped to the wall is of the wall behind it in one-to-one scale, about two by three inches. Then I take a photograph of the wall beside it, but including the upper left hand corner of the first photograph. Then that's taped over the part of the wall that it reproduces. Then I just move around building it up.

M: *It has that rough taped look that is currently fashionable.*

A: It certainly wasn't fashionable then.

M: *What was your third show at Dwan's?*

A: That was *Continuum*, 1970. It was a follow-up of the wall on the wall. Each wall had a silkscreened photomural of the space directly behind the viewer as he or she looks at the photograph. Each wall reflects the one opposite it; since each photograph was mounted before the next one was made, the early ones show a blank wall opposite them; the later ones show the opposite wall with a photograph of the first wall already on it.

M: *It's a kind of inside out version of the wall on the wall. If you look behind you you see the same thing that is in front of you. It is as if the viewer were rendered invisible or immaterial or transparent. Or as if the camera were pouncing on the viewer from behind. An infinite regress results somewhat like two mirrors facing each other. You might compare Lucas Samaras's*



*mirror-lined boxes or mirror-lined rooms, where each wall reflects the one opposite. Except that you have slowed the process of this energy bouncing back and forth to the pace of photography. Also, the Samaras work of course shows the viewer in all walls, and Continuum makes the viewer disappear.*

A: A closely related work is *Terminus*. I framed two pieces of masonite, since that's a material that photos are commonly mounted on, with glass in front of them, and put them on walls facing one another. The camera is in the middle; the photographer photographs one, then swivells around and photographs the other. Then I blew the photographs up to full scale and mounted them so each masonite now supports the photograph of itself, with the reflection of the camera and, behind it, of the other piece of masonite on the opposite wall. It's an extremely dumb piece, yet people never know what the hell they're looking at.

M: *Calling it Terminus is interesting. The reflective energy is kind of bouncing back and forth between the two walls endlessly, as if trapped between them. And Terminus as a title suggests something like the end of the line.*

A: We keep trying to make the very last work of art.

M: *Hoping.*

A: That art would just pack up after this piece.

M: *Untitled, 1966, has a simplicity that ranks with Microphone or the wall on the wall. A silkscreen of a photograph of a sheet of paper, one to one in scale, is mounted on the same sheet of paper.*

A: There are two versions of that; in one the silkscreen is a 90% reduction of the paper, in the other it's actual scale.

M: *It's so delicate. Reminds me of Mallarmé again—the blank sheet as the perfect poem. Framing of the Period, 1966, must have come right after.*

A: Yes, it did.

M: *I like its title very much. It's like capturing the aroma of a moment in an exquisite little bottle.*

A: I framed a piece of blank paper, photographed the whole situation, including the frame, then made a silkscreen slightly smaller than the framed piece of paper. That silkscreen of the framed paper was printed on the framed paper, then the paper was reframed.

M: *You have investigated this particular area of thematics with an extraordinary thoroughness. It's like the oeuvre of a philosopher. The wall on the wall just keeps unfolding itself into ever more complicated simplicities.*

A: *Through, 1967, is a photograph mounted on the east wall of the Dwan Gallery, showing the cityscape that you would have seen if there had been*

a window there. We built a steel arm that went out an actual window and extended it to get in position for the shot.

M: *Still developing possible ramifications of the wall on the wall.*

A: Right. This, for example, is called *Here, Here*; it's from 1979 and belongs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's a one-to-one scale photograph of a single empty postcard rack, that is, of one empty slot in a rack, in the bookstore of the Metropolitan. The size of the image, or of the space in the photograph, is equal to the size of a typical postcard. The piece will be finished when the museum makes an edition of postcards of that photograph of the empty rack and then fills the rack with the photographs of itself. I like the thought of people sending them everywhere.

M: *Untitled, 1979, also seems to be about the wall on the wall theme, the theme of the representation of the thing substituting for the thing, or fronting for the thing.*

A: Yes, from one position the photograph of the corner of the sculpture pedestal hides the actual corner.

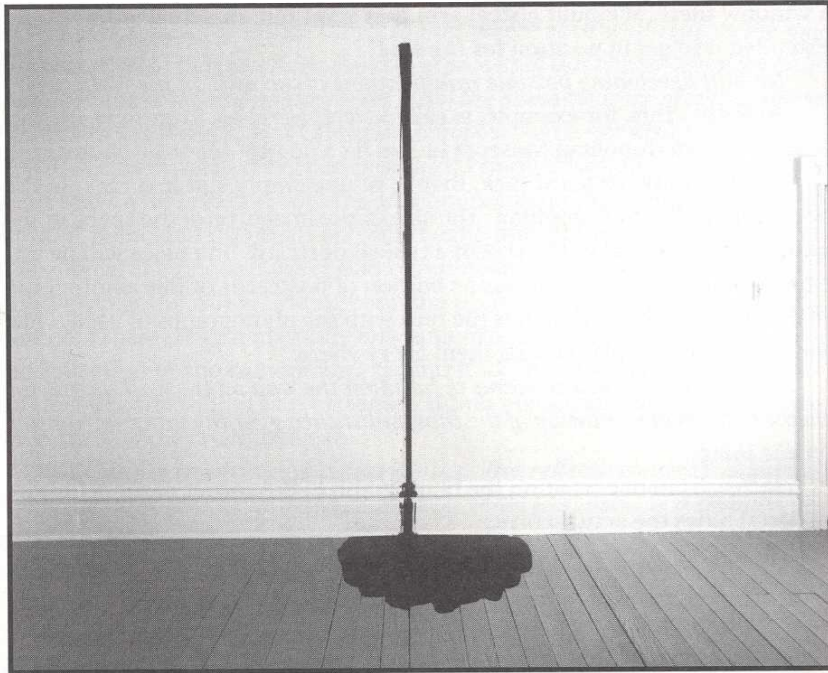
M: *Interesting how the pedestal becomes the work of art. But the pedestal as artwork is complexified here by the theme of photo-representation. The view from that one standpoint definitely involves illusionism—that you're seeing the corner of the pedestal when you're not; but at the same time it rejects illusionism in the same way the photograph of the wall on the wall did; because there is no other reality brought in by the illusion; it's the same reality, or the ordinary reality, that is made into an illusion, yet an illusion of itself.*

A: The idea of illusion involves reflection too. In *Sink* you got a reflection on the surface of the water that was sort of the forerunner of the space behind the viewer. I wanted to do more with that, and in 1967 I asked Marilyn Fishback if I could exhibit a puddle of water on the floor of her gallery, which was on another floor in the same building as Virginia's. Her space had a concrete floor, and Virginia's was carpeted. The piece consists of twelve ounces of tap water, poured. Both reflection and evaporation are involved. After it's evaporated you pour the water again. Each time the puddle evaporates it leaves a ghost trace. These rings build up on the floor like tree rings.

M: *Didn't you do a piece with pouring paint?*

A: Yes. In 1966 I poured a gallon of black paint down a wall, pouring it at the top and letting it run down and puddle on the floor. In another piece I threw a gallon of black paint against a wall in one motion. I did it first in my studio on Greene Street in 1966. It was against a brick wall, and that time I liked the thrown gallon better than the poured. When I later did it against a plaster wall my preference went the other way.





WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Untitled*, 1966. One gallon industrial high gloss enamel, poured.

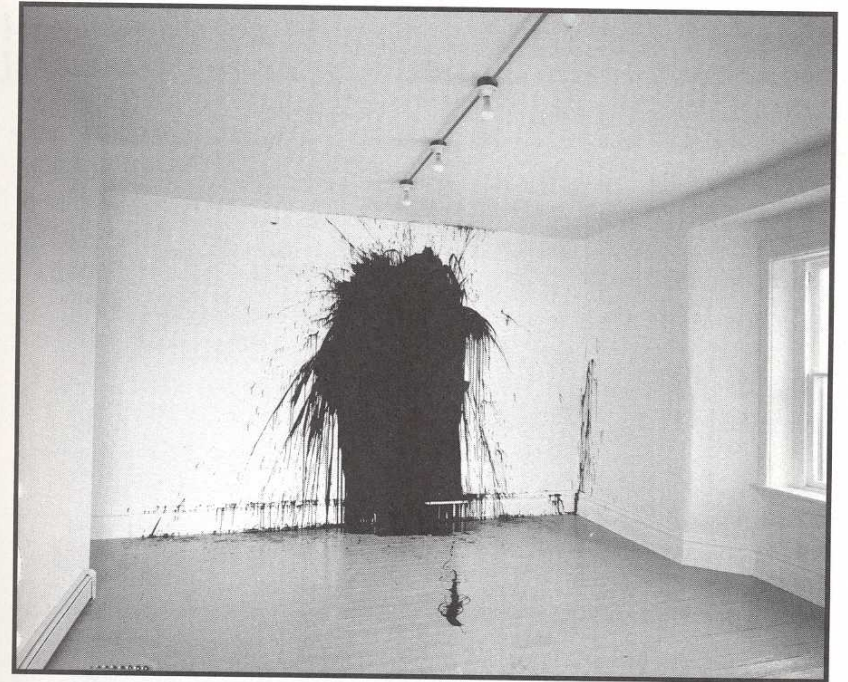
#### REMOVALS

M: *Your work now seems to have taken two directions. One, that was realized in *Continuum*, followed up the ramifications of the wall on the wall, the meditation on tautology and so forth; the other was a direct attack on the wall, in the form of the surface removals and wall removals. Were all the removals done after the wall on the wall?*

A: Yes, as though to attack the wall itself I first had to do a picture of a wall on that wall. The removals were a response to it. I felt that once you've done a picture of the wall then it becomes retrograde to put anything else on the wall so the next thing that happens is you're taking it down in various ways.

M: *And the first attack was called *Trespass*. So first you kind of possessed the wall, or claimed it, then as the possessor you trespassed in despoiling the surface of the wall.*

A: That might even have been conscious. I have a feeling that I really thought, I own that wall now. I remember saying something like that to



WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Untitled*, 1966. One gallon industrial high gloss enamel, thrown.

Smithson. Actually, the first removal was in '66 and was untitled. I gave it the title *Trespass* later.

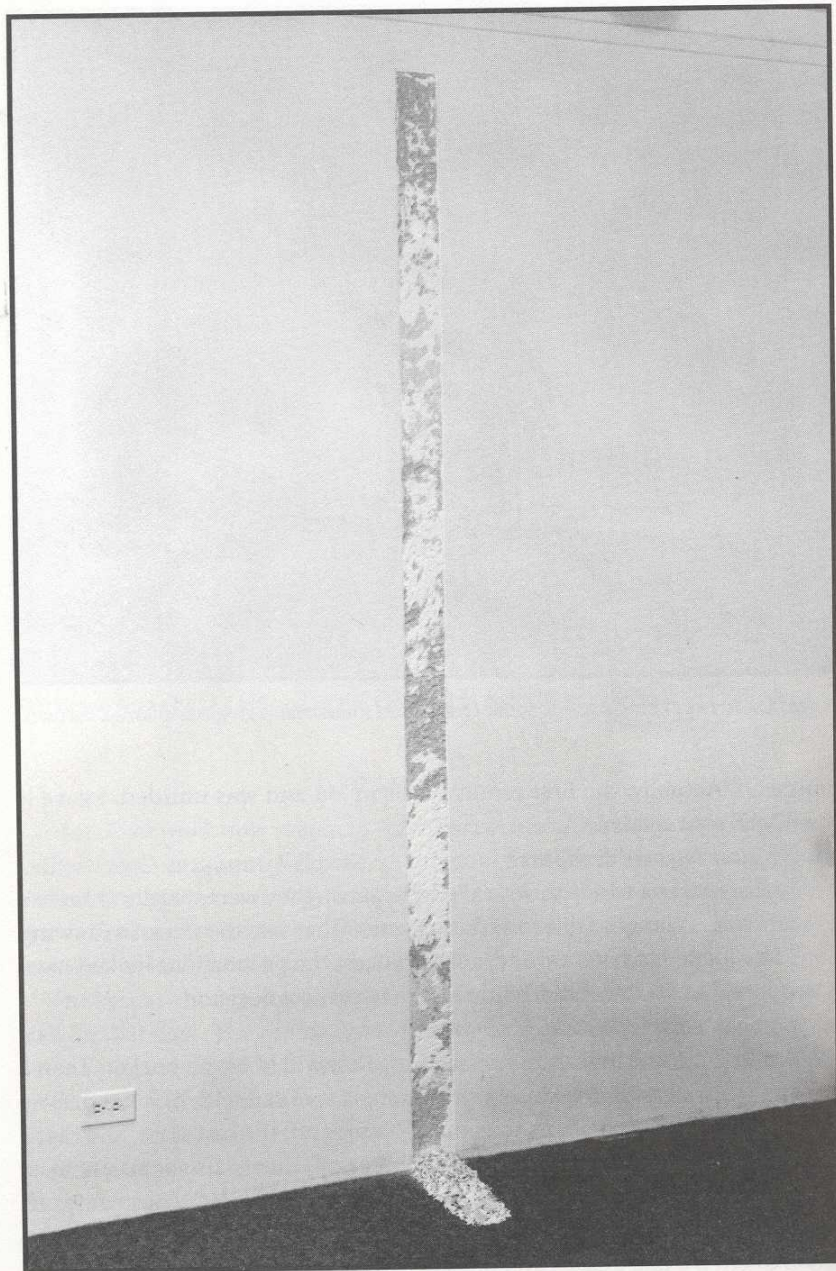
M: *How big was *Trespass*?*

A: There was a whole series called *Trespass*. They were usually 17 inches by 14 inches, although I did some larger ones. That was the size of a drawing book I happened to have around, and I thought the proportions looked nice. It happened to be there and I didn't have to make a decision.

M: *How do you physically remove the surface?*

A: I find a stone in the area, something that will fit in my pocket. Then I just rub the wall with it with as much strength as I can with one hand, eyes closed. The plaster that wants to come off comes off; the rest stays, and that's the piece. Sometimes almost no plaster comes off; then a discoloration takes place, which I like in some cases more than when the plaster does come off. When the idea came to me I don't recall being that preoccupied with the issues involved. I just thought, I bet that'll look wonderful, no matter what's under there.





Valer Bussell

WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Issue*, 1966. Wall displacement.

It's always a surprise, but every piece I've done I've been happy with. Sometimes there are lots of coats of paint, sometimes not; if not, then it's a much more quiet thing, in no way less beautiful than if there is a lot to see.

M: *Trespass* is a picture-like rectangle. But *Issue*, also dated 1966, looks like a very different kind of removal.

A: Yes. *Issue* is a four and a half inch vertical strip cut away from ceiling to floor; the rubble that has been freed by the chisel lies on the floor in front of it. I exhibited one example at the Dwan Gallery in 1970. This picture is of a more recent one that I did in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In some pieces, like this *Untitled*, '66, the rubble is contained in a little home-made box which resides in the space that's been cut away.

M: We're talking about a kind of work that was really in the air at the time. Wiener did a wall removal, I think it's dated 1967, that resembles your *Trespass* series. Didn't Smithson have the idea too?

A: Yes, he wanted to do a piece in the Whitney in which he would take a rectangle of white coat off a wall. He abandoned the idea when he heard from Virginia that I had already done it in a number of places.

M: Again it seems to me that these works were a part of a general transition that art was undergoing at that time. Just five years or so before you did these removals, Klein removed all the paintings from a museum gallery and exhibited it empty. His point in that case was not so much the exhibition of empty space as the removal. It's a complete reversal of the tradition of art as a group of portable objects which you carry into the exhibition space. Instead of taking something into a gallery you take something out. Instead of being a thing that you could put under your arm and walk out the door with, the artwork now was to be an integral part of the space, inalienable from its context—or it was nothing at all, a negative object, like the removal of the wall surface.

A: It's a much lighter experience than looking at a painting.

M: That's an interesting description—because the burden of illusionism isn't on you with all its invitations to feelings and so on. You used to look at a picture on the wall and you saw this illusion of depth, this world.

A: You were always bringing something else, bringing another place there.

M: Yeah. But when you look at the surface removal you're just looking at stuff that's really there in a material way.

A: It's a paean to the here and the now.

M: It goes beyond the wall on the wall in that it doesn't involve any representational element at all, such as the silk-screen photograph of the wall.



A: The wall on the wall is downright fussy by comparison.

M: *So as a paean to the here and now it also implicitly involves a rejection of the idea that art is a channel to a beyond or a vision of another world, rather than art as a way to fix you here, or focus you here.*

A: No matter how much our intentions are against the idea of idealization, art tends to come across idealized anyway. Even in a piece like *Free Will*, where you see the corner behind the video monitor, the image of the corner is an idealization of the corner itself. We're so conditioned by looking at art that if you put any kind of a frame around something, especially if it's a rectangle, it does the same thing. That's even true of Marcel's work in the Philadelphia museum; just because of the context the snow shovel becomes idealized. The wall removal is a kind of realization that even the wall on the wall was idealized.

M: *The surface removals are as much sculpture as painting. That was another element in the art of that time, an attempt to find positions in between these traditional media which represent a rejection of those media and an attempt to crawl out from their system of categories by finding ways in between them.*

A: Looking for an opening. As they say in football, running for daylight.

M: *So there's the interesting theme of entrapment or jail again. Like burrowing through a wall to escape from your cell. Yet at the same time it's a paean to the here and now. So your getting out of the trap or the jail is simply going to return you to the here and now, not remove you from it. The trap, then, would seem to be not the here and now but the supposition of an illusory beyond.*

A: I have often said I doubted this work could have been done by someone who believed in a consciousness after death.

#### THISNESS

A: I think one thing that differentiates art from other endeavours is that art is utterly useless. If you can figure out something that has no use whatever you already have one characteristic of art. Then if you make it useless enough maybe it'll be very useful from some other tangent.

M: *This has to do again with the idea of tautology. A tautology is the most useless of all things, a statement which conveys no information. I was once talking with a linguist about what might be the most useless verbal entity possible. We thought it would be a completely self-referential locution such as the phrase, "this phrase," just that on a sheet of paper referring to itself*

*and referring to nothing else in the world. Like the thought that thinks itself it simply points to itself and says nothing, contains no information, makes no observation.*

A: My drawing of the word "this" fits in here.

M: *The word "this" is a root of circularity, because it can be seen as referring to itself rather than to something else, which isn't true of many words. It's Magrittean, too, of course; it's the word "this" that makes "This is not a pipe" so dynamic.*

*So "this" really is like the wall on the wall again, isn't it? I mean it's the word that signifies itself as the wall exhibits itself and so on. Because "this" means just this presentness, a paean to the here and now, as you said earlier. In Buddhism the term "thisness" is used to signify the absolute bedrock reality of the present moment. The drawing of "this" is from 1987?*

A: Yes, but it's a variant of a much earlier work, the Dymo labels from 1966. They are those little plastic labels that you squeeze out of a plastic gun to label shelves. Dozens of them start with "This," like, "This is what I am doing." I also made a painting of that sentence.

M: *So that at the time when you were making it it applied to you, and at a later time when someone else is reading it it applies to that person. The "this" moves around and so does the "I." Personal and demonstrative pronouns are called shifters because they do that. You've made a double shifter here.*

A: A later Dymo label reads, "This now." *Reading a line on a wall*, 1977, is similar.

M: *Yes, the reader is reading about his reading. Again its all turned in and circular.*

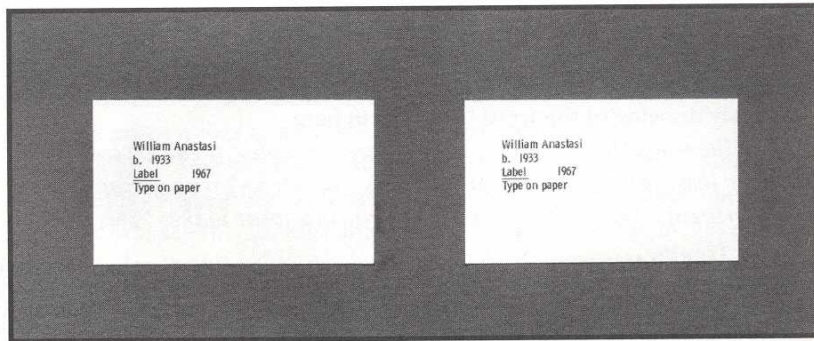
A: The advertisement I designed for a German art magazine for my shows there read, "Reading a line on a page." There was nothing else on the page. Not a very good advertisement perhaps, with my name left out, but a nice thing to come across paging through a magazine. It's a clear illustration of Duchamp's idea that the spectator completes the piece, because only when someone is reading it is the whole piece happening.

M: *I think words become more prominent in your work toward the end of the '70s.*

A: In general that's right, but actually I've done word paintings all along. In 1966, for example, I did a stencil painting of the word "facsimile."

M: *That was prophetic, wasn't it? I mean of the Fax machine being the first technology we have that can carry a visual image over a wire and put it down on paper. I take it it's also a caricature of the idea of representation. And of the idea of similarity, or sameness, which representation is based on.*



WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Label*, 1967. Type on paper.

One text that might be mentioned is Nelson Goodman's "Seven Strictures on Similarity." He argues that there are infinite ways that one thing is like and unlike another; to pick out one similarity or dissimilarity and take it as a defining meaning is arbitrary; it is a wish-fulfillment fantasy of controlling the world by believing we know what is like what.

There's a terrific irony, too, to the fact that such an early word painting was "facsimile." You know, like "in the beginning was the word and the word was facsimile."

A: In 1977 I did this piece in dry transfer type on paper. It occurred to me that words should have captions. A large image of the phrase "a word" is captioned "words"; then a large image of "words" is captioned "a word."

M: It goes from plural to singular than back to plural.

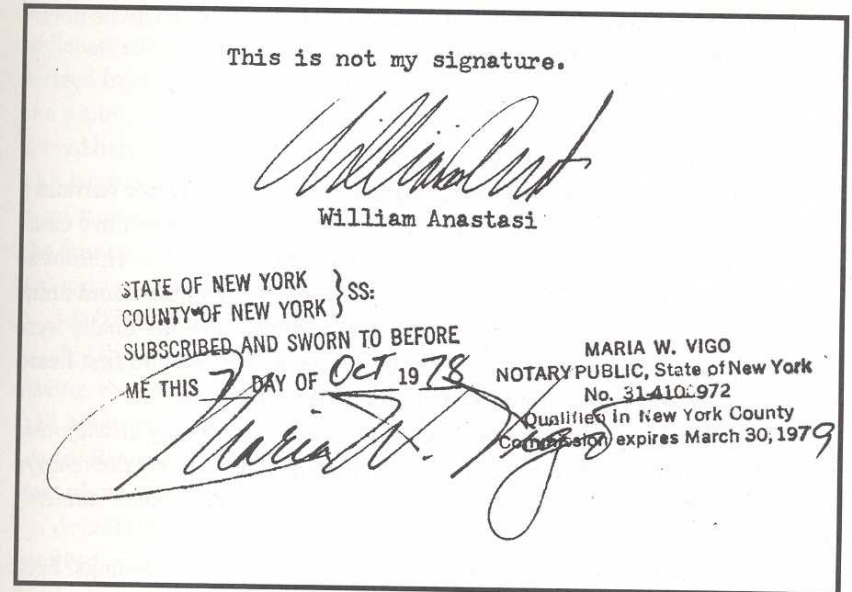
A: Which way you going.

M: Yes. And that's appropriate to this piece also because I think this piece is kind of a turning point; I think that after this piece photography and recording become less prominent in your work and both language and handicrafts become more prominent.

A: Another language piece that was in the Kunstmuseum in '79 consisted of every title I could remember of my own works.

M: So the titles now become the artwork, as the pedestal has in another piece. This suggests the way language plays a part in constituting things. *Label*, 1967, is even clearer about that: the label makes the thing.

A: This goes back to the year after my idea for the wall on the wall. But the example in the photograph is from the Whitney show of 1981. I described to them what the idea of the piece was, and I said, What would your label look like for a piece called "Label"? And they said it would look like this.

WILLIAM ANASTASI, *This Is Not My Signature*, 1978.

Then I said, Make another one and the second one is on me.

M: So now the label is the artwork. You know another artist who should be mentioned is Marcel Broodthaers. I can't believe how closely your oeuvres are related, though with very different sensibilities. I mean the physical realization of the ideas is so different, but the ideas or concerns are often related. In one exhibition he showed a lot of objects and every one had a label on it that said, "This is not a work of art," and a number. It's a variation on Magritte's "This is not a pipe," combined with Duchamp's practice of designating something as art by putting it in the art context: making it a work of art by virtue not of what it is but of where it is and what it's called. Broodthaers exhibited works of art and attempted to denature them with this label.

A: I've done a piece, look at this, number 51. It's a sheet of paper that has "This is not my signature" typed on it, signed "William Anastasi," and my signature. Then it's notarized.

M: It's like you're turning the notary against himself, since the notary's seal is to affirm that this scrawl is your signature.

A: Exactly. I did the piece when I realized that the notary testifies only to the identity of the signatory, not to the truth of the statement above the signature. But I couldn't get any male notary to agree. Even though I pointed



that out to them. And after a half dozen or so of them I hit a female notary who just did it without any problem.

#### THEATER?

M: You Are *is a theater piece, isn't it?*

A: Yes, but it uses the audience as part of the play. A narrator narrates a description of the audience collectively and also person by person; a court stenographer takes it down, and a speed typist types up the descriptions as quickly as possible. There were many sort of Joycean inventions and unintended puns that emerged randomly. The typed descriptions finally were posted on the wall. So just a few minutes after you arrived and first heard this person's description of yourself, you read it on the wall.

M: *So these people walk in to see a theater piece and first of all they hear themselves being described publicly by someone they don't know, then they're on the wall. Pinned like butterflies. You really reverse it on them; suddenly they're on exhibition.*

A: Yes. It was done at the Clocktower in 1978 in three evenings. Each evening had a different narrator—an artist, a composer, and a writer. Les Levine, John Cage, and Carl Kielblock performed as the three narrators. Each narrator of course had a different style which was part of the point of it all. They all did a beautiful job.

M: *You also involve the audience in Viewing a Film in/of a gallery of the period and audition, 1967.*

A: My idea was to make a film of an empty gallery then project it onto a wall of that gallery. John Hanhardt read about it in one of Gregory Battcock's books and we did it at the Whitney in 1979.

M: *It's kind of a film version of the wall on the wall. But what does "and audition" mean?*

A: That's to include the fact that there will be sounds; the projector's making a lovely sound, and there are the unpredictable sounds that the audience itself makes. It's to include all that in the piece.

M: *Since the piece is not titled "A film of the period" but "Viewing a film of the period," and so on, it would seem that the event of the audience viewing it, with their presence and their sounds, is the piece, rather than that the film itself is the piece.*

A: Right. It's like "reading a line on a wall" in that way.

M: *Let's talk about Plants and Waiters for a minute.*

A: *Plants and Waiters* is a play that I wrote. It was produced at the School of Visual Arts in 1980, then by the Princeton Players in 1983. All the

actors are plants in the audience, that is, they are posing as members of the audience, sitting in seats seemingly waiting for the play to begin. The title is derived from the fact that everyone there is either a plant, that is, an actor, or a waiter, that is, someone really waiting for the show to begin. So the set is a red herring. Since it's called *Plants and Waiters* I have a restaurant scene with large plants. But nothing happens there. No one ever appears on the stage. It seems that the play never begins, but it does begin, in the audience. The four couples in the audience who are the actors get increasingly riled up that it doesn't begin. Some of the real audience does too.

M: *I'll bet they do. And there's a text?*

A: Oh yes, the plants all memorized their lines. The eight players are playing, they are doing a play. But the real audience, the waiters, don't know that. They don't know that they're experiencing a play.

M: *Really the audience is the set for the play. What kind of lines do the eight plants have?*

A: Different. The four couples relate in different ways. One couple gets involved in a personal conversation. Another couple gets into an argument.

M: *Do the real audience members, the waiters, realize that the play is occurring?*

A: It seemed that most people did not. After all, the actors are supposed to be convincing.

M: *So it's kind of the wall on the wall in yet another incarnation. Waiting for the play which is waiting for the play. The environment of the play is there, but the play is not.*

A: The play is there all right, it's just a matter of finding it.

#### BLINDNESS

M: *Your work shifts, in the late '70s, to what might be called handicrafts with built-in subversion. An example is the new version of Framing of the Period, the limestone one from 1980 as opposed to the photographed version of 1966.*

A: I got a frame of the period, a metal frame with glass in it, and I made a limestone statue of it.

M: *I think the project of moving painting into the realm of sculpture is another genre in which Klein marked a turning point. In 1957 he exhibited paintings on free standing supports several inches in front of the wall, like sculpture. Your statue of the frame is a really direct address to this issue: a sculpture of a picture. Another interesting point to me is that here the frame*

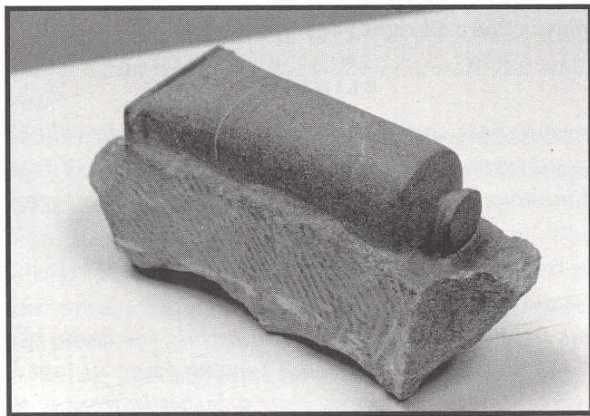


becomes the artwork, as the pedestal did in another piece we discussed. All the stuff that's usually the accoutrements, or the necessary conditions, of the artwork are converted into the artwork in your oeuvre, the artwork in the traditional sense then possibly being absent: we have the gallery as artwork, the wall as artwork, the label, the title, the price tag, the pedestal, the picture frame. That's the theme of context being more important than the thing contained again; all these things make up the context in which art is usually found.

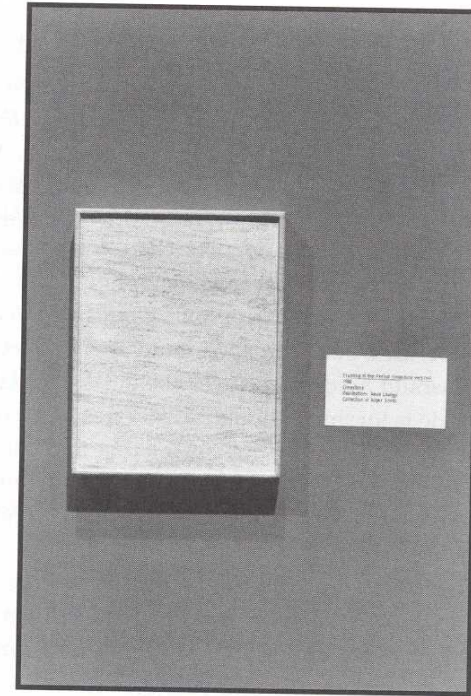
A: Along the same lines, I also made a limestone statue of a tube of paint. In 1974 or so. A large tube of Titanium white.

M: *Interesting. Again there's a tradition here. Duchamp reduced painting down to canvas and tubes of paint, implying he would prefer to see these materials rather than a painting itself. Klein, again presciently, exhibited his used paint rollers as a sculpture. Then Arman made accumulations of tubes of paint on a painting-like surface. Your statue of a tube of paint would seem to me to be a variation on this theme, which again involves rejecting illusionism and returning to materialism. The picture is negated in favor of its material constituents.*

A: In '63 I compressed a tube of Titanium white in a vise at the top of a vertical canvas. The released paint rolled down the surface as gravity painted the picture. And then in '64 I did a series in which I sandwiched open tubes of paint between plexiglas sheets, then screwed the sheets together to squeeze the paint out.



WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Statue of Tube of Titanium White*, 1974. Limestone.



WILLIAM ANASTASI, *Framing of the Period*, 1980.  
Limestone. 8½ x 11 x 1 inches.

M: *These predicted the throwing and pouring pieces, in that the paint finally assumes a random shape.*

A: Yes.

M: *The limestone frame also involves the theme of blocked vision. Like the wall removals, what you see when you look at it is not a window into another world but real material stuff actually present in this world. Since the limestone is a blank, opaque surface with no actual picture it relates to the idea of blindness, obstruction of vision, and so on, as in your blind drawings and paintings.*

A: Yes, I started those in 1962 or '63.

M: *You were doing those dotted Constellations blind then, while listening to "The Well-Tempered Clavier."*

A: Yes, and during the whole period we've been discussing I continued to do blind drawings and paintings. I was doing the scribbles with black lead pencil and closed eyes by '64.



M: *They were not exhibited until the '80s?*

A: Virginia Dwan wanted to show the 96 "well-tempered" Constellations in the '60s, but we never got around to it.

M: *But I have the impression that blind drawings and paintings really came to the forefront of your work in the '80s.*

A: In the early '70s I made the first large blind drawings. Then starting in 1977 I would go downtown on the subway a lot to play chess with John Cage. I would fill my pocket with a couple dozen sharpened pencils. Then on the subway I would put on firing range headphones to make it silent. It also makes people less likely to interrupt me. I would sit erect with my back away from the seat, with a pencil in each hand and a sheet of paper on a board on my lap. I would hold the pencils like darts and lightly touch the surface. The train ride is lurching enough so you need an external point to keep your balance; I would use the pencils for that and allow the swaying of my body as the train careened around curves to make the drawing. I bet I've done a thousand of those. I would ride from 137th street to 18th street and after the game back again.

M: *The results are extraordinary. It's interesting too that you got better at it, though some of the early ones are beautiful in a less knowing, more innocent way. This seems to go back to your paradoxical discovery, in 1962 or so, that you got better visual results with your eyes closed.*

A: You can see what a treasure randomness is. When you, for example, make random collocations of words through clipping or whatever, the results are always heartbreakingly beautiful.

M: *Yes, that's an amazing thing to contemplate, when we think of all our concern to control, and how it conventionalizes events. Others have done blind drawings—Robert Morris, I think, for example—but you seem to have made a special affirmation of them.*

A: I seldom do drawings with my eyes open anymore. The large blind drawings of course aren't done on the subway but in my studio. The subway drawings are timed by the ride; in the studio I set a time beforehand, usually between half an hour and four hours, and usually execute them non-stop.

M: *Like many of your photographic works, this process involves the simultaneous presentation of space and time—the image and its execution in a preconceived time.*

A: Actually the piece that sums up the simultaneous expression of time and space best is a performance piece that I thought of in the '60s, at about the same time as the wall on the wall or a little later, which never got performed. Two people are on a stage. One of them has a tape measure and is

measuring the stage, every dimension of it. The other has a stopwatch. When the measurer of space begins making a measurement, the measurer of time starts the stopwatch and begins making a measurement of the time it takes to measure the space. When the measurer of space obtains a dimension he or she hollers out to the audience "13 feet 6 inches," or whatever. The measurer of time then clicks the stopwatch off and yells, "One minute 13 seconds," or whatever.

M: *Well, that says it all, Bill. Talk about dumb!*



## François Morellet

### *Pythagorean Post-Modernist*

LIKE EVERY OTHER ARTIST IN THE WORLD, FRANÇOIS MORELLET was painting in 1952-53. The idea of Conceptual Art had not yet clearly arisen. It had been foreshadowed in the oeuvre of Marcel Duchamp more than a generation earlier, and was already incipient in works such as John Cage's *4'33"*, 1952—in which a pianist sits at a piano in front of an audience and remains silent and motionless for 4 minutes and 33 seconds—and Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased DeKooning Drawing*, 1953, presenting visual blankness as equivalent to auditory silence. Though Duchamp's example is clearly in the background, these works arose not directly from him but from an intimate interplay. Rauschenberg used his White Paintings as props in Cage's *Theater Piece, No. 1* at Black Mountain in 1951. Cage derived the idea for *4'33"* from the White Paintings in 1952. The next year, 1953, Rauschenberg derived from *4'33"* the idea of *Erased DeKooning Drawing*. This was the lineage of American Conceptualism at its birth. Ed Kienholz used the term Concept Tableaux from 1963 on for a while.<sup>1</sup> The term "concept art" was published by the American Fluxus artist Henry Flynt in *An Anthology*, an anti-art volume edited by Jackson MacLow and La Monte Young in 1963, and the term "conceptual art" was used by Sol LeWitt in his article, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in 1967. But Morellet was already sniffing around the hen-house in 1952 and '53, though his work is not internationally known enough for this fact to have been pointed out in the record.<sup>2</sup> In a spate of recent books on the art history of Conceptual Art, including one that is specifically dedicated to the origins of Conceptualism in places other than New York City, Morellet is not even mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

In the five years or so after World War II, Morellet painted in a mostly abstract, yet still somewhat painterly style that bore resemblance to some works of Paul Klee and Arshile Gorky. Then around 1950 the painterly elements disappeared, the edges hardened and became more geometrical, and

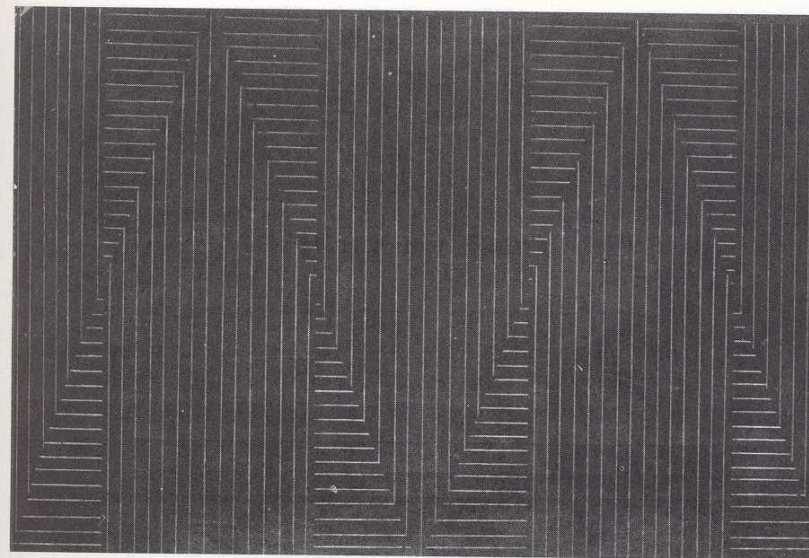
FRANÇOIS MORELLET, *The Ghost of Malèvich (Le Fantôme de Malèvitch)*,  
1981-82, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Chambéry.



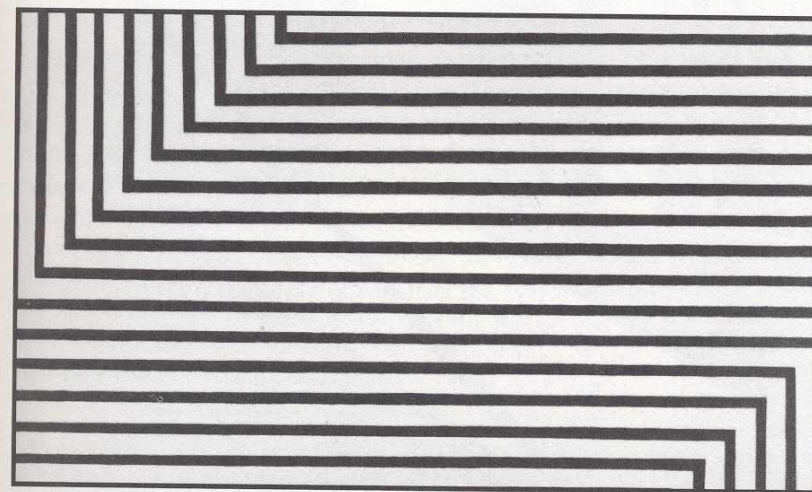
the work seemed to be struggling to find where to go. By 1952 it had found its way, and that way was at the forefront of what was happening in art history at the time, as the School of Paris gradually gave way to the emerging School of New York. Morellet bypassed, or overleapt, the gestural period of Abstract Expressionism and went directly into the later-to-emerge world of geometric abstraction which, with its emphasis on cognition, led to Minimalism and through it to Conceptual Art. At least three major American artists who have been firmly implanted in the art history books seem to have been anticipated in their breakthrough achievements by Morellet's work: Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Sol LeWitt.

Morellet's *Peinture (Peinture)*, 1952,<sup>4</sup> and *Peinture, rouge sur bleu (Peinture, rouge sur bleu)*, 1953,<sup>5</sup> contain the basic elements that Stella would use in his immensely celebrated *Black Paintings* of 1958 and after. Morellet's *Project (Projet)*, 1953,<sup>6</sup> could be a Kelly from the same period (which of these friends influenced the other?), as could *Violet Blue Green Yellow Orange Red (Violet bleu vert jaune orange rouge)*, 1953, and *5 Different Reds (5 Rouges différents)*, 1953. *Parallel Lines (Lignes parallèles)*, 1957, anticipates later works by several historic American artists, including Kenneth Noland and Agnes Martin, as does *Parallel Yellows and Blacks (Parallèles jaunes et noires)*, 1952. *4 Double Grids... (4 doubles trames traits minces 0 -22 5-45 67 5)*, 1958, has already everything that LeWitt's *Circles and Grid*, 1972, would have. This list could go on. Morellet was there at the beginning of the tendencies that would someday be called Late or post-Modernism and seems to have sensed its directions before they had begun to clearly unfold and reveal themselves. On the other hand, viewing influences on Morellet's works of the early '50s, one finds him continuing a venerable European Modernist tradition that goes back through the *art concret* of Max Bill to the works of Theo van Doesburg and, ultimately, to Russian Constructivism. He provides, in other words, a link between the tradition of European geometric abstraction and Conceptual Art.

Another angle of Morellet's work connects straight back to Marcel Duchamp—especially the tendency of systemic art to generate an aura of rigorous method that drifts in the direction of science rather than religion—or of a scientific and mathematicized form of religion such as the ancient Pythagorean. He was involved in the counter-aesthetic movement for “the avoidance of subjectivity in art,”<sup>7</sup> used “random numbers to help him determine the location of identical elements on a picture surface,”<sup>8</sup> shared with Bill and other Swiss concretionists “a desire to suppress individuality in favor of a system,”<sup>9</sup> and was a founding member of the *Groupe de Recherche*

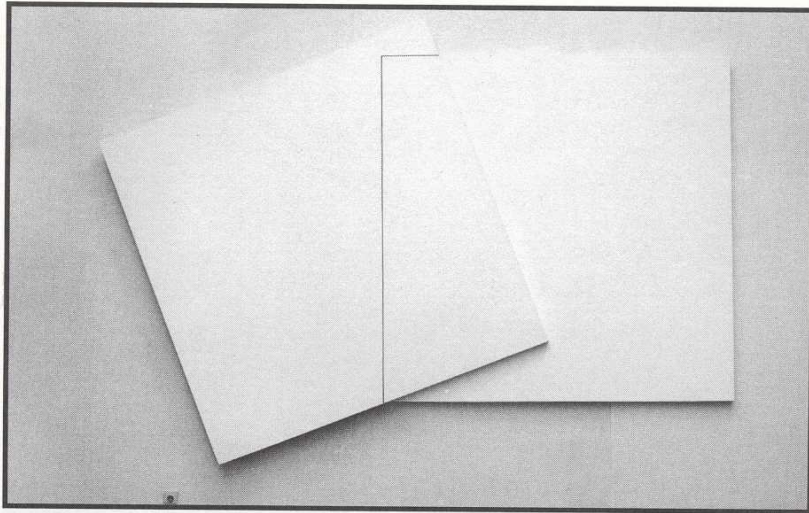


FRANÇOIS MORELLET, *Peinture*, 1952. Oil on wood. 40 x 70 cm.

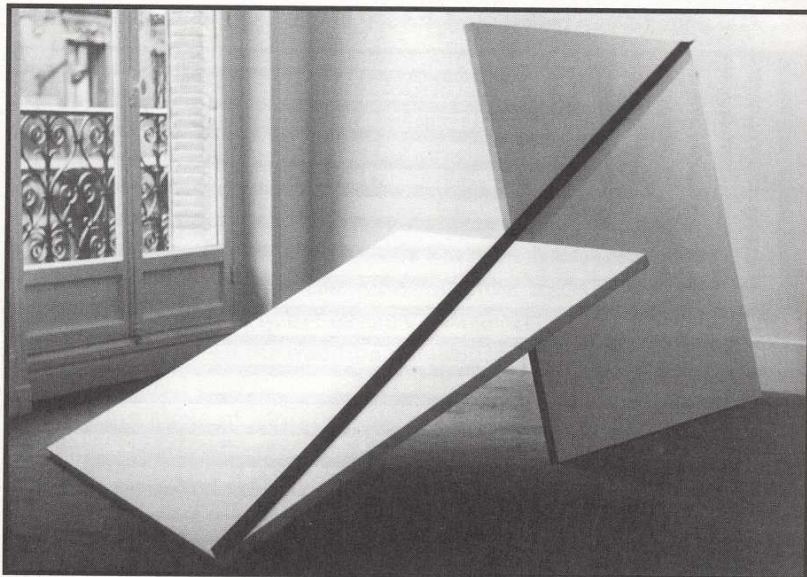


FRANÇOIS MORELLET, *Peinture, rouge sur bleu (Peinture, rouge sur bleu)*, 1953.  
Oil on wood, 40 x 60 cm.





FRANÇOIS MORELLET, *Superimposition and Transparency (Superposition et transparence: carré derrière 0°-90°, carré devant 20°-110°, 1980)* 256 x 310 cm.



FRANÇOIS MORELLET, *A Single Straight Line Passing Through Two Squares with the Middle of One Side of Each Contacting the Other (Seule droite (cornière métallique) passant dans 2 carrés ayant le milieu d'un de leurs côtés en contact), 1978,* acrylic on canvas and metal angle-iron, 130 x 140 x 270 cm.

d'Art Visuel in 1960. The title suggests a scientific research group and recalls Duchampian details such as the instructions for *Three Standard Stoppages*, which mimic laboratory research instructions.

Clearly, Morellet was a member of what has been called the Other tradition in Modern art—meaning other than both the aesthetic preoccupation of Matisse and the School of Paris, and the metaphysical transcendentalist urges of Malevich, Mondrian and the abstract sublime. This is the same as saying that he was not, ideologically, a Modernist. At the moment in question, the early '50s, he was what might be called a proto-post-Modernist. The Group's 1960 statement (written by Victor Vasarely) asserted that "the 'star' artist or the 'solitary genius' is out-of-date" and that the "true creators of the future" will employ the "aid of scientific and technical disciplines."<sup>10</sup> At the time when the last heyday of the Romantic movement was working itself out in Abstract Expressionism in New York, the irrelevance of the Romantic ideology was announced in the context of ideas derived ultimately from Duchamp which would be the foundation of post-Modernism twenty years later. Known by its acronym GRAV ("heavy"), the group was one of the first official manifestations of post-Modernism in the post-War period—though something very like it had happened at the beginning of the "other" tradition, in Dada and related anti-civilizational tendencies which were driven out into the open by the shock of World War I. "We would like to withdraw from our vocabulary the word art in its accepted meaning," read a GRAV statement in 1961. This was, in other words, an overt anti-art movement—understanding that anti-art has always meant anti-a-certain-type of art that was recently dominant.

Related tendencies had been expressed in the post-War period in the United States; *Erased DeKooning Drawing*, for example, is a stunningly direct and blunt anti-art gesture. In Japan, also, the War left a need to turn away from the principles that had dominated the flawed civilization that led to defeat; Matsuzawa Yutaka's "Nirvana School" turned anti-art in the early '60s with its "vanish *objets!*"; its "refusal to make," and its *Anticivilization Exhibition*, 1965. The sense that human hopes and ambitions—both East and West—had been foolishly committed to what Ezra Pound called a "botched civilization," the embarrassment of recognizing the fact so late, the impulse to go into denial—these were moods felt in places deeply affected by the War, including Japan, France, and the United States. In France this mood was characteristically carried off with aplomb, with a refusal to show shame; Gallic pride drifted into the nihilistic cult of the savage god of the Absurd, and Morellet and others in GRAV, as in the proto-Conceptual activities going on



in the United States and Japan, featured humor and Duchampian indifference. GRAV disbanded in 1968 and since then Morellet has carried out his project on his own, with both analytic intensity and humorous detachment, without cultivating the aura of a “star artist” or “solitary genius”.

Many of Morellet’s works have been connected with architecture, and the nature of the connection is unique. Called architectural “disintegrations,” his sculptural additions go against the visual premises of the structure, appearing to undermine its stability and direct it on a crash course into the earth. At the same time the connection disintegrates the architecture, it integrates the artwork into the surrounding world, from which it takes its premises and its form. Both the deconstructivist tendency and the intimate relation with the real world are prominent post-Modernist traits which permeate Morellet’s oeuvre.

In his works for gallery exhibition Morellet proceeded to an investigation of cognition in visual terms. Many of his works present an analytical breakdown of the vocabulary of art. The breakdown of perspective is celebrated in *4 Centimeter Lines Whose Spacing Increases in Each Row by 4 mm (Tirets 4cm dont l’espacement augmente à chaque rangée de 4mm, 1975)*; corners are accumulated for analytical breakdown in *All Over, 1995*, and arcs in *Random Distributions of Quarter Circles of Neon with 4 Rhythms of Ignition (Répartition aléatoire de 1/4 de cercles de neon avec 4 rythmes d’allumage, 1994)*. Many other works follow the same inquisitive analytical path, seeking results beyond painterly sensibility and its whimsical intuitive leaps.

The anti-Modernist insistence on bypassing the gallery space in favor of a site in the so-called “real” world of traffic, pedestrians, and commerce also shows itself in many of his outdoor works; but even so the outdoor elements—such as the skewed grid in *Trames 3 -87 -93 -183, 1971*, or the immense table-like framework that seems to have fallen from the sky onto the FNAC (*La Defance, 1991*)—identify themselves as art, whether by color combination or material. They are not attempts to disguise the artwork as a part of ordinary life, but gigantic and obvious intrusions from the usually separate and sheltered realm of art which by openly acknowledging their source bring the relation between the two realms into intense focus.

In line with its clearly acknowledging itself as art, Morellet’s oeuvre, for all its desire to break down old boundaries that seemed too restrictive, still has something precious or elitist about it. This is best seen in the Pythagorean-Platonic aspect of the work. The emphasis on geometry—which is sometimes broken down into semi-atomic elements, as in the works with many corners or many arcs—evokes an ancient pre-Christian resonance

which affords a glimpse into Morellet’s usually somewhat hidden sensibility. In some works, such as *L’angle DRAC, 1987*, where the geometry seems to have fallen from on high, there is a hint of the feeling Plato describes as being washed up on a beach after a shipwreck and seeing geometrical diagrams that men had drawn in the sand.

The most Pythagorean element in Morellet’s work is his pursuit of  $\pi$ —the endless number (or *an* endless number, as are all so-called irrational numbers). Here Morellet takes his stand in the arena of ancient mathematicians and aestheticians. In a classic essay setting forth the premises of his own recent work (“On the Path of Pi”<sup>11</sup>) he refers to “my usual tools, the ruler and protractor,” evidently invoking and parodying the ancient schools that worshipped geometry, as Plato, supposedly, had engraved over the entrance of his school the phrase, “God geometrizes.” The geometrical order of things, like the astronomical order, was regarded in those ancient schools as ordained, revealed, engraved on the soul by god, and so on. It was the karmic assignment of humans to find and decipher and consciously articulate the message that was inscribed in their own soul. The shipwrecked survivor viewing the geometrical diagrams in the sand is seeing that his soul is the same as the souls of the inhabitants of the region where he has washed up. He is among friends, or soul-brothers. In a mood that he compromises with humorous hedgings, Morellet declares himself to be of this brotherhood. He made his works, he says, “using only my ruler and good old protractor.”<sup>12</sup> What motivated his researches into  $\pi$ , he says, was “my dream of an infinite, unpredictable line that is self-generating.”<sup>13</sup> The ambition recalls Duchamp’s desire to find a line that was not generated by his own taste or sensibility—a pure line, a line that was uncontaminated by the personality, that came from universal or anyway unaccountable principles that overrode and oversaw human life. In Duchamp’s case this led to the random experimental procedure of the *Three Standard Stoppages, 1913-14*, a work that seems to have been formative on Morellet’s work as well as much other art of his generation. Morellet’s desire for an infinite self-generating line means the desire for an irrational number—a number whose decimal nuances never end, like  $\pi$ , which supposedly has been worked out to billions of decimal places without coming to anything like an end, or even a loop or an obsessive repetition which might be regarded as a kind of end. The irrational number goes on forever, and the line based on it would thus be self-generating and infinite.

The irrational number is one of the mysteries that was worked out in the Pythagorean school in the late sixth century B.C. So staggeringly, stupefyingly momentous was this discovery considered to be that the lore



relates that Pythagoras himself pushed one of his major disciples, Hippasus of Metapontum, off of a boat, causing his death by drowning, because he had revealed the secret of irrational numbers to an outsider. The problem with communicating this secret was that it revealed an essential discrepancy between arithmetic and geometry (between the order of numbers and the order of lines) that called into question the whole principle of the rationality of the universe. This was bound up with the so-called Pythagorean theorem: that given a right-angled triangle, the sum of the squares of the two short sides will equal the square of the hypotenuse. The problem is that the hypotenuse, given a triangle in which the two short sides are rational numbers, is an irrational number. That means that one could never measure the hypotenuse; no ruler, no matter how finely calibrated, would ever yield a whole number value for it. So the existence of the irrational number, discovered through the Pythagorean theorem, reveals an inner incommensurability between mathematics and geometry. The world as measured in numbers and the world as constructed in spatial units do not coincide and in fact will never do so. So the world is really two worlds. There is an eternal incommensurability built into it that is the groaning chasm of nonsense at the heart of sense. It is this incommensurability that Morellet has focused on as the subject matter of his  $\pi$  instantiations.

Morellet is of a generation which overlapped Modernism and post-Modernism. His instincts seem always to have been of the deconstructivist anti-metaphysical slant that is now commonly called post-Modernist, governed by a desire to undermine and disintegrate the certainties of Modernism. Yet his Pythagorean geometry-based art has distinct foreshadowings in Modernism—in the work, for example, of Mondrian and other neo-Plasticists. Yet Morellet has focused not on the certainties of Pythagoreanism, but on its one glaring uncertainty. The irrational number and the infinity of uncertainty it gave rise to stuck in the craw of Pythagoras, who seems to have been seeking elementary certainties in his work in mathematics and harmony. Morellet, though a residual Modernist through his Pythagoreanism, has focused on the one uncertainty that foiled Pythagoras, and in that decision is a post-Modernist—one who delights in seeing the certainties of Modernism disintegrate, destabilize, and go flailing overboard.

Many of Morellet's works are like those geometrical diagrams the dazed shipwreck survivor finds between his hands and knees as he crawls ashore gasping for breath. One imagines that Pythagoras himself would have loved a work like *6 Random Distributions (6 repartitions aleatoires)*, 1958. There are also intimations of immortality here; as Morellet says, "I can joyously

and endlessly lose myself on these new paths toward infinity."<sup>14</sup> Here for a moment he sounds like another French proto-Conceptualist, Yves Klein, with his path-oriented forays into the infinite. Yet for Morellet—essentially, or instinctively, a post-Modernist—this persona of the transcendental Pythagorean infinitist is a "parody." There may have been, among the Neo-Pythagoreans of the early Roman Empire, some who mixed Cynic elements with the ancient Music of the Spheres and treated it all as a metaphysical joke—but otherwise, Morellet is the first playful Pythagorean on record among the life-or-death devotees bound to their vow of silence. Morellet is not so bound, and proclaims his search for the endless continually changing line based on  $\pi$  to be a "frivolous...adventure."<sup>15</sup>

"Unless, of course," he says, "one of my sequences should one day reveal..."

1. Michael Newman and Jon Bird, in the introduction to the volume *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), which they edited, state that Ed Kienholz used a term like concept art in the late 1950s; they do not footnote the statement, and I have been unable to substantiate it. Walter Hopps, who founded the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles with Kienholz in 1958 and curated his Whitney Museum retrospective in 1996, does not remember it. It is on record, however, that in 1963 Kienholz began offering for sale what he called "concept tableaux," works which existed only in concept and would be actually built upon being bought. See Walter Hopps, ed., *Kienholz: A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), pp. 110-111.

2. The catalogue *François Morellet* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996) explains why: it is only in French—testily rejecting the use of the current global second language, English, something which virtually no other nation in the world still does, as if to say, to the rest of the world, We just don't care what you say or what you think or if you can even hear what we are saying—we are sufficient unto ourselves—and so forth. If Morellet's work had not been saddled with this burden of Gallic pride it might have entered the history books by now.

3. The main titles are: Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual*

*Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998); Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art*; Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999). The work which emphasizes extra-New York developments is Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999).

4. *François Morellet*, Flammarion cat., p. 117.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

7. Jan van der Marck, "François Morellet or the problem of taking art seriously," in *François Morellet: Systems*, exh. cat. (Buffalo, New York: Albright-Knox Gallery of Art, 1984), p. 12.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 14.

11. This is available in the exhibition catalogue *François Morellet dans l'atelier du musée Zadkine* (Paris: Les musées de la Ville de Paris, 1999), in both the original French and an English translation.

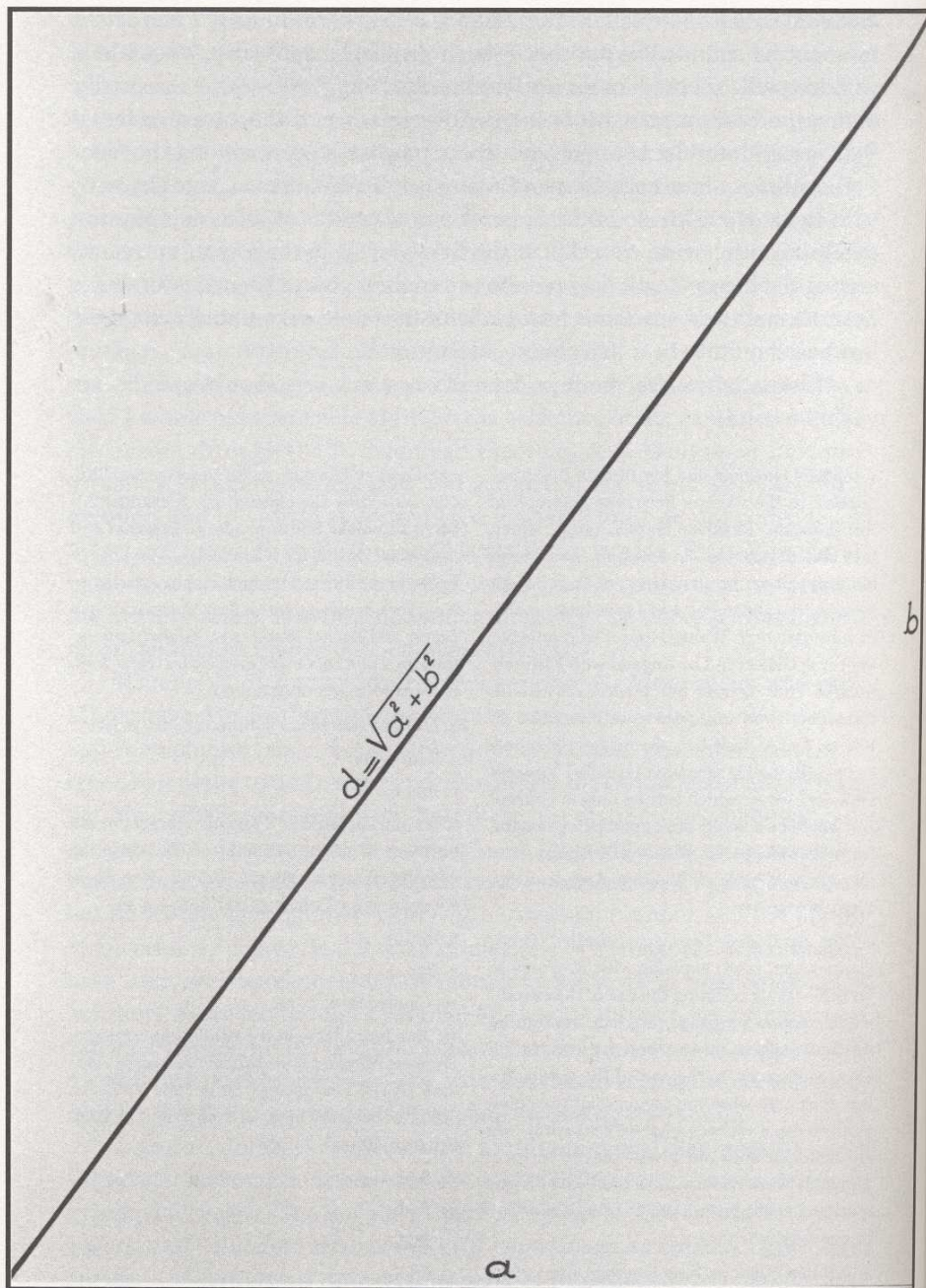
12. *Ibid.*, n.p.n.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*





BERNAR VENET, *Formula for the Diagonal of a Rectangle (Calcul de la diagonale du rectangle)*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 33.75 x 121 cm.

## Bernar Venet

### *From Breakthrough to Cul-de-sac*

**B**ERNAR VENET WAS BORN IN 1942 INTO A WORKING CLASS FAMILY in Saint-Auban, an industrial city of perhaps 5000 in the Alps of Hautes Provence. At age 17, he moved to Nice where he encountered Ben Vautier on the street in 1959 and subsequently met Arman at Ben's house. Soon he met Pierre Restany, at Arman's house. Without realizing it, he was being absorbed into the artistic lineage which would become known as the School of Nice.

The world in which Venet was about to emerge as an artist was characterized by Europe's post-War mood of redefining itself through the founding of movements. Lettrism, one of the most radical, had appeared in Paris under the leadership of Isidore Isou in 1946-47. It was a post-Dada attempt to return to infancy through a cultivated incoherence. It was soon followed by Situationisme, which had distinct leftist, utopian associations, and the Zero Group began ten years later in Cologne. The artistic cult of Nouveaux Realisme, also known as Neo-Dada, would be formed, with Restany as its prophet, in Paris in 1960. Venet was about ten years younger than the New Realists and theirs was not exactly his world, but a legacy he would inherit.

Yves Klein, Arman, and Martial Raysse (all Nouveaux Realistes) declared the School of Nice into existence in 1961—the year of Venet's compulsory military service. Historically, it was a sub-category of Nouveaux Realisme, but anti-Parisian. These young artists saw the School of Paris as hopelessly immersed in Modernism. That Paris also had emerging anti-art movements did not seem to cancel out the polarity. Though the three founders of the School of Nice may originally have meant the designation as a joke—proclaiming their small-town home to be the real cultural capital, not Paris—it has come to seem, over time, that more than a joke is involved. Seen as a historical force that perhaps went beyond its founders' intentions, the School



of Nice includes (in addition to Klein, Arman, and Raysse) César, Ben, Venet, and a number of younger artists drawn to the now-charismatic appellation. There are, in fact, meaningful ways in which these artists belong together; those who were Nouveaux Réalistes tended to use found or appropriated objects (though in Venet's case it was more found intellectual objects, like the mathematical formulae he would later work with). They tended to share a desire to narrow the breach between art and life which had become scandalously wide in the age of late Modernist abstraction. And, above all, there was an actual lineage or brotherhood among them, a warmth of feeling that reflected their origins in the sunny South.

Rather than trying to paint in some subversive way Venet, like many artists of his generation, chose to renounce the use of paint altogether. Paint seemed complicit with the suspect trickery of representation. Renouncing the illusionism of paint, he began to make "paintings" with tar, seeking "an anti-idealistic art founded exclusively on materialist premises."<sup>1</sup> The result, as one critic has put it, is "a form of art that is strongly, deliberately devalued."<sup>2</sup> The grisly tar-sticky surfaces were meant to directly counteract the effect of Klein's somewhat gaudy transcendental monochromes. "I took exception," Venet has said, "to the excessive charm of [Klein's] blue, red or gold monochromes, which were the consequence, in my opinion, of an idealist approach."<sup>3</sup> He wanted to bring the idea of the monochrome down to earth, into the realm of matter. "I was not trying to create the ultimate painting in the manner of Rodchenko," Venet has remarked.<sup>4</sup> Instead, like Carl Andre using ordinary builders' bricks several years later, Venet was attempting to develop a constructive approach which might suggest that art was a socially useful activity.

Out walking near Tarascon one day, while he was on military duty, Venet came across a vertical cliff down which a truckload of tar had first flowed then cooled and hardened, much the situation Robert Smithson would create with *Asphalt Rundown* eight years later. For Smithson, it would involve a parody of a brushstroke. To Venet, also, it seemed like painting, but without touch: the "hand" that had produced it was gravity.

Venet began to make "tars" in which he would spread the material on the canvas with a scraper, then set the canvas upright so the tar would slowly flow down the surface, then harden into a dark form. "Tar," he later said, "suited me on account of its plainness."<sup>5</sup> Art historically, the Tars belong in the anti-Modernist category of the Attack on Painting, or the Attack on the Pretty Picture, which began with Duchamp and, after a lag, held sway from about 1965-75. Venet's first works outside the bounds of representation, they

developed into a phase in which the dense black substance was applied to folded pieces of discarded cardboard. Torn and walked on pieces of cardboard were like leaves in the urban gutter that anti-art longed to reenter after its long trance of beauty.

Venet's concern for what he calls "poor materials" anticipated by several years Germano Celant's phrase "arte povera." For all its simplicity, the "poor material" accomplished several ends. It enabled him, he says, "to produce works from industrial materials, cold and uncrafterlike." Unaesthetic, even anti-aesthetic, industrial rather than transcendental, abjuring the quality of touch, they were contributions to the anti-painting movement which was getting underway in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

TWO MONTHS AFTER THE TARS, AT AGE 21, VENET ARRANGED TO have himself photographed, shirtless and shoeless, lying like a derelict, drunken or otherwise unconscious, in a heap of litter—old boxes and paint tins, empty food and oil packages, scraps of paper, garbage cans. *Performance in Garbage* (*Performance dans les détritus*), 1963, was in the ancient tradition of Diogenes, who lay around the streets with the dogs as a rebuke to bourgeois life-styles; more recently, in terms of art history, it hearkened back to iconic performance works of the School of Nice.

In 1958, Klein did his famous performance-installation *The Void* (*Le Vide*), in which the Gallery Iris Clert in Paris was emptied out and exhibited by itself. In Kleinian fashion, the work was in part a statement of transcendental idealism, positing a higher metaphysical reality that is beyond the world of form and can be approached by bypassing it. In the following year Klein's co-founder of the School of Nice, Arman, produced an installation called, antithetically, *The Full* (*Le Plein*), 1959, in which the same gallery was filled from floor to ceiling with literal garbage brought by City of Paris garbage trucks.

Arman's work involved a counterstatement to Klein's transcendental idealism. He came down on the side of ordinary reality, as *The Full* asserts the priority of the object over its absence. It formed an antithetical pair with Klein's *The Void*, redirecting attention downward into the street and the earth below it, rather than to the transcendent purity of *The Void*. It evoked the rotting level of life in which bodies metabolize substances and turn them into detritus which in turn becomes the seed-bed of new life. Venet's *Performance in Garbage* clearly takes sides with Arman. It underlines the correction of Klein's proposal. "I opted," Venet has said, "for matter and gravity, not for the void."<sup>6</sup>



There is an even more direct relationship between the *Performance in Garbage* and Klein's most famous performance work, *Leap into the Void*, 1960. In that definitive and iconic piece, the artist was photographed leaping upward, as if into flight, from a second floor ledge in a Paris street (while a bicycle pedalled by below, in the old mode of locomotion). Klein seems to be launching himself upward into the freedom of space, while Venet lies crumpled below, entrapped in matter. The two photographs are antithetical icons from the moment of the turning of late Modernism into post-Modernism.

Venet reveals the Leap's true, not wishful, consequence—the Fall, which Klein had always concealed and prevaricated about. While Klein faked the upward flight, Venet showed its true aftermath, affirming the reality of matter and its laws over spirit and its aspirations to escape. He presented the crumpled and seemingly broken body of the would-be Icarus after he has fallen to earth.

But the *Performance in Garbage* needs to be viewed in a larger context than the School of Nice. As an early crystallization of the anti-art movement its concern was the demystification of art and of the artist's role. Garbage represents the fact that organic things die, decay, and become loam or fertilizer. In the late Modernist period the artwork came to be regarded as transcending this process. Because it, supposedly, participated in Platonic Ideas such as Pure or Eternal Beauty, it was regarded as unaging. In the writings of Romantics such as Schiller the person of the artist (or poet), as well as his work, was described as transcending the world of flux and participating directly in eternity. Venet's *Performance in Garbage* located the figure of the artist within the reality of bodily life, death and detritus. No longer to be seen as a being above the level of transient things that come and go, no longer a creature almost transformed into an angel, the artist was now seen as a denizen of the underside of things, a part of the underlying process of living and dying, the heaving of the sod beneath it all. It is the death of the old and the (re)birth of the new kind of artist that this seminal work signifies.

BACK FROM MILITARY SERVICE IN 1963, VENET NOTICED A PILE OF gravel mixed with tar while walking by the Hotel Ruhl in Nice one day. He had already articulated, in the *Performance in Garbage*, the idea of a random heap constituting part of an artwork. The random heap of detritus was a possible solution to the over-control of form that had ossified late Modernism. Standing near the Hotel Ruhl, faced with the pile of gravel and tar, Venet experienced a breakthrough in his search. It occurred to him to change the

material in order to increase the ephemerality and indeterminacy of the piece; tar mixed with gravel hardens into a fixed shape, like a traditional sculpture. Instead, Venet erected *Heap of Coal (Tas de Charbon)*, 1963, in the workspace of the decorator's shop at the opera, where he was employed. He photographed it, had himself photographed with it, and brought people to see it as a new type of artwork characterized by indeterminacy and lack of definition.

*Heap of Coal* was the work that freed Venet from the constraints with which he began. A work that has no specified shape or dimensions, it is installed loosely in response to the dimensions of the venue. It never exists twice the same, hence is ephemeral. Lacking dimensions, it is indeterminate. Since it is not precisely arranged but loosely thrown down, it involves randomness and unpredictability. Even more than the Tars, it is created by gravity.

In addition to its importance in Venet's career, *Heap of Coal* was a milestone in art history. Philosophically similar works have been made by other artists who were dedicated to the project of reconceiving art or creating an anti-archetype to its aesthetic mode. It was as if history had assigned this project to a certain generation of artists. In 1964, William Anastasi con-



BERNAR VENET, *Performance in Garbage (Performance dans les détritius)*, 1961.



structed a stack of plain bricks in his studio and designated it an artwork (never publicly exhibited). In 1966, Carl Andre exhibited several symmetrical stacks of bricks in the Tibor de Nagy gallery. In 1969, Dennis Oppenheim designated as his artwork a shipload of unrefined cement. Starting about 1968, Robert Smithson exhibited various works of this type, from his Non-sites (bins of uncut rocks) to a heap of gravel (*Gravel Corner Piece*, 1968), and, in 1969, a heap of broken glass. Kounellis presented various exhibitions of heaps of coal beginning in 1967—and so on. But there is something special about Venet's *Heap of Coal*, something genuinely primordial: it seems to have been the first recorded act of designating an unaltered and unmanipulated natural material as a work of art—the first clear gesture of undoing what civilization had done, by revealing the clean slate of nature again.

The series of realizations and developments Venet had gone through to this point consisted primarily of removing from the artwork the traits (color, form, etc.) that had long been associated with aesthetic pleasure. "Already," he says of these early years, "I was convinced that art is not made for pleasure but for knowledge." The urge to eliminate the pleasurable elements is a puritanical urge, suggesting a serious, even sombre, point of view. In that period of his life, as Venet later recalled, "Darkness and sobriety surrounded

my universe. The use of stylistic devices, color and the spectacular, seemed childish to me."<sup>8</sup> This youthful asceticism would grow, till it had his work, and him, in a kind of stranglehold from which he had to make an escape.

IN 1966 (AT AGE 24), BERNAR VENET CAME TO NEW YORK FOR THE first time. Later in the year he moved there for good. What convinced him was a kind of revelation which occurred at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Venet attended an exhibition of contemporary American sculpture, including works by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, and others. Venet remembers keenly the "shock" of the work he saw, which forced him to the surprising realization that "my intentions...were closer to those of the American artists than to the Europeans."<sup>9</sup> It was specifically the work of Minimal artists he was referring to, with their insistence on industrial inexpressiveness and their focus on the surface rather than the interior, the rejection of implied depths in favor of a perceived and present surface.

Later in the same year, during a brief return to Nice, Venet was invited to exhibit at the Musée de Ceret in a show called *Impact*. Under the influence of Minimal sculpture he had arrived at the concept of the Tube—a sculpture consisting of a length of industrial tubing cut at (usually) different angles at the two ends. The first generation of Tubes was made of cardboard; later that year Venet was able to acquire tubes of polyvinyl chloride. Years later, he would make larger versions in steel. Most of these works were painted industrial yellow (the cadmium yellow with which it is customary to paint cranes and other industrial equipment). "The tubes," he later observed, attracted him because they "...are...objects reduced to the greatest possible simplicity..."<sup>10</sup> In order to remove his personality from the process as much as possible, he stated that the length of a tube would be decided by someone else, perhaps a collector or a curator.

For the "Impact" exhibition Venet found that he could not afford to buy the tubing and decided to show only the blueprint of a tube, indicating dimensions, color, and material. "In the logic of my thinking," he says, "the presentation of this plan was equal to the object itself."<sup>11</sup> A week or so after the opening he began to reconceive the piece so that a physical length of tubing would lie on the floor, while behind it a blue print of it was mounted on the wall. Thereafter, that was the usual structure of the Tubes, with the angles at which the ends were cut arrived at by some random means. The first and classic example, from 1966, is *Tube no. 150/30/45/1300* (the two ends

BERNAR VENET, *Black Tars and Heap of Coal* (*Goudrons noir et Tas de charbon*), 1963.





are cut at 30° and 45°; the diameter is 150 mm., the length 1300 mm.).

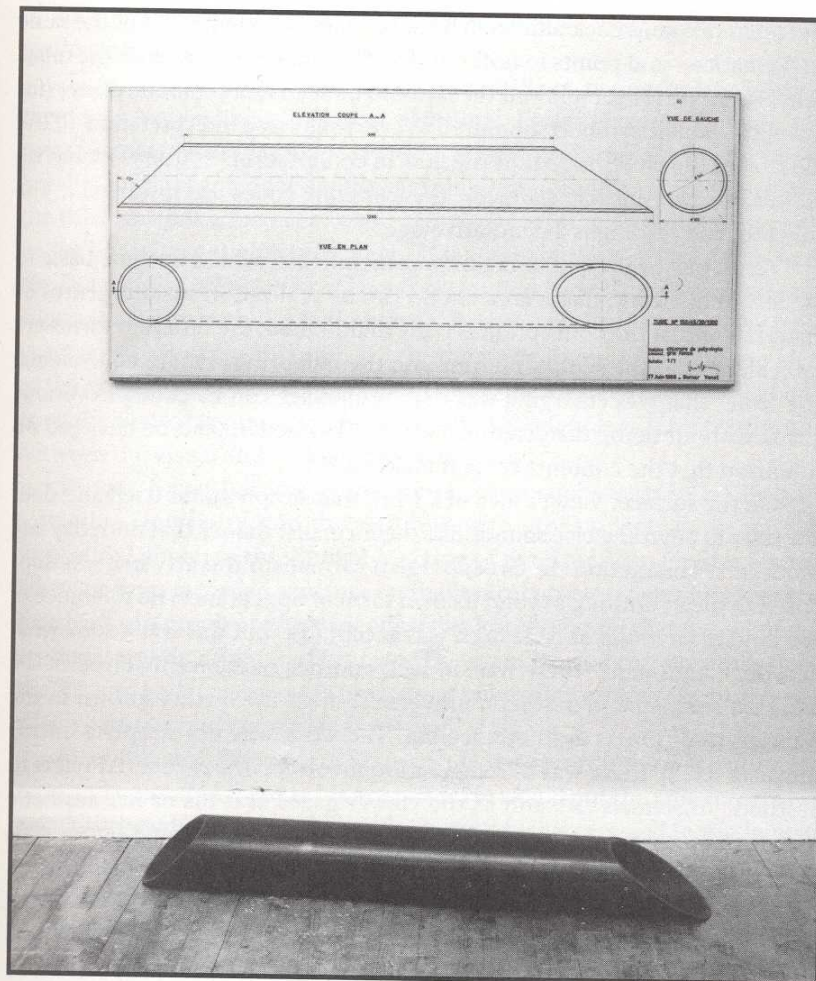
It was in the unforeseen relationship between the sculptural and pictorial elements that a new arena for the meaning of art opened up. The significance of this work involves the theory Venet was shaping out of his reading, especially the works of French semiotician Jacques Bertin. (Reading a great deal of analytical literature was another trait of Venet's generation of artists.) Bertin gripped his imagination with a distinction among three types of relationships between signifiers and signifieds.

In what Bertin called polysemy, or multi-referentiality, the signifier can be interpreted as referring potentially to a number of different signifieds, but this number is finite; the signifier cannot be pinned down to a single exclusive act of reference, but it also cannot be opened infinitely to any conceivable interpretation. As Venet considered this in terms of art, it seemed to him that this relation applied to representational art, where a single work can cooperate with a finite number of interpretations. Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, for example, can be seen in terms of the allegory of the ship of state, or of the struggle of the soul toward freedom, or as a record of an historical event.

Second, Bertin posited the category of pansemy, infinite- or all-reference, for situations in which signifiers can seem to relate to any signified whatever, a category that Roland Barthes and some other semioticians have called empty signifiers. In Venet's view this was a description of works of abstract art which, as Clement Greenberg had argued, were without any subject matter or reference. Malevich's *Black Square* is a classic example of an image where one can see anything or nothing. The window in the wall had been painted over, ambiguously. A Mondrian, by comparison, might be viewed as occupying a position between polysemy and pansemy, with its references to a mathematically ordered Platonic substructure of the universe.

It is monosemy, the third and last category in the trichotomy, that is revolutionary. Monosemy, according to Bertin, means a situation in which there is one and only one possible relationship between signifier and signified. In a monosemic act of signification there is no escape from the object's direct objecthood; it simply is itself and refers only to itself, not to anything else. Monosemy is a semiotic form of tautology and solipsism. "In a sense," as one author has put it, "the monosemic function in art is about denotative significance as opposed to connotative interpretations."<sup>12</sup>

"Art history" it seemed to Venet, "has evolved up to now within the limits of the first two groups," polysemy and pansemy, or representation and abstraction.<sup>13</sup> "What is at stake," he concluded, in the attempt to free



BERNAR VENET, *Tube no. 150/30/45/1300*, 1966.

art from the whims of subjectivity, "is the introduction of monosemy into a sphere from which it had seemed excluded."

In *Tube*, the locked-in quality of one-meaning-and-one-only—and that simply identical with the actual physical being of the piece—was achieved by the intersection of two vectors, one the physical tube on the floor, the other the blue-print-like plan on the wall. The tube points the viewer to the diagram as a plan of itself, the diagram to the tube as an embodiment of itself.



The reference goes back and forth between these two instances of the same mathematics—and points to nothing else. “The plan together with the tube,” Venet says, “no longer allowed the latter to be seen as a symbolic object (for example a phallic symbol) submitted to everyone’s free interpretation.”<sup>14</sup> The addition of the blueprint “stops the flow of connotation.”<sup>15</sup> “The work has no *subject*,” one author has claimed; “the symbolic codes are thwarted... The only possible reading is a denotative one.”<sup>16</sup>

Venet was beginning to realize a principle that would become basic to the rest of his work: that a conception can be realized in various genres or materials and, if the conception is truly maintained, the different forms are equivalents—as the sculptural tube and the blueprint of it are equivalents. The “rule” that was emerging was that “a message can be coded in various forms without being distorted or lost.”<sup>17</sup> “The media...can be changed on condition that the contents remain identical.”<sup>18</sup>

On the surface, Venet’s idea of a work that simply states itself and does not refer to anything else sounds like the formalist theory that underlay late Modernist abstraction. In Greenbergian formalism the artwork was supposed to mean nothing beyond its own form or appearance; no reference of any kind to anything outside itself was acceptable. But this was a somewhat deceptive argument. There was, in fact, another reference involved in the work—a reference to aesthetic universals, or to the quality known in the Kantian tradition as aesthetic feeling. The work was not simply a mirror image of itself. There was a triangulation involved. The object (A) refers to aesthetic universals (B), and as the viewer gazes at it his or her aesthetic feeling (C) picks up the reference and is aroused. Monosemy, if purely realized, supposedly does not involve this triangulation. The monosemic work involves no reference to anything external to itself—not even to anything as indefinite as a feeling. Even that would be an external involvement, a triangulation. There were only two elements involved, the object and its self-identical meaning or self-reference. Even the maker was denied. His aesthetic feeling was declared to be subjective and irrelevant. Venet’s approach, as one author has said, was to “deprive the artist of his involvement in the act of creation.”<sup>19</sup> As Venet himself has put it, “My work is a manifesto against aesthetics, against the expression of the individual’s personality.”<sup>20</sup>

VENET WAS EAGER TO EXTEND HIS DEMONSTRATION THAT THE internal conceptual code of a work was more important than its medium, material, or genre. What was needed was to translate the monosemy of *Tube* into another medium. Following the guidance of the blueprint part

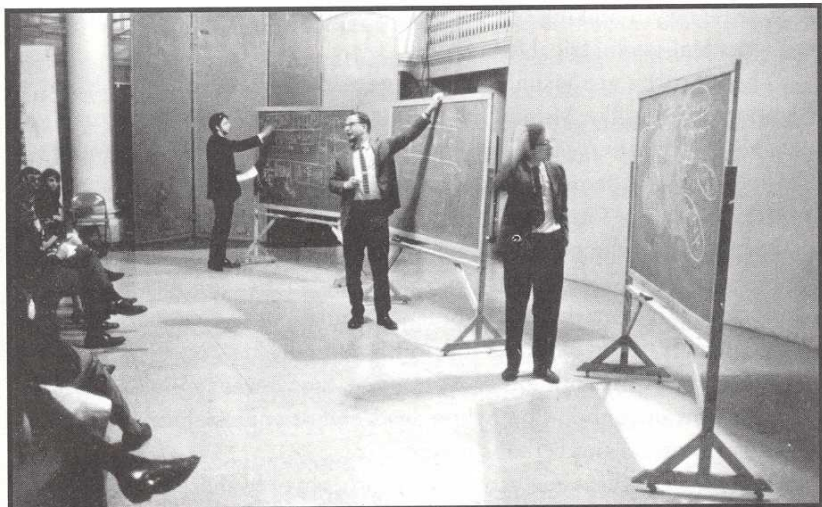
of *Tube* he began making black and white photoenlargements illustrating mathematical-geometrical formulae.

These works are visually attractive without trying to be. Many of them look rather like Minimalist paintings. *Equal Vectors/Contrary Vectors* (*Vecteurs égaux/vecteurs opposés*), 1966, for example, was simply two parallel lines, of unequal length, running horizontally across the canvas; the title, which is a formal or geometrical description, is written below the image but within the picture plane, still a part of the picture. *Formula for the Diagonal of a Rectangle* (*Calculs de la diagonale d'un rectangle*), 1966, shows the figure with the Pythagorean formula on the diagonal. The “title” is actually part of the picture. “It is in the same frame...on the same plane as the graphic representation.”<sup>21</sup> As in *Tube*, the viewer’s mind is held back from the flow of connotation by the dead-end or endless-loop relationship between the visual and verbal elements.

In 1966 Venet became acquainted with astrophysicist Jack Ullman at Columbia University, and through him with other scientists. In 1967, he went with Ullman to the Annual Meeting of the American Physics Society, where he tape-recorded a lecture on theoretical physics. Later he played the tape back to a group of artist-friends in his loft, declaring that the act of presenting it was an artwork of his own. The event bears a certain similarity to the Art and Language group’s practice of publishing an essay as an artwork, which began in the same year, 1966-67.

Over the next three years Venet made ten recordings of scientific lectures and presented them as his artworks. He would put the tape recorder on a sculpture pedestal beneath a wall-plaque which expressed in mathematical formulae the propositions being discussed on the tape. As with *Tube*, the two components of the exhibition had the same inner structure and contents, pointing back and forth to one another without making triangulation or external reference. Sometimes the mode of exhibition was more performative, as in an event that occurred at the Judson Church Theater in Manhattan on May 27 and 28, 1968. On each night the same three pieces were presented. First, “the physicist Martin Krieger [lectured] on ‘Neutron Emissions from Muon Capture in Ca40,’ with slide projections.” Next, “three physicists...gave three lectures simultaneously in front of blackboards.” Finally, “Stanley Taub, a doctor of medicine, helped by an assistant, [spoke] on ‘The Speech Mechanism’ [and] his discoveries on the possibility of using an artificial larynx... Two films were shown and a video camera employed.”<sup>22</sup> (It should be mentioned that Dadaists also had presented lectures—sometimes simultaneous lectures—as Performance Art.)





Peter Moore

BERNAR VENET, *Performance at the Judson Church Theater, 1968.*

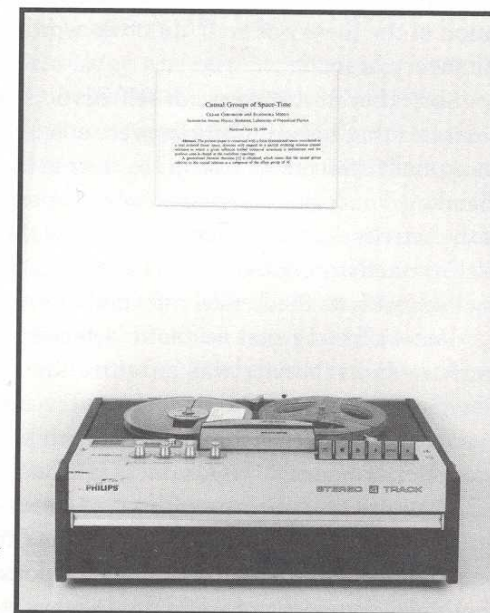
Throughout the series of ten lecture-pieces, which transpired between 1967 and 1969, Venet attempted to eliminate his own sensibility from the process by delegating matters of choice to others. “The scientific subjects ... were selected principally on the advice of Jack Ullman, but sometimes also on the advice of other physicists at Columbia University.” He specifically requested that his consultants not use aesthetic criteria in their selections. “The criterion was the importance of the theory developed, and this...ab-solves the works from any aesthetic will...”<sup>23</sup>

PERHAPS THE MOST EXTREME ANTI-ART GESTURE IS FOR AN ARTIST to stop making art on the grounds that he or she no longer believes in its premises. The prototype was Duchamp, who promulgated in the '20s the falsehood that he had quit art for chess, and who in 1957 made the famous assertion that the artist of the future would “go underground”—perhaps meaning that he would make art in secret (like the *Étant donnés*). Evidently, the connection between the artwork and the artist's ego or subjectivity was repugnant to him; it seemed to rob the art of validity. Duchamp seems to have specially focused his criticism on the cult of craftsmanship and the worship of the pretty object—that is to say, the fetishization of “touch” and aesthetic feeling. The rumor that he had quit artmaking for the pursuit of chess underscored the idea that he was abandoning aesthetic feeling in favor

of cognition. The emphasis on cognition matched Venet's uneasy feeling, as early as his military years, that art should strive for knowledge rather than pleasure.

Venet's handling of this motif of withdrawal was unusually uncompromising. He made an out and out declaration that he would quit making art absolutely, in any mode whatever, after certain projected pieces were completed. The procedure began with an announcement, early in 1967, that for the following four years Venet would restrict his activity to exhibiting a set of disciplines by various means, including photo-enlargements, performance elements, and tapes of lectures—after which he would quit art-making altogether. In 1967 he would present the disciplines of astrophysics, nuclear physics, and space sciences; in 1968 it would be mathematics by computation, meteorology, and the stock market; in 1969 meta-mathematics, psychophysics and psychochronometry, sociology and politics; in 1970 mathematical logic. Art—or anti-art—had come all the way around to science.

As in the lecture presentations, Venet removed himself from the decisions involved by relegating the selection of topics and works to be exhibited to experts in the various fields. “For each discipline,” he wrote, “an expert will be consulted concerning the subjects to be presented (the standard of choice

BERNAR VENET, *Causal Groups of Space-Time, 1969.*



being based on their importance). Thus the plastic qualities which some people might notice in [the] work will be independent of my intentions;<sup>24</sup> This programmatic attempt to eliminate subjectivity from the artmaking process implied a belief that cognition or rationality has a special claim to leadership among human faculties.

Toward the end of the project Venet featured “book presentations” following a quasi-Minimal form. In *Elementary Number Theory*, 1970, for example, a book of that title by Underwood Dudley of DePaul University lay on a pedestal, available to be leafed through by the viewers, while its title page and contents page were reproduced on the wall just beside it. In such works Venet relentlessly pursued his project of displacing the self. As one author has put it, he “eliminated all remaining traces of subjectivity... by substituting photographic enlargements for hand-made copies.”<sup>25</sup> One might say that at last the element of touch was entirely gone. “The direct participation of the artist,” Catherine Millet has observed, “was reduced to zero.”<sup>26</sup>

As in *Tube*, the works are monosemic because the contents of the object on the sculpture pedestal are the same as those of the picture hung on the wall. There is no external reference, no escape from the loop.

Venet’s withdrawal from the field followed from principles he had articulated in the renunciatory years before 1966: 1.) “It’s not art if it’s not changing the history of art,” 2) “The history of art is the history of the evolution of the theory of art.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, it’s not art if it isn’t changing the theory of art.

So art became uroboric or self-devouring. As Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus* that his propositions were a ladder that one should throw away once one has ascended over it, so the practice of art, for Venet, was to be abandoned once one had shaped or reshaped its premises. Since the essence of the activity was to change the theory of the activity, and thus the activity itself, the activity existed only in the state of flux or becoming, always pursuing itself with its theoretical reformulations, a serpent biting its own tail.

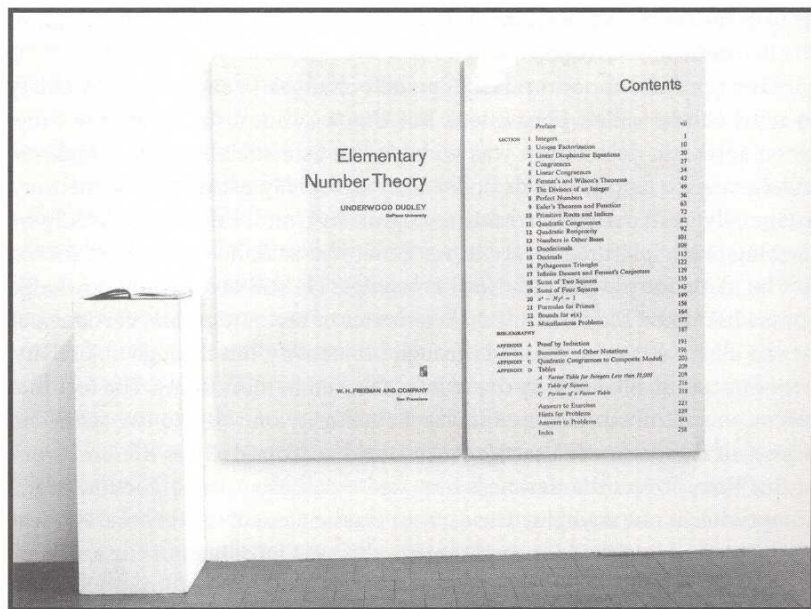
Venet’s feeling that aesthetic delectation was invalidated by its subjectivity and relativity was an attitudinal change characteristic of the generation of artists who matured in the 1960s. Artists proposed various modes of escape from the aesthetic, such as ugliness (Joseph Beuys), anti-social performance (Vito Acconci), critical analysis (Joseph Kosuth), Earth Art (Dennis Oppenheim), and so on. Venet’s solution can be seen as going further than those others. While affirming the general attitudinal change, he suggested a more than attitudinal response. His use of the semiotic trichotomy—pansemy, polysemy, monosemy—by prying monosemy out of the

heap of meaning and elevating it to the top, amounts to a structural shift in the theoretical landscape.

The youthful mood underlying such changes (Venet was only thirty in 1971) can be called puritanical, but this was not unusual for the time, when aesthetic delectation was widely seen as a socially useless hedonic indulgence. In fact, it was not only seen as socially useless but sometimes as socially destructive, distracting cognition from reality, supposedly by flashing pretty pictures before it. As Venet had said, he felt that art should not be made for pleasure but for knowledge. He still conceived knowledge somewhat in the Modernist way, as a matter of certainties, and certainty, as he saw it, was not to be attained through subjectivity, but through objectivity, the unquestionable facticity that was embodied in monosemy. The fact that monosemy eliminated so much was an austerity one had to live with—an aspect of the darkness that Venet has said surrounded his life and work at this time. It was the darkness imposed by asceticism—the objection to the voluptuous in raw daylight. The early or classical era of Conceptual Art was characterized in general by puritanism; this was an aspect of the anti-aesthetic or anti-sensual mood. The spareness of the works of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and William Anastasi in this period, for example, results from a similarly puritanical stripping away of the “merely” pleasurable. As Eric Orr, another artist of that generation, declared in about 1970, “We’re not concerned with making pretty objects anymore.”

Venet’s resignation from artmaking was earnest, not a joke or an imposture. He was really acting out in his life the implications of all the 1960s theorizing that hoped to enable a more rational world. The resignation seemed inevitable in terms of Venet’s analysis of the artistic career into three stages. First is “the learning stage,” which in Venet’s case included some juvenilia and art-school works. Second is a period “when the object ‘art’ is subjected to doubt and questioning and the development of an original concept takes place.” In Venet’s case the second stage begins with the Tars and culminates in the “original concept” of monosemy. “The third stage,” he felt, “consists of the production of variations that can only fulfill the artist’s pathological urge to make objects.”<sup>28</sup> This third stage accomplishes nothing, since “the history of art is the history of the evolution of the theory of art”—not the history of objects; it is the history of second, not third, stages. The idea that the urge to make objects was “pathological” restates Venet’s underlying puritanism at this stage of his life. Desiring not to add more pointless non-theoretical objects to the world, Venet declared that even if he had not been a Conceptual artist more or less in the tradition of Duchamp, even if he had been





BERNAR VENET, *Elementary Number Theory*, 1970.

an abstract painter in an aesthetic mode, he would, sooner or later, have stopped practicing in order to avoid repeating himself.<sup>29</sup>

So Venet's oeuvre, as he saw it at age thirty, was to end with the theoretical breakthroughs of stage two, and omit the tedious third stage with its multitude of redundant objects. His career as an artist was to culminate and end in a retrospective of his specifically conceptualist works (*The Five Years of Bernar Venet*) at the New York Cultural Center in 1971, featuring photo-enlargement works, book presentations, and lecture presentations.

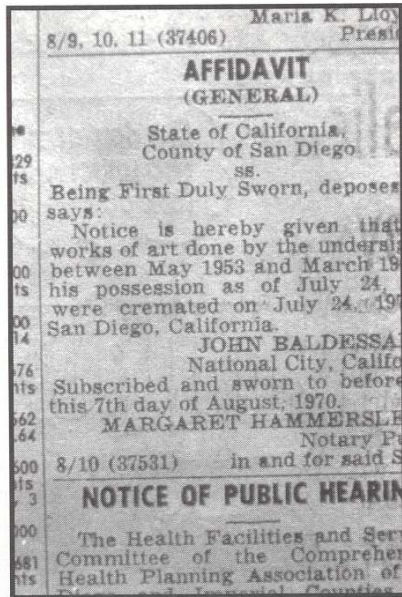
Despite its size (it contained 180 works on two floors), the show unfolded with an austere dignity appropriate to the work. It did, indeed, seem a kind of apogee, with its look of maturity and mastery, yet a strange tomb-like quiet lay over it all. Vitrines and pedestals holding scientific and mathematical books lay in a pristine purity beneath wall-mounted reproductions of their title and contents pages. Black-and-white photo-enlargements of mathematical formulae austere studded the walls. The sense of sobriety and asceticism seemed to call for an almost pious silence. This was the ultimate statement of Venet's puritanism, his view that art was not about pleasure but knowledge. Cognition reigned as an absolute. There was only the purity

of silent unchanging knowledge speaking back and forth from book to wall, and from work to work. It was the artist's triumphant farewell to art.

Venet's solution of what he perceived as the cul-de-sac of an exclusively aesthetic approach seemed to have led him into another cul-de-sac—this time, of an exclusively cognitive approach. When he would return to art making (as he did six years later) his premises would be broadened.

1. Arnaud Pierre, *Bernar Venet, Sculptures et Reliefs*, preface by Achille Bonito Oliva (Milan: Gianpaolo Prearo Editore, 2000), p. 83.
2. Ibid.
3. Catherine Millet, *Bernar Venet*, English translation (Milan: Gianpaolo Prearo Editore, 1974), p. 13.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Françoise Gaillard, "Interview with Bernar Venet," in Bernar Venet, *La Conversion du Regard, Textes et Entretiens, 1975-2000* (Genève: Musée d'art modern et contemporain, 2000), p. 8 of the unpublished English translation provided by the Bernar Venet studio.
7. Gilbert Perle, "Conversation with Bernar Venet," in *Bernar Venet, New Sculptures and Drawings* (New York: Andre Emmerich Gallery, 1993), p. 10.
8. Gaillard, Interview with Bernar Venet, p. 8.
9. Millet, *Bernar Venet*, p. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 17.
12. Robert C. Morgan, *Bernar Venet 1961-1970* (Saint-Etienne: Editions des Cahiers intempéstifs, 1999), p. 112.
13. Millet, *Bernar Venet*, p. 25.
14. Ibid., n. 17.
15. Thierry Kuntzel, "Bernar Venet: Logic of the Neutral," in *Bernar Venet* (La Jolla: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1976), p. 10.
16. Ibid., p. 11.
17. Lawrence Alloway, "Textual Criticism," in *ibid.*, p. 2.
18. Millet, *Bernar Venet*, p. 22.
19. Ibid., n. 17.
20. Morgan, *Bernar Venet, 1961-1970*, p. 111.
21. Bernar Venet and Thierry Kuntzel, "Study of Representation Graphique de la Fonction  $y = x$ ," La Jolla catalogue, p. 18.
22. Millet, *Bernar Venet*, p. 23. Of the second piece, Venet has remarked, "This piece, which was the most successful of the three, was certainly the least probative as far I was concerned. I have since regarded it as an error in so far as it had a collage, or happening effect, resulting from the simultaneity of the lectures."
23. Ibid., p. 25.
24. Ibid., p. 18.
25. Pierre, *Bernar Venet: Sculptures et Reliefs*, p. 72.
26. Catherine Millet, interview, 1998, "Bernar Venet: dans et hors la logique," in Bernar Venet, *Conversion du Regard*, p. 117.
27. Millet, *Bernar Venet*, p. 20.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 19.





Above: JOHN BALDESSARI, *Cremation Affidavit*, 1970.  
 Below: JOHN BALDESSARI, *Cremation of Paintings*, 1970.



## John Baldessari *The Mythos of Spring*

JOHN BALDESSARI WAS ONCE DESCRIBED, IN THE *VILLAGE VOICE*, AS “the Big Daddy of California Conceptual Art.”<sup>1</sup> Writing a couple of years earlier, and from the other side of the continent, Hugh Davies called him “the original role model for the artist who establishes a career while based far outside New York.”<sup>2</sup> Both critics featured Baldessari’s location in their appraisals, implying that it is somehow central to the significance that his work has attained.

Baldessari is also widely regarded as the artist who made humor respectable after its long banishment from art in the Late Modernist era, when the unsmiling sublime stared from the solemn canvases of Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko. Edmund Burke, who defined the sublime for the modern era,<sup>3</sup> described the experience as the stunned, even terrified, gaze of one who is unexpectedly confronted by a greater reality and cannot imagine how to address it. This awestruck moment was the goal of late Modernist art in general, especially Abstract Expressionism, which was locked in place as the dominant style—seemingly forever and ever amen—during Baldessari’s adolescent and student years.

It was Marcel Duchamp who initially introduced humor into the confrontation with aestheticism, as did Dada in general. After World War II there was a resurgence of Dada-like tendencies on both sides of the Atlantic; in Europe, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni and others, and in the United States, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and others, had worked on the introduction of humor at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the ’60s—whereas this strain did not become prominent in Baldessari’s oeuvre until 1966. Still, Baldessari is seen, with good reason, as the artist whose work was most dedicated to correcting the imbalance created by the exclusive obsession with the sublime.

The latest edition of H.W. Janson’s *History of Art* adds a new honorific



to Baldessari's reputation, proclaiming him (along with Joseph Beuys and Andy Warhol) "the patron saint of postmodernist art."<sup>4</sup> Post-Modernism derived its early tactics for the deconstruction of Modernism from both Dada and Surrealism, which means that its objects are, as Fredric Jameson said, "pastiche,"<sup>5</sup> based on unaccustomed combinations of things or styles. It innately involves humor because, when one puts things together that are not ordinarily seen together, and the viewer, though surprised, sees the point of it, the effect is like that of a joke, where, often, an expectation is foiled by a new insight into possibilities.

These attributions are sometimes combined. According to Davies, again, Baldessari created "a peculiarly potent strain of California conceptual art distinguished from other conceptual efforts by its use of wit as tool in the tradition of Duchamp."<sup>6</sup> Davies's conflation of the theme of humor with the theme of California has become a standard way to slot Baldessari's work into a manageable space. The situation can be clarified by regarding the distinction between Baldessari and an artist who has come to be seen as the quintessential New York Conceptualist, Joseph Kosuth.

Baldessari and Kosuth had their first solo shows in the same month of 1968, and virtually around the corner from one another in the same city—Los Angeles. They were reviewed together in *Artforum* by Jane Livingston, who planted the seed of competition by suggesting a certain antinomy between the two shows or the two artists, speculating that some of the Baldessari works might even have been made "in answer to Kosuth."<sup>7</sup> In the following year, Kosuth published parts 1 and 2 of his polemical justification of Conceptual Art, "Art After Philosophy," and in part 2 attempted to take care of the situation by flinging down a gauntlet in Baldessari's direction—or in the direction of critics who might want to discuss their work together in the future. After stating that his own work was "purely conceptual art," he treats Baldessari in a quizzical parenthesis: "(Although the amusing pop paintings of John Baldessari allude to this sort of work by being 'conceptual' cartoons of actual conceptual art, they are not really relevant to this discussion.)"<sup>8</sup>

There seems to be a layered critique underlying Kosuth's characterization of Baldessari's works as "cartoons." It involves a dismissal of the idea of humor in art along with an implication that California is too much an entertainment capital to produce serious high culture, too much a vacation land to understand the serious workaday stuff that real life is made of, and too far from the Old World to know of the sublime. New York, by contrast, is the ultimate "dark city" ("a great fire pining for a tower to burn through"<sup>9</sup>), a city that throbs, like Milton's description of Hell, with the murderous rhythm of the sublime.

The problem with humor, in terms of its participation in art, is that its direct appeal is not to the aesthetic faculty but to the cognitive. Duchamp, the originator of Conceptual Art, recognized this, saying that he wanted to put art back in the service of the mind. In doing so, he flaunted the use of humor in his work, hoping that a knowing laughter would reveal the illusory nature of the bonds that held the formalist theory together. Among American Conceptual Artists of the classical period, Baldessari more than the others (as Davies notes) was true to the humor of Duchamp's spirit and to his insistent distaste for the solemn. The fact that some Conceptualists made art that was still solemn, indeed, almost reverential, like, say, one of Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, showed their deep respect for the gravity of the revolution they were involved in—but at the same time it indicated that they were somewhat confused about the theoretical premises that they claimed to espouse.<sup>10</sup>

The prejudice against humor is oddly restricted to the fine arts tradition; in literature, comedy is not only regarded as a high art form (Aristophanes, Menander, Cervantes, Jonson), but in fact is sometimes critically valued more highly than tragedy on the ground that tragedy is more limited. As Aristotle said, "Tragedy ends in death, comedy in marriage." This is why Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, called tragedy "the mythos of autumn," and comedy "the mythos of spring."<sup>11</sup> The abstract sublime was the equivalent of tragedy—a grandly lighted terminal at the end of the line, where choices vanish, the door closes, and only the cold of winter waits. Post-Modern art has sought to open a way back to life after the bizarre Modernist infatuation with death—and the renewal of life is traditionally accompanied by happy laughter.

IN THE 1960S, THOUGH HEGELIAN MODERNISM WAS ENDING, SOME sense of historical mandate remained. Baldessari felt it, and worked industriously at defining the thematics of that moment. The humor of his work, far from removing it from the Conceptual mainstream, was part of its solution of the art historical problems of the moment.

In *Cremation Piece* (1970), Baldessari burned all his paintings made prior to 1966 that he still owned, and exhibited the ashes in a cremation urn shaped like a book. The paintings involved were, as Baldessari puts it, "kind of tenth generation Abstract-Expressionism," and the trompe l'oeil book pointed to his intention to shift gears into cognitive energies. The *Cremation Piece* was the most direct possible realization of anti-art—the idea that the annihilation, or removal, of a traditional piece of art could somehow be an artwork too, though of a different stripe. *Cremation Piece*,

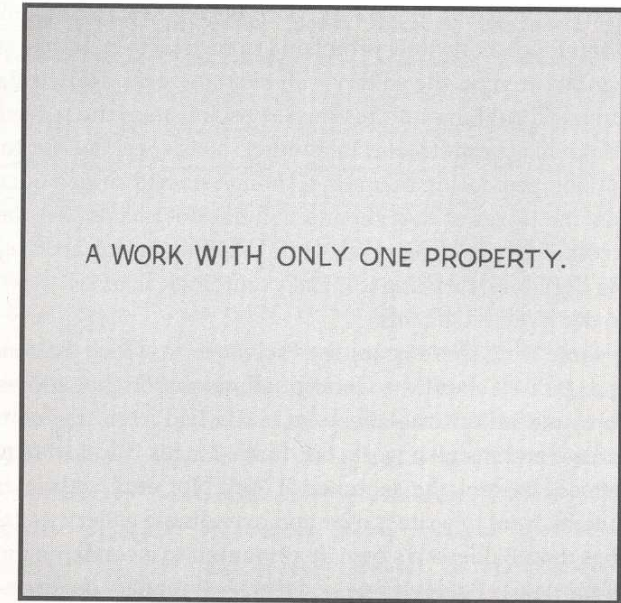


like Venet's retirement piece, rehearses the structure that Duchamp had highlighted with his announcement, in 1923, of his retirement from art—a retirement which may itself have been intended as an artwork. The burning of the paintings was an appropriately uncompromising gesture to herald the radical appearance of Conceptualism, which, as Peter Wollen has noted, was “not simply a new style or a new movement...[but] the single greatest shift in art since the Renaissance.”<sup>12</sup>

The medium of painting had been linked with the formalist ideology for so long that it had come to seem inherently bound to it. Conceptual Art, on the contrary, understood itself from the beginning as opposed to the Kantian ideology and hence—rightly or not—opposed to painting.<sup>13</sup> One step required of a first generation Conceptualist in devising his or her vocabulary was to arrive at an individual style of repudiating the tradition of painting. Yves Klein offered identical blue monochromes for sale at different prices in 1957, ridiculing the idea of the objective value judgment. In his “fire paintings” (1960), he attacked the medium of easel painting with a flamethrower.<sup>14</sup> Salvatore Scarpitta's bandaged paintings suggested that the medium of painting was wounded or dead and needed to be bandaged or mummy-wrapped. William Anastasi's photo-silkscreen paintings of walls hung on the same walls presented the painting as otiose, and representation as tautological.<sup>15</sup> Jannis Kounellis's canvases with curtains hung over them denied the visual emphasis of the aesthetic approach.<sup>16</sup> In the late 1960s Baldessari had texts from formalist painting manuals painted on canvases by a signpainter.

All this was part of the grand opening gesture of Conceptualism, the deconstruction of painting as formalistically understood. Barnett Newman once said that he could phone out the colors and dimensions of a painting to a sign painter and it would have the same value as if he had painted it with his own hand—but he never actually did this.<sup>17</sup> The artist who in fact made this primal Conceptual move in the critique of painting was Baldessari, who, in making the text-paintings, had someone else stretch the canvases and prime them, and instructed the hired signpainter to do the lettering in the most conventional way.

One of these paintings—*A Work with Only One Property*, 1967-68—focused on the monochrome, a channel through which energy flowed in the transition from painting to Conceptualism. The Modernist monochrome and near-monochrome comprised a crowning achievement of the cult of the abstract sublime. At the same time, as the final products of the reductivist tendency inherent in Modernist abstraction, they seemed to indicate



JOHN BALDESSARI, *A Work with Only One Property*, 1967-68.  
Acrylic on canvas, 59 × 45”

that formalism had arrived at a dead end—had painted itself into a corner, as it were. At this point the emerging force of Conceptual Art took up the monochrome as a sign of an ideological orientation to be parodied (as in Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting*, 1967-68). The monochrome, in other words, marked the end of formalist painting and at the same time the beginning of Conceptualism; it was a hinge between those styles and eras. Among Baldessari's works executed by the signpainter, the theme of the monochrome figured in *A Work with Only One Property*, 1967-68, *Everything Is Purged from This Painting*, 1967, and *A Two-Dimensional Surface without Any Articulation Is a Dead Experience*, 1967. It was later subjected to performative parody in *Floating: Colors*, 1972, *Car Color Series*, 1976, and other works.

The monochrome painting was a statement of simplicity so absolute as almost to be a tautology—an assertion that a thing simply is itself, which simply is itself, which simply is itself, and so on ad infinitum—an assertion which, although it goes on forever, goes nowhere. This tautological dead-end was the ironic culmination of the aesthetic era of art. Conceptualism arose to save art from this nihilistic impasse by converting the concept of tautology to new creative uses.



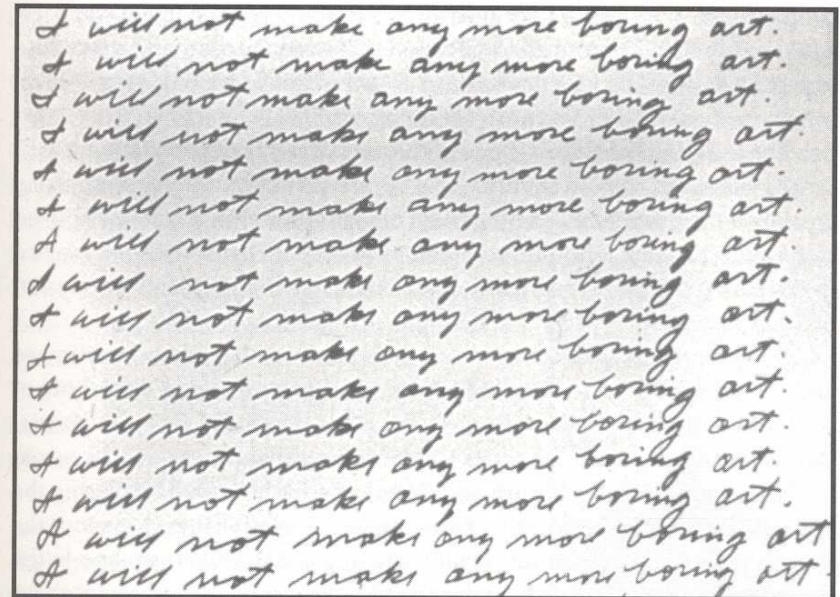
Baldessari's *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971, follows upon the Cremation Piece, contritely promising to be true to it. In one sense the sentence handwritten on the gallery wall over and over again is Baldessari talking to himself, rubbing into his own consciousness the radical change he has made in his commitment; in another, he is speaking not to himself but to his public, reassuring them that, though he had sinned once, he has burned away the traces of that sin and will not do it again. Yet the avowal perversely contains its own betrayal; while rejecting boring art it represents excruciating boredom. By being ironically tautological, or self-referential, it manages to deny what it affirms.

At the same time there is another scenario in which Baldessari was not talking to himself about the Conceptual revolution, but addressing the young who would inherit the effects of it. He had been invited to an art school to create and install a work, but funds for his travel were not available, so instead, he sent the sentence "I Will Not etc.," with instructions that art students were to write it over and over on the gallery walls. In their hands, rather than Baldessari's own, it amounted to a condemnation of the academy of the day, as Baldessari passed the revolutionary credo on to them. The students were, in effect, vowing never to make another art work of the type their teachers were instructing them to make. It was not just a personal vow by one artist; it was the expression of a turning point for a generation. They were avoiding the need to burn their own boring paintings someday, by deciding not to make them in the first place.

Baldessari's work has always been characterized by an apparently child-like simplicity which masks an ironic adult intelligence—as in adopting the persona of the naughty child made to write something over and over again on the blackboard.

*Alignment Series: Arrows Fly Like This, Flowers Grow Like This, Airplanes Park Like This*, 1975, again parades a display of childlike simplicity. But the simplicity in such works is deceptive; it involves parodying the Modernist idea of the purity and primacy (hence childlikeness) of artistic perception—as Duchamp had parodied it in *L.H.O.O.Q.*, *Apolinère Enameled*, *Prière de Toucher*, and other works.

The convergence of various threads on Duchamp was significant to, even formative on, the new genre. It was understood that the Conceptual artist's mode of relationship with Duchamp had to be articulated in some way. This one art historical relationship had to be tracked even while the rest of art history was dismissed. It was like measuring oneself by a new measure



JOHN BALDESSARI, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971. Lithograph, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  × 29 $\frac{1}{16}$ ".

in hope of being admitted to a new history. For Baldessari, the discovery of Duchamp occurred at the difficult moment when, after graduating from art school as a "kind of tenth generation Abstract Expressionist," he found himself back in his hometown, National City, California, looking around at the bleak world that was somehow supposed to inspire him creatively, and wondering what on earth he was going to do. The discovery of Duchamp, he says, "was as if I had come across a long-lost brother. All of a sudden I felt I had a home, that I wasn't so strange."<sup>18</sup>

Another Duchampian motif that soon became active in Baldessari's own work was the parody of scientific experimentation. *Aligning balls*, 1972, and related works such as *Throwing Three Balls in the Air To Get an Equilateral Triangle (Best of 36 Tries)*, 1972-73, are in part homages to Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*. As Duchamp's fallen strings never lie straight, a meter long, so the balls never really make a straight line or an equilateral triangle. These works posit truth as a variable measure that is susceptible to modification by circumstances. In Baldessari's *Strobe Series/Futurist: Dropping a Cord One Meter Long One Meter*, 1975, a string is stroboscopically photographed as it falls for one meter through the air but, in the last strobe exposure, has not yet fallen clear to the floor where it would mark its

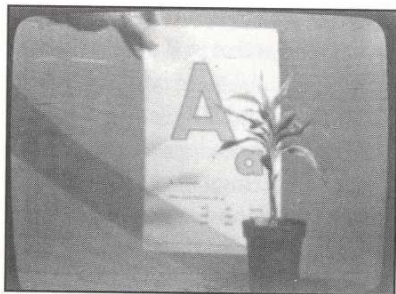


conformation as a permanent measure; it has not yet become a stoppage, but is still in flux. There is an implication that even Duchamp was too close to setting an absolute rule or measure. ("At the time," says Baldessari, "I was much involved with flux as a way of doing art.")<sup>19</sup>

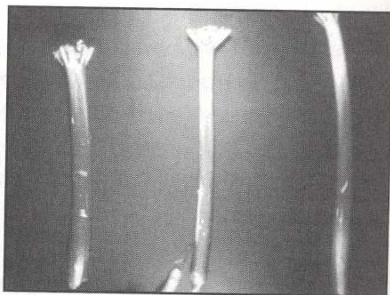
The idea that Baldessari is one of the patron saints of post-Modern art<sup>20</sup> recalls Jameson's dictum that the post-Modernist cultural object works by pastiche.<sup>21</sup> A pastiche is put together out of other things and lacks fixed selfhood. This lack amounts to a denial of essence, and without essence there is no fixed truth—no truth that remains unchanging in its exclusion of other options.

Baldessari first pastiched image and text together, then later image and image. His photo-text works, such as those involving snapshots of southern California towns (*Ryan Oldsmobile*, *National City, California*, 1967-68, and so on) and the series *Commissioned Paintings*, 1969, occurred at about the same time Kosuth and Wiener and others were exploring the revived relationship between text and image—a relationship that, since the Renaissance, had been on the wrong side of a quasi-religious taboo in the sanctified realm of High Art. At this time Baldessari was reading a lot about language and structuralism. One of the points that leapt out at him from that discourse was Saussure's elementary observation that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary—which suggests that meaning is always a pastiche, always something that was once put together and will someday come apart.

THROUGH THE '70S, BALDESSARI CONTINUED HIS INVESTIGATION OF ways that photographs and words or other language-like elements



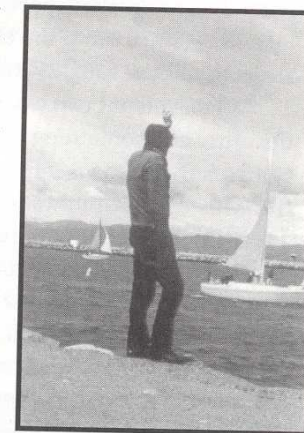
JOHN BALDESSARI, *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, 1972. Black and white videotape with sound, 19 minutes.



JOHN BALDESSARI, *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Rhubarb*, 1972, detail 3. Color photograph, 14 x 11".

can interact. Sometimes performance was involved. In a videotape of 1972—*Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*—Baldessari's left hand can be seen holding up flashcards of the letters in front of a potted plant. In *Goodbye to Boats (Sailing In)*, *Goodbye to Boats (Sailing Out)*, 1972-73, he is seen from behind, waving to boats as they pass in the entrance channel to Marina del Rey. In *Choosing (A Game for Two Players): Rhubarb*, 1972, his index finger intrudes into the frame which holds three pieces of rhubarb, choosing one in a parodic exercise of the faculty of judgment.

Other works involve photographs of simple objects—a nail, a lightbulb falling through the air, a pencil—accompanied by little stories one page long ("Once there was an artist who worked very hard..." "Once there was an unknown sculptor who was an early worker in neon..." "Once there was an artist who everybody thought was very good..."). Still others involved serial repetitions of photographs combined in various ways with texts. *Story with 24 Versions*, 1974, for example, repeated four movie stills of hands with their set directions, such as, "He took out a cigaret," or "He held the book." Each caption is seen with



each photograph in groups of four, till the total possible number of twenty-four "narratives" is completed. *Brutus Killed Caesar*, an artist's book of 1976, adopts a phrase from Suzanne Langer's "Logic of terms" and represents it as three photos—a figure on the left representing Brutus, one on the right as Caesar, and a murder weapon in between; thirty-three of the three-part "sentences" are presented with the "verb" in the middle represented at first by an actual weapon—knife or gun—then by increasingly unlikely middle terms—a paint roller, an apple, a pipe, a clothes pin; as one progresses through the series, the logic of terms is weakened step by step till it fades into ambiguity or undepictability. Hundreds of such works explored the relationship between language and imagery from a variety of ambiguous points of view. By the early '80s, the logic of terms he dealt with was ready to become more complex. Ambiguous binary word/image relations began to give way to complex sentences and implied narratives that have to be deciphered.

At that point Baldessari reduced the presence of language in his work in order to investigate the language-like qualities of visual narrative by itself.



He wanted to explore the signifier/signified relationship in visual terms by inviting several images to cooperate in a signification—or to refuse to do so. Still, for him, the pastiche mode, though it may use only images, retains a linguistic aspect in the syntactical logic of how the images work together. In his complex photo-collages of the '80s, fragments of images that already existed as parts of other pictures are broken loose from them and recombined into new visual statements. The problem is reading the sentence, even identifying the grammatical parts—what is the subject and what the predicate for instance—since often the elements, as in a foreign monosyllabic language, all seem to bear roughly the same weight in the composition.

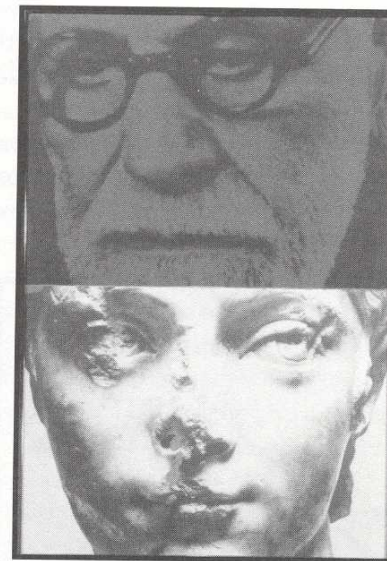
When you put two words together, Baldessari observes, each impacts on the other and something new is created out of their union. This ideographic principle, applied visually, was the basis of Eisenstein's editing in the films from his "Soviet montage" period. "Each [image], separately," Eisenstein wrote in "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," "corresponds to an *object*, to a fact, but their combination corresponds to a *concept*."<sup>22</sup> Sometimes this concept is only dimly suggested, like a mood in music. In such cases, Eisenstein reflected, "By the combination of two 'depictables' is achieved the representation of something that is graphically undepictable."<sup>23</sup> Baldessari works in the same area—where two depictables impact on one another in such a way as to produce an undepictable.

A binary relationship of strangeness or contradiction ensues, as in Lautreamont's "a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table."<sup>24</sup> The sheer otherness of the relationship approaches a weak case of the sublime. Baldessari seeks a less aggressive cognitive challenge, one that does not threaten to trigger the awestruck moment of the sublime. As in surrealism, he says, if the relationship is too easy (say, a chair with a table) it lacks tautness; the images only impact upon one another in a conventional everyday sense. But skew the impact of one image on another—by, say, presenting a chair with an apple core on it (Baldessari's offhand example, typically invoking the strangeness of the everyday)—and the compound begins to become taut. If the image becomes too taut—if, for example, as with the sewing machine and the umbrella, the viewer/reader simply throws up his or her hands in capitulation—this is not the desired effect. He wants an implication that meaning is available, though the exact zone it resides in may approach the "undepictable."<sup>25</sup>

Baldessari's photo-collages of the '80s seem like a long meditation on Barthes' challenge: "the narratives of the world are numberless... Must we conclude from this universality that narrative is insignificant?"<sup>26</sup> Baldessari

is not willing to grant that narrative is insignificant; but neither is he willing to be pinned down to any narrative so explicit as to exclude alternative readings. The multidirectionality of the currents of meaning in his collages engenders multiple narrative readings that tend to relativize one another. Baldessari may "prefer" one reading, but only on the grounds of taste, not on the grounds that it possesses some exclusive claim to truth. The issue of the narrator arises, as it does in post-Modern analysis in general, which is not willing, as Modernism was, to accept narration without problematizing its source. "I do try to provide false leads," Baldessari says in affirmation of the post-Modern idea that any narrator must ultimately be unreliable—"say, an easy reading that doesn't hold up."<sup>27</sup>

AT FIRST BALDESSARI, LIKE EISENSTEIN, WORKED WITH BINARY structures. *Emma and Freud*, 1984, is two-paneled and involves an elementary subject-object binarism based on the oppositions male/female and above/below. The male is above, the female, bleeding, below; the arrangement suggests the Freudian idea that sexual intercourse is an act of sadism for the male, masochism for the female. (Analysis, as the Dora case shows, may have the same internal dynamics.) Freud (the subject) seems to have done something to Emma (the object). In the first place, she is a statue, indicating that he, in Victorian fashion, put the female on a pedestal in a category that does not correspond to living reality—that is the problem. The consequence is that at the same time she is idealized she is also wounded; the category was too rigid, it broke the living thing that was forced into it. The statue-likeness is now broken, the human figure looks beaten up, has a cut over her eye and a bloodied nose from which red blood dribbles down the otherwise black-and-white image. Freud, it seems, can relate to her either as an idealized image or as an abused image, but not in the area



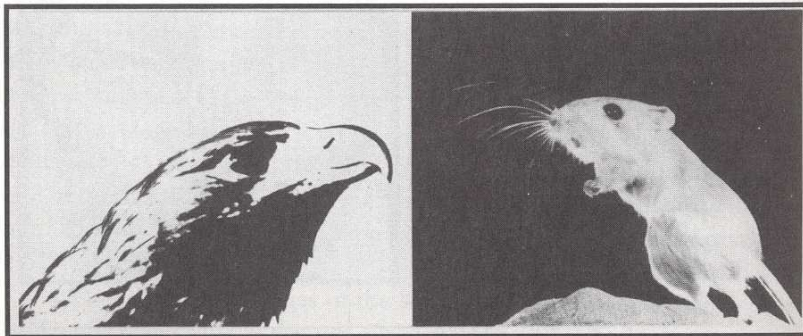
JOHN BALDESSARI,  
*Emma and Freud*, 1984. Black and white  
photos, paint, acetate. 24 x 16".



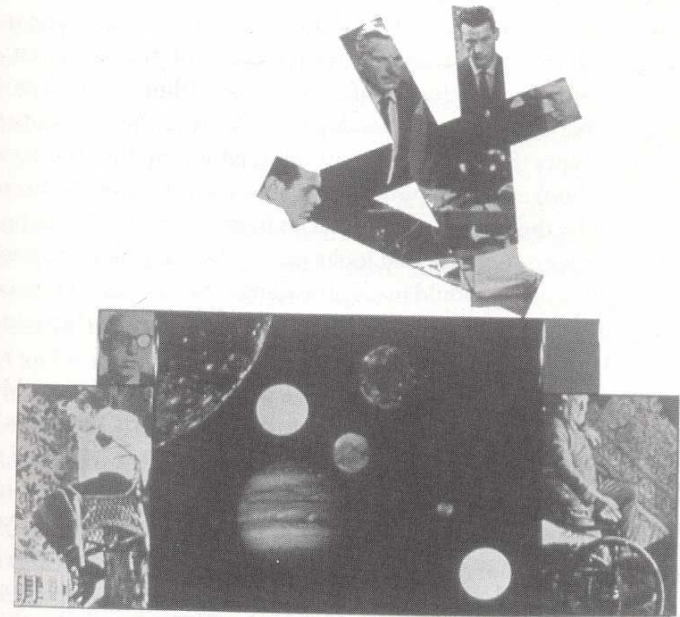
in between where everyday images may be expected to occur. What he does not perceive is that the falseness of the idealization of the object has actually led to the abuse. He looks saddened by the situation; she looks knowing and patient.

*Eagle/Rodent*, 1984, is another two-paneled binary structure with similar subject-object implications. The eagle's head and the rodent's body-and-head rise as if to meet one another in frames which they compose with similar diagonalizations. The eagle is a predator who will eat the little rodent soon. The rodent is on a black ground as he roams about seeking safety in the dark of night; the eagle is on a white ground, as he gazes from the bright sky to detect his scurrying prey. Their attitudes as they lean toward one another are almost like lovers about to join in an embrace. The embrace involves death (it is a love-death or *Liebestod*), but both parties, as cooperators in the web of balanced forces that is nature, seem to accept this unpleasantness as their duty. Like *Freud and Emma*, *Eagle/Rodent* evinces the forces that sustain the order of things as involving an aggressor and a victim.

In a few years the collages became more complex. *Planets (Chairs, Observer, White Paper)*, 1987, contains nine photographic fragments arranged in two groupings, with a hint of a loose binarism linking them. The lower group may be described as representing the cosmos within which man finds himself. The planets turn in their mathematical perfection at the center (in the sanctum area), heraldically flanked by two men bound in chairs who function as entrance-guardians. The sanctum holds the secrets of the night sky. On the one hand, the free floating movement of the planets suggests a state of freedom that the bound men aspire to but fail to attain; on the other hand, that movement is not really so free-floating: it is precisely the



JOHN BALDESSARI, *Eagle and Rodent*, 1984. Black & white photos, each 24 × 30".



JOHN BALDESSARI, *Planets (Chairs, Observer, White Paper)*, 1987. Black and white and color photos, oil tint. 100 × 105½" overall.

mathematical laws governing the internal relations of the planets that have created the prison of gravity which holds the two figures in bondage. So the element in the inner sanctum both holds the surrounding figures in bondage and invites them toward freedom. One of two small rectangles which seem inserted to make a formal transition contains the face of a man whose eye-glasses, with colored circles on the lenses, relate to the white circles that revolve among the planets, suggesting a macrocosm-microcosm relationship: the man's mind or vision has the ability to contain the worlds, thus offering a mental route of escape from the bondage of the gravity-chairs. The answering red rectangle, however, seems to cut off this option with its bald assertion of danger: Don't go there!

If Baldessari had been satisfied with the composition thus far, this grouping could have been a piece by itself. But the area below is too heavy, too much mired at the bottom of the gravitational scale. It is lightened up and given life by the addition of the four-part grouping tenuously attached to it from above, like a premonitory star above the earth. There, three men



in business suits gaze with anxious looks at the “white paper” of the open book that lies before them on a desk. A fourth man may be joining in their concerted gaze at the paper or may be watching one of them gaze at it. Their clothing—as well as the enclosure of each figure within a thin rectangular bar—suggests that they too are in bondage. The book or sheet of white paper, however, represents the power of the mind to either tap into the secrets of the universe (a book of astronomy?) or expand microcosmically to contain it, as suggested by the figure with spectacles below. The men contemplating the white paper with such worried looks may be wondering if the freeing of the bound figures below would justify the dangerous incursion into cosmic totality that the white page quietly suggests. They are like gods hovering over the earth and making decisions about it.

Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, declared that the post-Modern artist or writer, unlike the formalist aesthete of Modernism, functions “like a philosopher.”<sup>28</sup> Baldessari noticed this in the 1970s, when intellectual events began having a serious effect on art making. “A lot of artists,” he recalls, “were getting interested in Levi-Strauss and Wittgenstein. It has always been my feeling that the surge of interest went beyond being just topical, that it offered explanations of other ordering systems in other cultures—how they put units together in whatever syntactical modes.”<sup>29</sup> The fact that at that time artists were unusually drawn to philosophical topics was a sign of the beginning of post-Modernism with its shift of emphasis from form to content. The fragmentary nature of Wittgenstein’s writing was one of the models that prompted Baldessari’s isolation of fragments of images; Levi-Strauss’s practice of drawing structural connections between seemingly unconnected normal things lies behind his penchant for ambiguous collages.

A typical post-Modern position (or non-position) is not to renounce the idea of meaning but nevertheless to seek to remain free from its possible closure. This is what leads to all the post-Modernist hedging about truth, neither exactly affirming nor exactly denying one position or another. Perhaps to explain his nomination of Baldessari as a patron saint of post-Modernism, Janson characterizes him as “Baldessari, for whom anything goes.”<sup>30</sup> The locution, intended, it seems, almost as another honorific, derives from the larger sense that history has—as the French once loved to put it—“ended,” meaning that it has changed directions and apparent meanings: “History is dead and everything is permitted,” as Arthur Danto once parodied it.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in Baldessari’s oeuvre as in post-Modernism in general, there is a constant flirtation with the liberating condition of meaninglessness. Baldessari says a question that underlies his work is, How does something

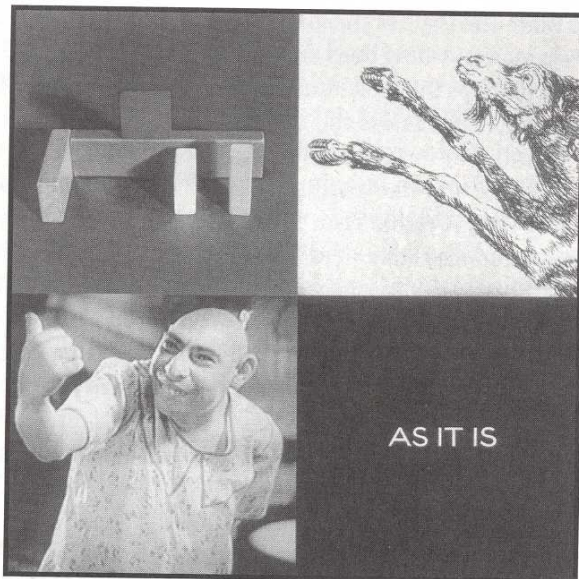
mean this or that? The issue of meaning is a slightly transposed form of the issue of representation—how does one thing represent another?—and this transposes into perhaps the most fundamental issue underlying Baldessari’s work, the question of sameness and difference.

Nelson Goodman, in “Seven Strictures on Similarity,” argues that “anything is in some way like anything else.”<sup>32</sup> There is then no reason to compare a thing with A rather than B: it is like both in some way or other. This universality reduces statements of similarity to meaninglessness—as Barthes said of the universality of narrative. Another of Goodman’s strictures asserts that “any two things have exactly as many properties in common as any other two.”<sup>33</sup> (If, for example, there are only three things, A, B, and C, then A and B are alike in not being C; A and C are alike in not being B; B and C are alike in not being A. And so on.) “If the universe is infinite [Goodman goes on] all [similarities] become infinite and equal.”<sup>34</sup> Finally “‘is similar to’ functions as little more than a blank to be filled.”<sup>35</sup>

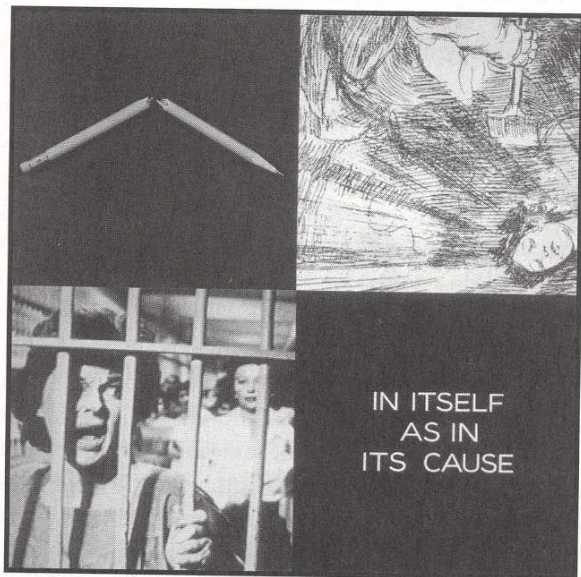
On this question Baldessari, as post-Modernist, maintains ambiguity. While he declares, “I think there *are* similarities in the world”—suggesting that, for him, Janson’s “anything goes” is an exaggeration—he seems most interested in the edge where similarity breaks down, where it comes very close to difference or fades into it. He would agree with Wittgenstein: “the idea of an analogy being misleading is nothing sharply defined. No sharp boundary can be drawn round the occasion in which we should say that a man was misled by an analogy.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps neither sameness nor difference can be perceived in isolation. Still, post-Modernism has aligned itself primarily with difference in reaction to Modernism’s obsession with the universal, or sameness. To quote Joseph Margolis in *The Truth about Relativism*: “Incommensurabilism is...the dominant option of the last half of the twentieth century,” where by “incommensurabilism” he means “...a repudiation, at least, of all correspondentist presumptions...”<sup>37</sup>

Plato, in the *Timaeus*, had stated a more traditional position—that “the like is infinitely fairer than the unlike” (33b). He had, in other words, a personal preference for sameness over difference; the philosopher (or artist) who attempts to impose a sense of sameness on things more properly regarded as different he describes as “compressing by force the reluctant and unsociable nature of the different into the same” (*Tim.* 35a). Some of the pieces in which Baldessari works at the edge of difference, still seeking remnants of sameness, can be described thus. “I suppose I prioritize similarities,” Baldessari says (like Plato), “but not easy similarities. I don’t care about things that are obviously the same. They have to be kind of different,

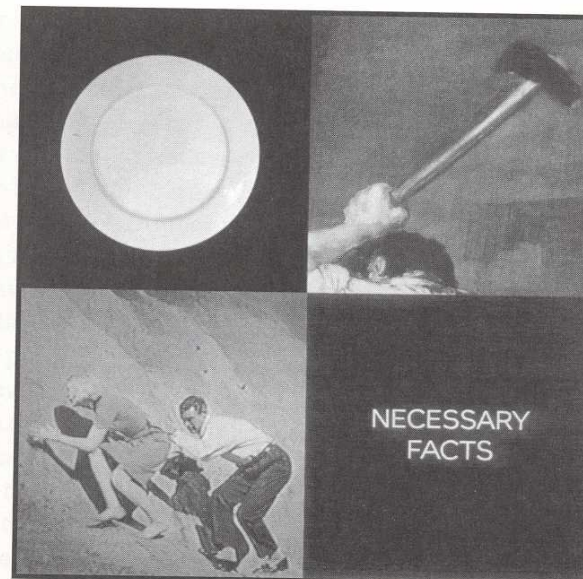




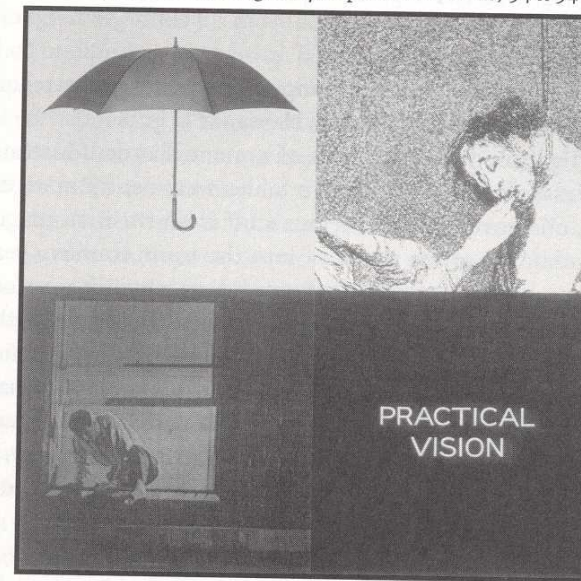
JOHN BALDESSARI, Tetrad Series: *As It Is*, 1999. Digital printing, hand-lettering, acrylic paint on canvas, 94 x 94".



JOHN BALDESSARI, Tetrad Series: *In Itself As In Its Cause*, 1999. Digital printing, hand-lettering, acrylic paint on canvas. 94 x 94".

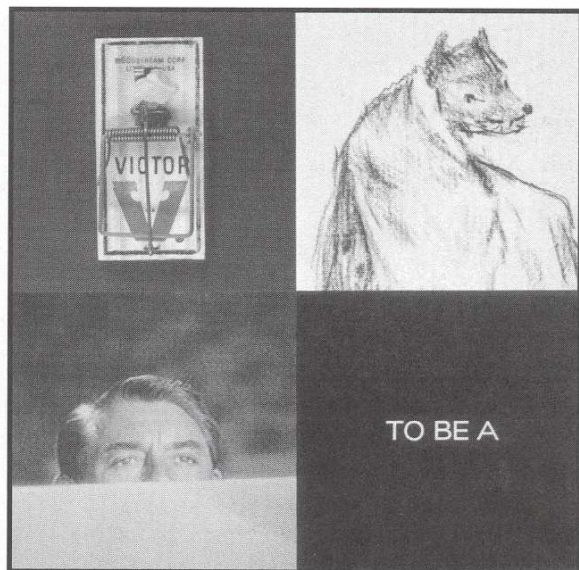


JOHN BALDESSARI, Tetrad Series: *Necessary Facts*, 1999. Digital printing, hand-lettering, acrylic paint on canvas, 94 x 94".



JOHN BALDESSARI, Tetrad Series: *Practical Vision*, 1999. Digital printing, hand-lettering, acrylic paint on canvas. 94 x 94".





JOHN BALDESSARI, Tetrads Series: *To Be A*, 1999. Digital printing, hand-lettering, acrylic paint on canvas, 94 x 94".

then I'll find sameness in them" ("compressing by force the reluctant and unsociable nature of the different into the same").

An investigation of the typology of sameness is demonstrated by an exercise Baldessari set for a class: two tables were set up in an otherwise empty room, one covered with various stuff from thrift stores, the other bare. One student at a time was sent into the room to move it all to the other table in some order different from that in which it was found. The teacher was interested in how people categorize and organize the world. "Sometimes they have ways I would never think of," he says.<sup>38</sup> New means of sorting and organizing suggest different cultural minds. "Is what we perceive as chaos just another kind of ordering that we don't understand yet?"<sup>39</sup> Putting it slightly differently on another occasion, Baldessari says, "If things look completely the same, I search for differences; if completely different, I search for similarities."<sup>40</sup>

IN THE TETRAD SERIES OF 1999, EACH TETRAD PRESENTS A COMPLEX moment of cognition involving four different modes. Different sources of image or text feed the four panels, each always in the same position. Thus,

each Tetrad presents what Barthes calls "a 'complicated' alternative, or four-termed opposition."<sup>41</sup>

In the upper left quadrant is an everyday object straightforwardly photographed in color. In the upper right is a detail quoted from Goya, in the lower left, a still from cinema, and in the lower right a brief text from Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*<sup>42</sup> (which Baldessari "happened to be reading at the time"). Among the four elements there are six binary relations (AB, AC, AD, BC, BD, CD) and many multi-termed ones, so that the barrage of "impacts" each element can exert on each of the others, and on any combination of the others, is extensive and complex.

Each position or quadrant represents a different cognitive take. Clockwise from the lower right, there is a verbal take, then one based on the semiotics of cinematic tradition, another based on the semiotics of everyday life, and finally one based on the mood and imagery of Goya's work. It's like trying to think with four different minds at once. "I think of Auden tying his tie in the mirror," Baldessari says, "and thinking that there are all these planets hovering in the sky and trying to hold these two awarenesses in his mind at once."<sup>43</sup> The situation of having four modes of cognition is not unlike the situation of having five senses, each of which reports as if on a different world, though if one adds up those reports they seem to convey one world approached in different modalities. It's as if the Tetrad were a microcosm of a world approached through cognition rather than sensation; there are different things happening in the world at any one time, and ideally one would be able to hold them all in one's mind at once without the contradictory cognitions interfering with one another. "It's like four different sets of eyes perceiving the same world but differently," says Baldessari.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, the work is pervaded by notions of cosmic order emanating from the four-square format. Four equal squares arranged together make a larger square which is internally inscribed with a center from which a quaternity spreads. This pattern is a common way to organize the cosmos. Maps, cosmograms, and mandalas are based on this originary division into a quaternity surrounding a center. Thus, the ancient monarch Sargon of Akkad, when he wished to declare himself king of everything, adopted the sobriquet, Lord of the Four Quarters (not the Three Thirds, the Five Fifths, and so on).<sup>45</sup> When the quaternity is viewed as a section rather than a plan of the universe (as in a horoscope), it portrays the eastern and western locations of solar rising and setting along with the above and below of the midheaven and the underworld. The face of the clock, with its division of the hour into four quarters, is another temporal mode of this totalization-through-quaternization.



The everyday object in the upper left—a mousetrap, a cigar butt, a broken pencil—is photographed in straightforward acceptance of its ordinary facticity as a thing. Usually against a black or white ground, the intended object is seen in isolation as if to give all possible weight to its identity as itself. The fact that the object is usually centered adds to the viewer's sense of the naïvete of the representation—which corresponds to the naïvete of the everyday taken-for-granted object itself.

The Goya panels in the upper right are mostly details of drawings or prints in greys or sepias, in three cases details of paintings in full color. In nine of fifteen cases they involve representations of animals and the childish mood that often accompanies them. At the same time there is a darkness to this voice, suggesting demonic gatherings, illnesses, and depredations of the dead.

Nine of the cinema panels in the lower left position are black-and-white; six are in color. They range from a still of the Soviet montage era to two from Tod Browning's *Freaks* to four from Hitchcock. This quadrant both directs an eye toward the semiotic reading of reality that appears in popular culture and focuses on one of Baldessari's special preoccupations, the relationship between photography and narration. Baldessari early on began looking cinematically at paintings in museums—wondering, for example, what still might precede or follow that one. The Goyas also involve suggestions of narrative, forming, with the film stills, a narrative diagonal from upper right to lower left, which is offset or balanced by the diagonal which fades from the simple presence and clear definition of the everyday objects in the upper left to the ambiguous absence and extreme lack of definition in the speech fragments in the lower right. The two diagonals cross in an X at the center, contributing a spirit of dynamic balance to the quaternary.

Some of the Pessoa texts are: "certain unknown unclassifiable categories"; "it doesn't seem much"; "unnoticed among larger things"; "to be a"; "what was seen"; "as it is". Though words are often regarded as more concrete in their meanings than images, here they are used in an indefinite floating way, like a faculty of attention that is roaming around without commenting on anything in particular. In fact, each of the modes of cognition is caught in a moment of uncertainty; the upper left is in a sense the most definite—it at least represents an object unambiguously—but the conspicuous lack of context leaves the object, for all its clarity in itself, in a zone where it cannot make clear its relationship to anything else. The lower right, which balances this box, shows the opposite: the vague surround of context without the clarity of the presence of an object within it. (The concrete things in the upper

left in fact could be used to fill in these verbal blanks in the lower right.) The four quadrants, then, might be regarded as four modes of the indefinite—but, still, one senses a drift toward meaning, which is most easily perceived by allowing the text panel in the lower right to guide the reading.

The pictures accompanying the phrase "Practical Vision" show a figure climbing through a window, presumably because of something he hopes to take from inside; a hand removing a gold filling from a hanged man's mouth; and an umbrella open and ready for use. Each is an instance of practical vision. In the upper right and lower left panels there are furtive intrusions taking place, and two actors are implied in each, an intruder and one who is intruded on; the everyday object—the open umbrella—by contrast, is naïve, forthright and doesn't imply a drama. Still, the body climbing in and the hand reaching in both focus on the opposition inside/outside, and the umbrella supports this in reverse, suggesting a person about to go out. The viewer, as a detective who is trying to figure this out, is asked to apply practical vision himself.

The artist does not think of such readings as absolute, anymore than the tentative scenarios a detective may consider. But in the case of the Tetrads, no final solution arrives, only such hypothetical possibilities. The lack of an absolute reading suggests that the text has no fixed meaning, only degrees of likelihood. Thus the reading can break down, if the reader presses it, or impacts upon it with a counter-reading from another direction. The tenuousness of the grip of meaning reflects Baldessari's sense that civilization is only a thin veneer that could crumble at any moment, revealing something more violent and primitive underlying it. In an odd yet understandable way, these works—and in a larger sense the whole level of indefiniteness in Baldessari's work in general—are about World War II. "I was just scared by the Holocaust," says Baldessari, who was twenty-five when the documentation of the death-camps began to be published. "I never believed after that that the world had a real order. There seemed to be a very thin tenuous order in the world that could crumble any moment. Piles of wallets, rings, shoes, in the ovens...how you organize things..."<sup>46</sup> So the fact that the viewer is cast in the role of a detective trying to figure something out suggests the deeper purpose of figuring out the riddle of civilization, which is the riddle of human nature.

"Clues" is a key concept for Baldessari, who says that rather than hitting the viewer over the head he likes to offer hints, clues, and suggestions. Is there a supposition that one of the Tetrads has an actual specifiable meaning? "I'm a great believer in the slipperiness of language (and the image),"



says Baldessari. "If a photograph can lie, then what can you believe in?"<sup>47</sup>

The connections are apt to be quick. *To be a* suggests the question, A what? The three image panels present three roles a detective might encounter as possible answers: a snoop, a rat, a wolf in sheep's clothing. *As it is* suggests an acceptance of the inadequacy of the clues, a shoulder-shrugging acknowledgement that these things are in the world, each of these is a part of how it is; that's the plain fact that stands or falls merely by its facticity. *Necessary facts* implies a scenario: one must perform work (upper right) to obtain food (upper left); in the lower left two people may be trying to escape this entrapment by circumstances.

Underlying this detective-and-clues approach is the implication that a crime has been committed: the totality of all things holds, in the knot of forces at its center, a primal crime whose consequences are still being worked out, inscrutably, in the world of our experience and in the cultural objects we make to convey our feelings about it. This is not a concept like Original Sin so much as Freud's idea of the guilt, remorse and self-doubt that one incurs by the acts of repression that make civilization possible.

So the first fact about the Tetrads is their physical conformation as a mandala or totality or map of the All, and the second is the inner scenario of the conundrum which that All presents to our eager but confounded gaze.

*In itself as in its cause* bears more directly than most on the basic questioning of meaning, or of civilization itself. The broken pencil suggests that meaning can no longer be expressed and civilization is at an impasse, like the broken spectacles in *Potemkin* which signify that mob rule has taken over and the situation is no longer about clear seeing. The opposition between the seemingly entranced female figure in the upper right and the imprisoned and screaming one in the lower left also suggests the suspension of reason and the obstruction of communication. Here it is the text panel, usually the easiest starting point, that is most difficult to fit in. The idea that the phenomenon is the same as its cause (that it is "self-caused," as theologians say) suggests no reflective pause in the process, a kind of rule of unreason in which a cause inevitably becomes its own effect without any option of intervention.

BALDESSARI'S MAIN SUBJECT MATTER FOR THE LAST THIRTY-THREE years can be described as the relationship between imagery and philosophy in our time—understanding that our time is an age of doubt and its philosophers purvey irony and skepticism. It is a time when certainties are suspended, flux prevails, and definitions drift. The ambiguous and shifting

foundations of the Tetrads reflect the difficulty—if not the inaccessibility—of knowledge today. Granted this, the philosopher—or the post-Modern artist functioning as philosopher—steps back to his next position of defense, which is epistemology. He asks, What is the cause of this difficulty in knowing? Is it inherent in the ontological situation, or is it a deficiency in one's cognitive equipment? This is what many of the Tetrads are working out in different particular models: a mapping of the functioning of the cognitive equipment. The floating, indefinite, semi-transparent quality of the statements the works seem to be making is a direct reflection of the floating, shifting, indefinite quality of reality today. A picture of Modernist cognition, by way of contrast, would be a picture of a mind working with certainty—or anyway with an impression of its own certainty—a Mondrian, say. The mind is seeing clearly a reality which has within it a clear structure. Today, cognition is less Platonic—less infallible, less abstract, less geometrical. It incorporates the blurred edges of incomplete definitions—or open identities.

When we think of "the indefinite" we do not mean the void. We do not mean it has absolutely no qualities, or no degree of definition. We mean something that is partly defined but with major questions still left open. That is the way Baldessari's pictures in the Tetrads work. He has formulated an array of precise examples of indefiniteness.

Indefinite reality, or the indefinite cognition that perceives it, can be precise although it is indefinite, because it has nuances of mood, an indefinite number of quizzical moods, moods of questioning, or moods of indefiniteness. That is something closer to the reality of our time than the clear right angles of a Mondrian. Each of the quadrants of a Tetrad is partly defined and partly undefined; the relationship among all four is a complex indefiniteness woven of the interactions of several simpler indefinitenesses. Here, the artist seems to be saying, are fifteen ways it can happen—fifteen pictures of challenges the mind might deal with, and the uncertain directions these challenges point in.

1. Kim Levin, "Get the Big Picture?" *The Village Voice*, April 22, 1981.

2. Hugh Davies, "John the Baldessari: Prophetic Works," in *John Baldessari: National City* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), p. 8.

3. Edmund Burke, *On Taste, On the Sublime and*

*the Beautiful, Reflections on the French Revolution, A Letter to a Noble Lord* (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, [The Harvard Classics], 1937).

4. H. W. Janson and Anthony E Janson, *History of Art*, 5th edition revised (New York: Abrams, 1997), p. 923.

5. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The*



- Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991), especially chapter one, "Culture."
6. Davies, "John the Baldessari," p.8.
7. See Coosje van Bruggen, *John Baldessari* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 40.
8. Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy Part II: 'Conceptual Art' and Recent Art," *Studio International* (November 1969), pp. 160-161.
9. Charles Bernstein, "Dark City," in *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994), p. 140.
10. Compare James Collins on this point: "I'm amazed that Baldessari hasn't been taken seriously as a Conceptual artist. Some hardcore Conceptualists have dismissed his work on the damaging grounds that it is amusing. Such political ploys attempting to pass off 'philosophy' as a natural heir to art can now be seen for what they are—political ploys. Could the reason for such slights be that Baldessari's early word paintings were too close and (to think the unthinkable) more interesting, and also genuinely earlier than Kosuth's work, for example?" ("Pointing, Hybrids, and Romanticism: John Baldessari," *Artforum* [Oct. 1973], p. 58.)
11. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 163.
12. Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 81.
13. For more discussion of this point see Thomas McEvelley, *The Exiles's Return: Toward a Redefinition of Painting for the Post-Modern Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially chapter one.
14. See Thomas McEvelley, "Yves Klein, Conquistador of the Void," in *Yves Klein: A Retrospective* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, and New York: The Arts Publisher, 1982), pp. 44 and 69.
15. See William Anastasi and Thomas McEvelley, "William Anastasi: Talk About Dumb," above pp. 105-35.
16. See Thomas McEvelley, "Mute Prophecies: The Art of Jannis Kounellis," in *Jannis Kounellis* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1986), p. 107. Republished in McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
17. The extent to which his canvases are imbued with the aura of touch is illustrated by the furor over the restoration of the painting vandalized in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.
18. Quoted by Marcia Tucker, "John Baldessari: Pursuing the Unpredictable," in *John Baldessari* (New York: The New Museum for Contemporary Art, 1981), p. 10.
19. In van Bruggen, *John Baldessari*, p. 55.
20. Janson and Janson, *History of Art*, p. 923: "...Joseph Beuys, who, with Andy Warhol and John Baldessari, may be regarded as the patron saint of postmodern art..."
21. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, chapter one.
22. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form, Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [A Harvest Book], 1949), p.30.
23. Ibid.
24. Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautreamont), *Les Chantes de Maldoror (Songs of Maldoror)* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 263.
25. Often the relations among Baldessari's visual alphabet units seem to involve a more complex patterning such as that suggested by Levi-Strauss when he speaks, in *The Raw and the Cooked*, of arriving "at the same contrasting structure by a regressive process," "by means of a transformation symmetrical to the one that produced [the old structure] but operating in the reverse direction." (*The Raw and the Cooked* [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], p. 199.) Baldessari's *Binary Code Series: Orange Peels and Ties...* (1974) is a simple example of such a structure.
26. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text: Essays*
- Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 79.
27. In conversation with the author, Santa Monica, California, June, 1999.
28. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 79-82.
29. In Nancy Drew, "John Baldessari, An Interview," in *John Baldessari* (New Museum catalogue), p. 64.
30. Janson and Janson, *History of Art*, pp. 869-870.
31. Arthur Danto, "Post-Historical Abstract Painting," *Tema Celeste*, autumn 1991, p. 55. Danto discusses the Hegelian basis to this idea in *After the End of Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 45.
32. Nelson Goodman, in Charles Harrison and Fred Ortan, eds., *Modernism, Criticism, Realism: Alternative Contexts for Art* (New York: Harper and Row, [Icon Editions], 1984), p. 88.
33. Ibid., p. 90.
34. Ibid., p. 91.
35. Ibid.
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), p. 28.
37. Joseph Margolis, *The Truth About Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 22-23.
38. In conversation with the author, Santa Monica, California, June, 1999.
39. Ibid. A crucial fact in Baldessari's background seems to lie behind this activity of endlessly sorting images and representations by varying perceptions of their similarities. In his youth his father was in the salvage business; he gathered and brought back materials from demolition sites and other sources. As a teenager Baldessari had the job of sorting the random heaps of stuff to prepare it for reselling—the faucets all together, the light switches together, and so on.
40. In conversation with the author, Santa Monica, California, June, 1999.
41. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 82.
42. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, English trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991).
43. In conversation with the author, Santa Monica, California, June, 1999.
44. Ibid.
45. See John Welt Perry, *Lord of the Four Quarters: Myths of the Royal Father*, with foreword by Alan W. Watts (New York: the Macmillan Company, [Collier Books, Patterns of Myth Series], 1966).
46. In conversation with the author, Santa Monica, California, June, 1999.
47. Ibid.



## Les Levine

### *Mass Media Campaigns*

LES LEVINE'S BODY OF WORK BEGAN IN 1962 WITH A PARADOX, the "disposable artwork," which, in terms of centuries-old beliefs about art, was a contradiction in terms. The "disposables" were multiples in vacuum-formed plastic that could be arranged and rearranged on a wall. They have a relationship to both Minimal painting and Minimal sculpture, but even more to the emphasis on ephemerality that informed the moment, in defiance of the idea of the eternal verity of aesthetic form. In 1965 his video production—and in fact video art in general—began with *Bum*, which established a social dimension to the emerging oeuvre.

With other works Levine entered the vanguard of what has been called the art-life project: the use of art itself to break open the art system and interpenetrate it with the world outside. *Levine's Restaurant*, 1969, affirmed the street nature of the new art, as well as its nourishing aspect, its interpenetration with ordinary life, and its everyday commodity nature, like groceries; the *Museum of Mott Art, Inc.*, was a conceptual museum invented by the artist in 1970 on Mott Street in New York. In an essay of 1974,<sup>1</sup> Levine seemed to align himself with Marcel Duchamp's stated project of returning art to the service of the mind. "What good artists are doing," he wrote, "is raising art beyond the level of mere taste." Like the art-life issue, this was a project that history had assigned especially to the artists of Levine's generation.

A primary concern of this project was simply to point at mind or cognition, both its presence and the glitches in its presence; but this option might instantiate itself in a variety of specific socio-cultural forms. "I was forced," Levine wrote in 1973,<sup>2</sup> "to ask myself, Are the social and political problems of a society a valid concern for art? The answer was, 'Yes, of course...'" A variety of themes involving American foreign policy, the troubles in Northern Ireland, ecological concerns, and other matters, have since been articulated in his approach.



LES LEVINE, *We Are Not Afraid*, 1979. Subway advertisement, New York City.



LEVINE'S WORK OF THE 1970S OFTEN MIXED TEXT AND IMAGE AND often involved video or photography. By the end of the 1970s his attention had focused more and more on the media themselves—the major public modes of disseminating information and attitude. Earth Art, Performance Art, Mail Art, and other alternative modes of communication designed to evade the suspect aura of the gallery system arose from similar concerns—but Levine's solution was somewhat different. In these other tactics he saw something defensive; the artists seemed to be turning to out-of-the-way alternatives in a gesture of desperation. Levine chose to take the offensive and enlist the larger established media in his art rather than innovate among smaller and more esoteric byways of communication. "I want to consider media as a natural resource and to mold media the way others would mold matter," he wrote in 1973. "In that sense," he went on, "my new work could be considered media sculpture."<sup>3</sup> It was this decision, and its implementation over a period of two decades, that earned Levine the description as "the founder of media art."<sup>4</sup>

Levine's own term is "media sculpture." The billboard works are media sculptures, as are the subway advertising posters of the 1980s, such as the famous image of a young Asian man and woman gazing straight out at the viewer over the words, "We Are Not Afraid." In Levine's subversive yet subtle interventions into the public media, it is a cognitive material that is "sculpted"—either that of the immediate viewer or that of the community at large. A transformation is wrought in the cognitive material as the 19th century sculptor wrought a transformation in stone or from clay to bronze. Usually Levine's works do not aggressively confront the viewer's media conditioning but obliquely brush up against it, leaving puzzlement in their wake as much as amusement, or sometimes (as in the *Blame God* series) a mixture of surprise and shock. The concept of media sculpture means that the works address those outside the art world. They become a part of the flow of urban life and, being sited in the everyday world, appear to reject the high art tradition. This impression is reinforced by the childhood orientation implied by the coloring book imagery and style, which tends to question adult frameworks of meaning. There is a suggestion that the work of attaining a grown-up attitude has not really been done yet by our society, and that one of the problems is the use of media to create false consciousness.

Starting in 1974 with works like the implied self-portrait *A Boy Making Sculpture*, Levine produced pictorial-textual confections that he called "Ads" or "Photo-Ads"; these were not, however, sited in the outside world of popular media but in the art gallery, from which they referred outward.

It was the haunting 1979 subway ad *We Are Not Afraid* that made the transition, riding for two months in 5,000 New York city subway cars. In 1982 the billboard works themselves began. The massive outdoor-sited objecthood of the billboard is part of what is pointed to by the term media sculpture. Yet at the same time the billboard message, despite the massive physicality of its support, is quintessentially ephemeral. It is perhaps the ultimate example of an information medium where messages pass quickly through a system and are as quickly replaced. The very idea of flow is incarnated in its siting near points where traffic builds up. Outside of Levine's work the medium of the billboard has not been highly developed in art history. Occasional projects are known in which an artist, or several artists, abandon momentarily their usual media in order to make a lightning-like move onto the street and the highway, then retreat back into the more controllable arena of the gallery. Levine's development of the billboard as an instrument for his Mass Media campaigns has been far more committed, investigative, and productive. These campaigns have grown in both size and focus, from the first project, ten billboards in Los Angeles in 1982, to recent projects of 250 boards in Vienna in 1994 and 250 in Bursa, Turkey, in 1995.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE OF OUR ERA—INDEED ONE OF THE INSIGHTS that presaged post-Modernism in the 1950s—that in any act of communication the medium becomes a part of the message. The billboard, as much as, say, a tomb wall of Egyptian hieroglyphs, has inherent parameters of meaning which it overlays onto the message it blazons forth. One parameter deals with location. Egyptian hieroglyphs sited in a tomb are meant for only the most private viewing conceivable—principally by the ghost or afterlife form of the deceased. The billboard points in the opposite direction, toward the most populous areas of living activity, the streets, bazaars, and highways of the world of commerce. Whereas the Egyptian text involves an attempt to gain access to an eternal sanctum through spells, a billboard text involves the act of selling mundane and transient commodities. Another parameter is the duration of the reader's attention. The Egyptian burial text is for eternity; the contemporary billboard is for a fleeting moment. Quicker than a TV commercial, the billboard makes the briefest possible demand upon attention. Viewers, buckled into cars and trapped in the flow of traffic, are constrained from pausing to look longer as one flipping through a magazine might pause to linger over an ad. They are at the mercy of random factors, such as traffic and weather conditions. The fact that driving is an activity that brings a certain stress with it, even a certain crisis in the sense that



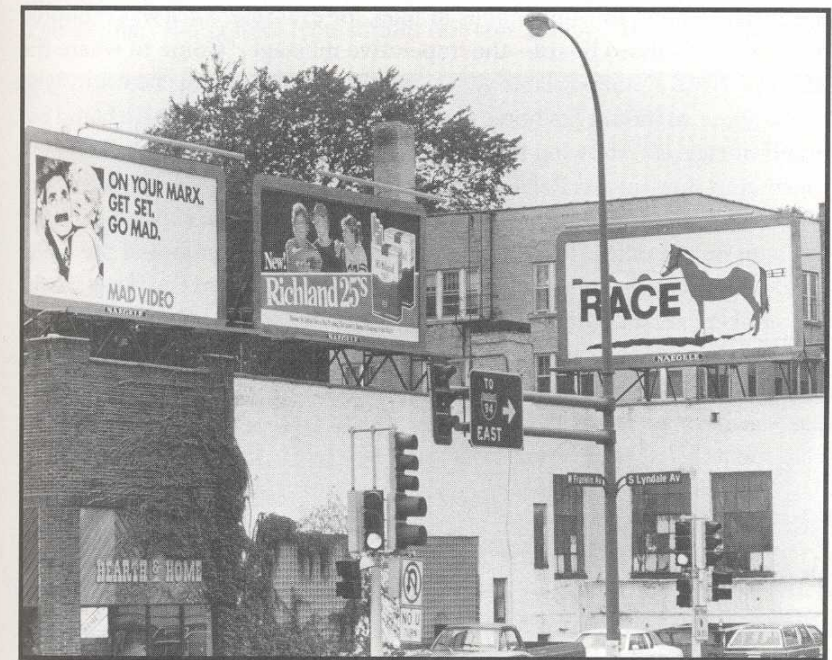
one's life is constantly in danger, shadows the billboard with a touch of the same sinister sublime that the brevity of any capitalist ad campaign, with its *memento mori* suggestiveness, radiates.

Despite the many differences of their situations, the Egyptian tomb painting and the contemporary billboard both involve combinations of words and images; they are both, in a sense, ideographs or rebuses in which the meaning arises precisely from the mind's ability to shift easily back and forth between the two realms. Like the moving of the artwork out of the gallery, the introduction of language, and with it cognition, to the art experience became a major preoccupation of Levine's generation of artists, all influenced, however remotely, by the legacy of Duchamp. Levine's particular approach to text has been distinctive. Whereas Duchamp settled on the esoteric or learned pun, early Conceptual Artists employed neutral texts such as dictionary or thesaurus entries, and younger artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger espoused a feminist rhetoric which operates through the reinterpretation of familiar phrases, the basic unit of Levine's verbal components is the imperative verb—the briefest possible message, suitable for a glimpse in passing, and the most overtly manipulative in its commanding nature. The directness of the command is reinforced formally by the artist's preference for monosyllabic verbs, and by a certain childlike expressiveness most evident in the visual style of the billboard images, which have been compared to coloring books.

THE ONE-WORD MESSAGE IS OFTEN A PUN, BUT NOT A COMPLEX OR learned pun in the Duchampian tradition; rather, it is a childlike beginner's-mind pun that often consists simply in the fact that the word in question could be either a verb or a noun. Five billboards of 1981, for example, bear the messages *aim*, *race*, *take*, *steal*, and *forget*. The first two function as either imperative verbs or singular nouns; the next two can do so also, with allowances for slang or jargon (the take of a robbery, a bargain or a move in a baseball game). The last one is exceptional, having two syllables but only readable in the imperative.

The imperative mood of the message accords with its placement on a billboard, where the usual message is, in effect, *Buy...!* But what the passing viewer of Levine's messages "buys," or "buys into," is not a commodifiable product but a kind of puzzle. The puzzle has to do with the relation between the message and the image, but even more with the relation between the message and the viewer's own life or state of mind or situation at the moment.

*Race* shows a horse standing docilely in a field that is fenced in a way visually associated with the world of horse racing. It seems to refer to the reader as a docile trained animal which has been taught to race toward some goal or other and accepts this mandate and the limitations it puts upon his life; he stands ready to race upon command. In fact, ensconced in his car, on the way to or from work, the reader is even then, at the moment of reading, involved in the race or competition of life in a capitalist society. In the difference between the species of the driver and of the stand-in represented on the billboard there lurks another meaning of the word race, an alternative which would come increasingly to the foreground as the years passed. A billboard mounted in Aalst, Belgium, in 1992, for example, eleven years after the first *Race* board, says "Win the race," and shows three hands, one white, one brown, and one black, evidently competing for a circular object, somewhat like the leaping grasp of the jump-ball in basketball. In this case, however, the object grasped for is not a sporting missile but a JFK silver dollar, and it is the white hand that in fact has succeeded in grasping it. The white competitor has won the race for the coin, but more to the point has



LES LEVINE, *Race*, 1982. In situ, Minneapolis. 30 sheet billboard. 10 × 21'.



won the competition of race or ethnicity. In fact, upon closer viewing, it appears that the white hand has not just grabbed the prize, but has had it all along and is now holding it up to display it to the members of non-white races as a goal to be sought for; the white hand holds the coin in a relaxed, not a striving, posture; the brown and black competitors reach for it with outstretched straining right hands. The “race” was fixed all along: only one race could win the race. The message of the *Race* of 1981—the docility with which humans submit to the goals which society projects upon them—is still in effect, but the viewer has glimpsed the situation behind the scenes, the fact that the race was fixed from the start. The pun opens up to reveal a closed social system.

The aggressive nature of Levine’s imperative message, with its façade of advertising-style manipulation, is offset by other factors which render the seemingly simple situation increasingly complex. By siting his work in the streets, for example, Levine invites the intervention of random factors into its reception. Prominent among these is the fact that Levine’s billboards, with their ironic displacement of the command *Buy!* are often placed beside or among others which extend the command *Buy!* with neither irony nor displacement. In Minneapolis in 1982, for example, *Race* was mounted between a Marlboro board—the imperative message, “Come to where the flavor is” (with a monosyllabic verb), seemingly encouraging a cowboy who is just about to mount his horse—and a board advertising the Richland 25s brand of cigarets, showing three young people in sporting attire laughing together as they smoke. Relationships emerge multifariously. The Marlboro Man about to mount his horse is preparing to enter a race which he already has won on the ethnic level (the cowboy is basically a symbol of the white genocide of Native Americans). In the Richland 25s board the three laughing smokers are all ethnically white, as is the Marlboro Man, evincing the subtextual message that in this society the reward, the “flavor,” is reserved for members of one race. While the conjunction of the billboard *Race* with the Marlboro ad seems meaningful, it was in fact random. Other random placements seem as obviously meaningless, while in fact they have the same ontogeny as the supposedly meaningful ones. Reflections on the randomness of meaning, or its dependence on habit systems, are invited.

Sometimes the imperative message involves more than one word, as in *Pray for more* and *Consume or Perish*, both 1989. Often a two-word clause is made up of an imperative verb and a noun-object, as in *Block God*, 1985, *Control Arms*, 1990, *Switch Position*, 1989, or *Feed Greed*, 1988. Sometimes a modifier expands the clause to three words, as in *See Your Mind*, 1989, or

*Guard This Object*, 1990. In still other cases the imperative verb is conjoined with an adverb, as in *See True* or *Look Sharp*, both 1996. Alongside these forms which are generated out of the lone imperative one encounters two-word phrases of various types, such as *Not Guilty*, 1989, or *Pretty Please*, 1996.

IN GENERAL, THE ARTIST INTENDS THESE WORD-OBJECTS AS LITTLE riddles or anagrams which the viewer is supposed to work on and, perhaps, work out; he or she is directly invited to do so by the seeming (but often deceptive) simplicity of the message and by its conjunction with a simple image in coloring-book style. The experience may involve several possible outcomes. In some cases the viewer may succeed in working the message out in some way meaningful for him or her, in which case the experience will result in a moment of clarity, a heightened perception of the ontology of meaning itself. But most encounters will be more ambiguous or vague. The viewer may neglect to engage the message but drive by in a state of denial about its claim on his attention. Or the viewer may fail to decipher the message in a useful way and retain a memory imprint of fleeting confusion, puzzlement, or irritation. In any case, the situation remains like that of a Zen saying: “Being here, you should not stumble by.” That is, as the artist



LES LEVINE, *Attack God*, 1985. 30 sheet billboard in situ, London, England. 10 × 21'. Part of *Blame God* series, 28 billboards throughout London.





LES LEVINE, *Kill God*, 1985. 30 sheet billboard, in situ, London, England, 10 × 21'.  
Part of *Blame God*, 1985, 28 billboards throughout London.

exerts pressure on cognition, the viewer is confronted unexpectedly with a request to exercise special attention upon this present moment. This pressure works in various ways.

The *Forgive Yourself* series erected in Kassel, Germany, in 1988, for example, refers formally to the *Blame God* series of 1985, as each retains a single object with a shifting array of verbal commands. Between them the two series comprise the metaphysical poles of existence, god or the universal on the one hand, and the self or the particular on the other. The images of the *Blame God* series featured Levine's own news photographs of violence in Northern Ireland (from earlier years as a journalist), and the negative thrust of the messages (blame god, kill god, starve god, attack god, block god, execute god, and so on) underline the absurdity of acts of violence performed in the service of religion.<sup>5</sup> That is its topical focus. But more generally the series seems to inculcate a refusal of the universal, which, by cozening us into seeing life as abstraction, divorces us from its concrete reality. The *Forgive yourself* series, more positive in its overt messages (forgive yourself, create yourself, control yourself, free yourself, lead yourself, and so on), points the opposite way, toward confronting the self in the extremity of its particularity and the project of making it somehow free of the universal, master of its fate.



LES LEVINE, *Forgive Yourself*, 1981. In situ at Documenta, Kassel, Germany.  
30 sheet billboard, 10 × 21'.

In each case a certain community is overtly addressed in the midst of its specific troubles (the Irish in *Blame God*, the German in *Forgive Yourself*), while the message reaches covertly beyond that community to humanity at large.

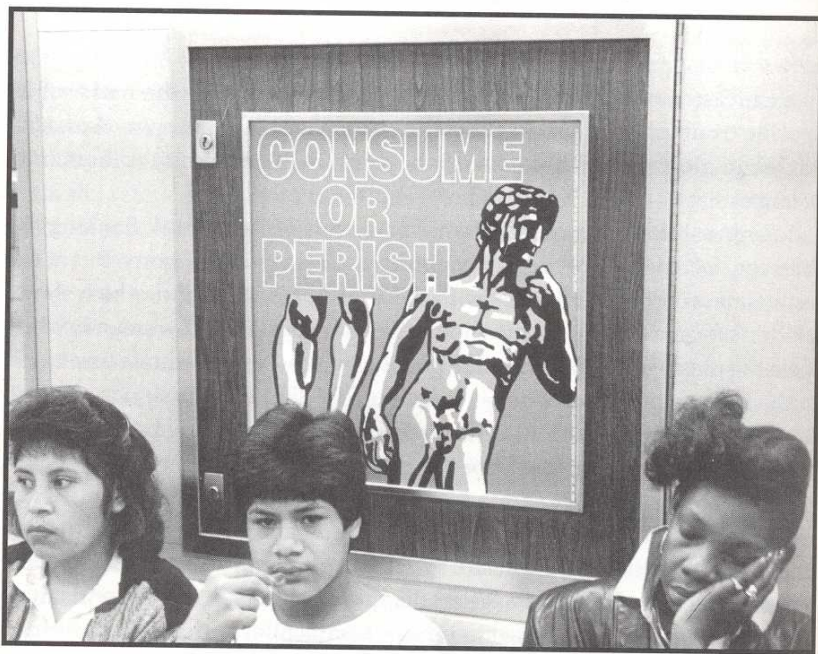
*Forgive Yourself* shows the famous portrait of Ann Frank flanking the message, focusing its particularity upon the German community. But at the same time it connects textually with the later *Not Guilty*, 1990, which shows a kitten's face peering over the shoulder of a blonde-haired woman holding it. So the message—free yourself of guilt feelings—extends from a tiny kitten to the horrors of war, and one is instructed to offer compassion to oneself. It is a kind of precondition of the associated message, *Create Yourself*, an admonition to become free from the past in hope for the future.

*Pray for More*, 1989, shows two hands cradling a praying mantis. The mantis represents nature, while the message relates to the fact that nature is threatened by the human desire to get more and more out of it. The combined visual and verbal message is: the more we humans take from nature the more we need to nurture it in return. Meanwhile, by the sort of punning inversion that Levine often employs, the insect itself is advised to pray for



more, that is, more life, more human care, and so on. In Levine's work as a whole, this board is a development from an earlier monosyllabic one, *Take*, 1984, which shows a crane with a clawlike lifting device heaping up stuff torn from the earth. The monosyllabic imperatives of the early 1980s (including *Cheat, Hate, Kill, Lie, Race, Rape, Sell, Starve, Steal, Win*, and others) are, as it were, the seed forms of which the later wordier and more intricate boards are exfoliations. *Take* suggests the plunder of the earth by industrial society and the blindness of the drive to *take* evermore from whatever source is available without reckoning the consequences. The hands cradling the praying mantis are a corrective to the action of the hands on the controls of the crane; the posture of protecting is the corrective to the posture of taking; the act of praying for more by humanity is responsibly fulfilled by nature's own praying for more nurturing—and so on.

*Consume or Perish*, 1988, is thematically related to *Pray for More* and other environmentally concerned projects (meaning the cultural as well as the natural environment). The message refers to the need to eat in order to continue living, but there is a problem or paradox involved: if we don't consume we will not live, but if we continue to consume (to take ever more)



LES LEVINE, *Consume or Perish*, 1989. Subway advertisement, New York City.

we will destroy the environment we depend upon. The image of Michelangelo's *David* applies this paradigm to the cultural realm: culture too grows in response to consumption and, in growing, threatens to be destroyed; the *David* has been arbitrarily cropped (legs separated to the left) to fit it to a new mode of cultural life; it survives in this new mode, but not precisely as itself. The Renaissance ideal of humanity has been broken by its heedless obsession with consuming.

Many of the billboards relate to the conjoined themes of childhood innocence and the mind, which goes back in Levine's oeuvre at least to his 1982 *Village Voice* cover that showed a smiling little girl with the word *Mind* superimposed on her dress.<sup>6</sup> Works which relate to the *mind* theme include *Slide into Your Mind*, 1985, *Change Your Mind*, 1989, *Lose Your Mind*, 1993, and *See Your Mind*, 1995. The theme of the innocent mind extends widely through the series. In terms of form, it is involved in the childlike emphasis on primary colors, the evident liking for pictures of animals, the coloring-book look of many of the images, the child's-almanac format of having a picture of a species of animal with a single word or two accompanying it, and so on. The interplay and interchange between these two themes run throughout the billboard works, pointing to the innocence of a child's mind as a natural resource for the future, and the importance of the adult's responsibility of training that mind without destroying its innocence or the directness of its vision. The billboard itself, with its receptivity to whatever message is placed upon it, represents the *tabula rasa* of the innocent mind about to be imprinted by a combination of manipulative and random factors. The theme of education, which combines the motifs of mind and childhood, is directly represented in various boards, such as *Feel Time*, 1989, which shows a baby's hand clutching the forefinger of an adult hand, and *Power Play*, 1989, which shows a man in a military uniform holding a toy tank. Billboard messages (like Burma Shave signs in an earlier era) are among the earliest texts that children read, and Levine's boards, capturing the viewers at a moment of vulnerability, reduce them all to a receptivity like a child's.

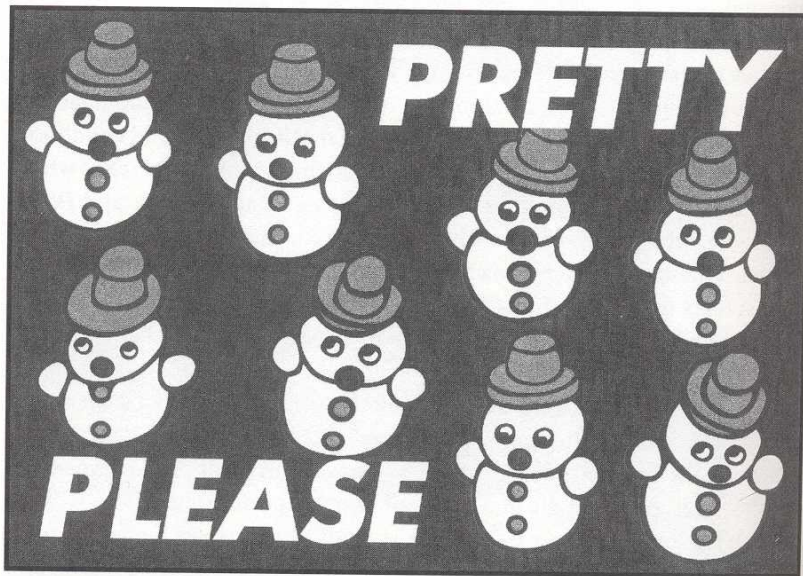
THE BIG POSTERS ARE SOMETIMES EXHIBITED INDOORS IN MUSEUM situations, and here different tactics emerge. Sometimes, if the space is suitable, the walls long and low, the billboard posters can emphasize perspectival foreshortening and establish a sense of almost tumultuous rushing. They sculpturize the architecture. This is a style of installation Levine has used on several occasions. In a different situation, where the walls are higher and shorter, the posters have been installed on top of one another, with no



space between them, seem to make a single huge image. In one case, the Galerie der Stadt in Stuttgart in 1997, the eight rooms of the installation, all taken together, seemed to comprise a single vast symphonic opus. Stacked and stretched continuously, the posters surrounded the viewer, at first glance a jumble of words and images but, upon closer inspection, an orderly array with architectonic structure punctuated by modular repetitions. The completeness of the surround suggested a comparison with music, and the progression from one room to another was orchestrated by stages.

In the first room, twenty-one different words were combined with the monosyllabic imperative *look*: *Look Alert, Look Alive, Look Bad, Look Good, Look Clever, Look Pretty, Look Smart*, and so on, interspersed with repeated occurrences of *Doubt Identify* and *Bring to Life*. Various readings appear, transform, and reappear kaleidoscopically: *Look Bring; To Life Look; Doubt Identify Look; Look Doubt Identify*, and so on.

Regarding just the *Look* phrases, with some of the adjectives/adverbs the verb becomes a partial pun meaning either appear (appear to be sharp) or scrutinize (look about yourself sharply). The subject is involved both actively—looking at the world—and passively—appearing to the world. The repetition of the word *look* suggests the persistence of the self through a se-



LES LEVINE, *Pretty Please*, 1996. Billboard layout.

ries of moments; the rapid-fire changing of the adjective, with no repetitions or recurrences, suggests the always shifting and changing series of relations and conditions of the self. The eyes represent a watcher who sees clearly.

In the next room, the sentence *Good Taste Is No Excuse* was repeated endlessly in three primary and two secondary colors. The readings proceeded in various ways: *Good Is, Good Is, Good Is; Taste Excuse, Taste Excuse, Taste Excuse; Excuse Taste, Excuse Taste, Excuse Taste; Is No Good, Is No Good, Is No Good*. Implicit is a critique of the traditional approach to art as based on aesthetic taste.

Going on, one entered a room where the words *Pretty Please* were endlessly repeated in conjunction with four toy or candy snowman effigies. When read together the words suggest a sensibility that begs for prettiness in art, but with a nursery rhyme simplicity in doing so.

In the final room was found a video installation, *See Your Mind*, which acts somewhat as a coda to the piece as a whole, restating its principal theme. Levine's fundamental artistic goal is that of promoting insight into mental processes, their origins and consequences. Rather than seeing something else from inside your mind, why not see your mind itself? Why not begin at the beginning which is so close that we hardly see it, absorbed as we are in looking always outward from it? The adventure begins from the mind (*Look alert!*) and ends with the mind, with the ability to see it at last after following its trails back from their extensions in the world, and perhaps, in the now nearly universal saying of T.S. Eliot, to "know it for the first time."

1. Les Levine, *Camera Art* (Wayne, New Jersey: Ben Shahn Art Gallery, William Paterson College, 1974), p. 8.
2. Les Levine, "It's Realistic, But Is It Art?," *Saturday Review*, February, 1973, p. 18.
3. Ibid.
4. Peter Doroshenko, in *Public Mind: Les Levine's Media Sculpture and Mass Ad Campaigns 1969-1990* (Syracuse, New York: The Everson Museum of Art, 1990), p. 12.
5. For detailed analysis of the *Blame God* series of 1985 see Thomas McEvelley, "The Collaboration of Word and Image in the Art of Les Levine," in *Les Levine: Billboard Projects: Blame God* (London: The ICA, 1986).
6. For more on this piece see McEvelley, *ibid.*



## Francis Alys

*Calling the Unaccountable to Account*

FRANCIS ALYS IS A BELGIAN ARTIST WHO LIVED AND EXHIBITED in Mexico for many years. In that time his work participated in a small but meaningful art scene, centered in Mexico City, that has international implications not yet well articulated. During the period in question, his work developed in responsive dialogue with the works of younger Mexican artists and some other foreign-born artists who, for various reasons, had chosen to live in Mexico. Within that *mélange*, his work has combined Belgian reference points—such as the oeuvres of René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers—with references to the life-world of Mexico, and a general participation in western contemporary art practice.

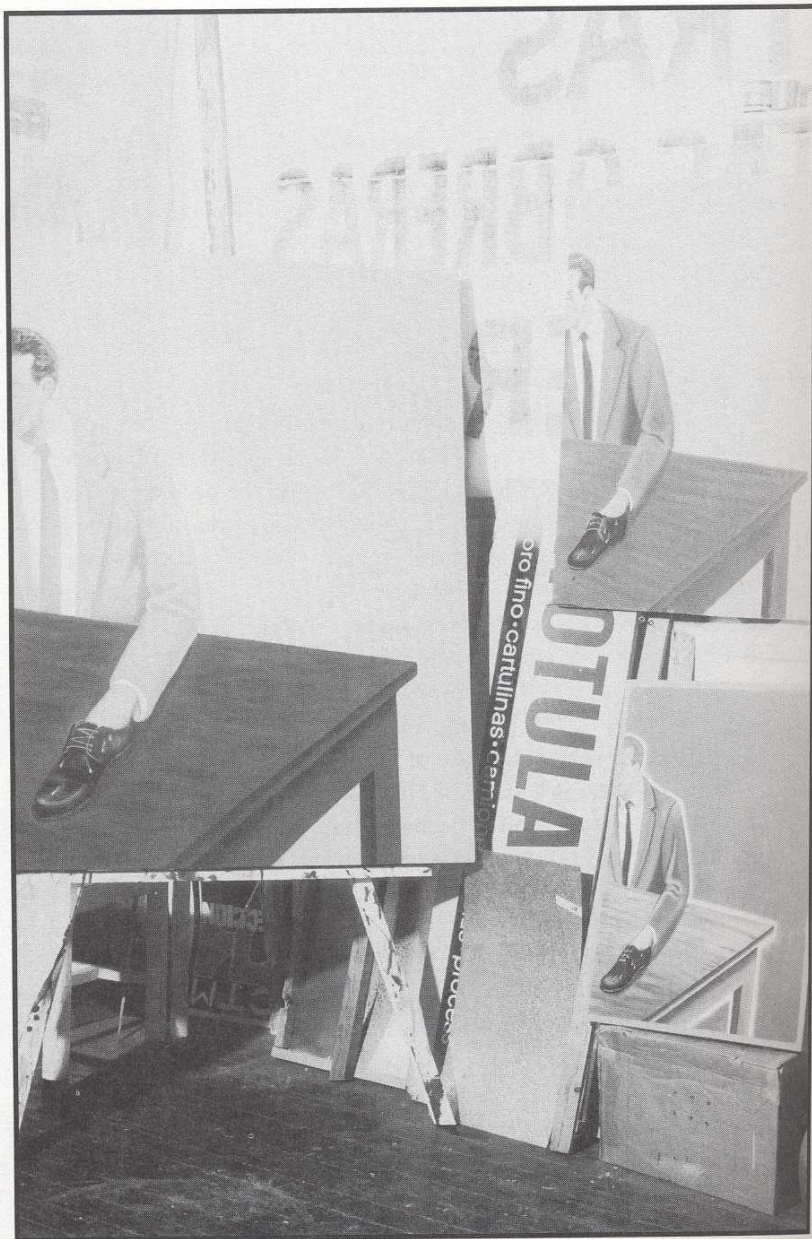
Alys's work is subtle, surprising, and resists categorization. Its subtlety seems very Belgian (with much else of Europe in the background); its surprising effervescence has a spark of New World insouciance; its apparent desire to resist categorization is perhaps the deepest sign of these times, when nobody knows exactly where he or she is. Before addressing Alys's work directly it would be worth reviewing this situation briefly.

Much of the international art discourse for a generation or so has been based on a resistance to categorization, which is part of the post-Modern voiding of inherited Modernist patterns of meaning. The desire to be indefinable has produced two more or less definable genres: neo-Conceptual sculpture, a category in which much of Alys's work can be situated without doing violence to it, and neo-installation. The two have a certain amount in common: both involve the arrangement and rearrangement of found objects; both will tolerate more or less anything in terms of formal and material parameters; and both tend to conflate traditionally separate media such as painting, sculpture, Conceptualism and Performance. Yet there is a key difference between these genres, also.

Much installation art of the 1980s—such as the work of Mel Chin or

FRANCIS ALYS, from "The Liar / The Copy of the Liar," 1993-94.  
Commercial signpainter works on Alys's design.



FRANCIS ALYS, *Catalogue 8*, 1993-94.

Studio shot of three paintings for "The Liar / The Copy of the Liar."

Fred Wilson or Cady Noland—was heavily coded in ways that invite, or command, the viewer to decode them. The works are often extremely complex, and may refer in detailed ways to social and political situations. These works are, in other words, meant to be "read" as texts. They may appear inscrutable at first sight (and often, proudly, do), but in fact they are inwardly anxious to give an account of themselves. So earnest, in fact, is this intention that the artist often supplies a verbal key to a set of historical references that will enable the reader to read the details and nuances of whatever odd configuration of things he or she is momentarily confronted with. Such works move aggressively against the Modernist or formalist idea of the purely optical, immediate presence of the artwork, emphasizing cognitive mediation instead. The work's resistance to categorization is based not on intellectual unaccountability but on its mixing of traditional genres: painting, sculpture, theatre, architecture, and so on.

The genre of neo-Conceptual sculpture is interestingly different. It does not ask to be read, yet it does not rely exactly on formalist immediacy either. Ultimately, this genre may derive from Dada and Surrealism, but it evolved more directly from the strange combinations of objects in 1970s and '80s contexts such as Arte Povera and the New British Sculpture, with infusions of influence from Joseph Beuys and, perhaps its most perfect practitioner, Broodthaers. As opposed to the Dada tendency to threaten and shock the viewer, these works are more apt to surprise the viewer in an exhilarating but non-threatening way. The category might be applied to at least some of the work of such artists as St. Clair Cemin, Rosemarie Trökel, Wim Delvoye, Nayland Blake, and Dennis Oppenheim (especially the work of the '90s), among many others. In contrast to the encoded installation, much of this work tries to forestall the viewer's tendency to read it. While not formalist in the old Modernist way, it still works through the fascination of immediate presence. Its style of immediate presence, however, is the arousal less of aesthetic feeling than of cognitive surprise—the immediate realization, upon encountering the work, that one has never seen anything quite like it, and that one never expected to. While there may in fact be discursive codings at play in the work, the work's surface impact deals with the idea of unaccountability.

THE QUEST FOR THE UNACCOUNTABLE OBJECT—AN OBJECT ABOUT which one can think of little or nothing to say, though its presence may fascinate—is a thread of anti-Modernist art that has long challenged the tradition of the purely aesthetic account. Duchamp's Readymades with added puns



involved the attempt to simultaneously engage and confound the cognitive faculty. This impulse was acted out with more variation in the work of Broodthaers. Often such pieces involve a surprising recombination and repositioning of everyday objects and materials, yet without the metaphysically portentous aura with which Surrealism invested its unexpected confluences.

The works in Alys's show at the Galleria Arte Contemporaneo, in Mexico in 1992, included powerful examples of the genre. *Untitled, My Hands Feel Like Gloves*, 1992, for example, shows a small leaden artifact enclosed inside an inflated red balloon. It is not only the contrast of the densities and weights, the solidity and clear boundaries of the cast lead object as against the vaporous expansiveness and evanescence of the balloon, that surprises and fascinates the viewer. There is in addition a slightly uncanny sense that, although this conjunction of objects is obvious and easy, still one never expected to see it. The effect is not uncanny in a religious or metaphysical way, but in terms of suggesting that the usual boundaries of life and perception are very rigid indeed. One could go into almost any room of any home and find common objects that could combine and recombine in such unforeseen and apparently unaccountable ways. *Untitled*, 1991, from the same exhibition, shows a metal bed-frame with the mattress, bedclothes neatly made, removed and thrust partway underneath it. There is nothing surprising or unforeseen about the objects except the unusual positioning with which they have been recombined, for which no reason presents itself. Yet the piece conveys surprise and fascination at the mundane level of everyday life.

In other works in the same exhibition Alys took on the massive project, which so many artists have worked at with such penetrating insight for over a generation, of deconstructing the traditional medium of painting. In *Untitled, Killing the Dog*, 1992, for example, there is a taut balance between ideas of painting and of sculpture, of vision and of the occlusion of vision, of illusionistic space in the picture and functional wall paper seen through the right end of the frame, and so on. The unpretentious little work seems to hover in a forcefield where it is maintained by the intersecting tensions of these and other polarities. The traits of painting and sculpture are suspended and presented as open questions by the intervention of the conceptual elements. This theme or project of Alys's work comes to maturity in his commercial paintings on steel plates.

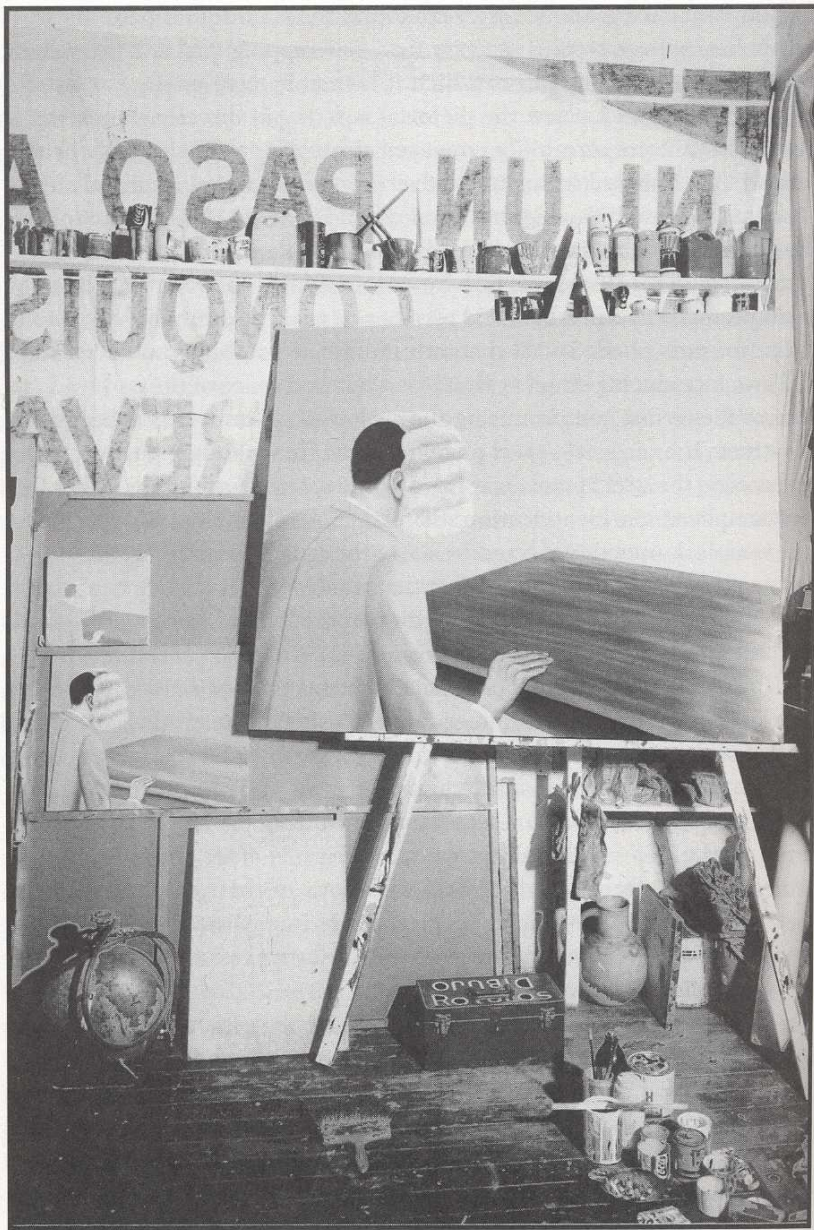
AT FIRST GLANCE THESE PIECES SEEM, MOST OBVIOUSLY AND SIMPLISTICALLY, to be a series of paintings. And, in a sense, that is what they are. But in terms of intention and methodology they have little to do with

traditional painting. In fact, they confound the tradition of painting with a diabolical subversiveness at every turn, enwrapping it in a dense web of forces and relationships from which it is unable to re-emerge as simple painting. In the first place, the pictorial style is not directly expressive of the artist's unique sensibility conveyed through the touch of the brush. Instead, it is imitated from street advertisements painted on metal sheets encountered in Alys's neighborhood of Mexico City. This methodology, whose intentionality is already unclear or muddled, is further suspended in an undefined cultural location by various additional polarities. It is, for example, made by a personal and private act, yet in a communal and public style. In terms of the social thematics of art, it combines so-called high and low, introducing street art into the sheltered space of the gallery or, to reverse the terms, compromising the sheltered space by this reflection of the street. The material—steel plate—and the free-standing posture of the originals on the street point away from painting toward sculpture. Other factors complicate the identification still further. An element of site specificity, for example, is introduced by reference to the artist's neighborhood culture, and an element of chance in the fact that whatever that culture happens to offer is accepted for use. While focusing on the look of painting, the work has characteristics of both sculpture and Conceptual Art as well.

There is also a prominent performative element in the artist's interaction with various workshops of commercial advertising painters. Alys starts from models seen on the street, which themselves are types, not originals in the high art sense; he makes a small paint-on-canvas variation of his own, and this in turn is passed on to a sign-painting workshop where a large sheet-metal copy of his smaller oil-on-canvas version is made. The commercial artists in turn often introduce new variations of their own, rather than making completely mechanical copies. Sometimes the process is further complexified as versions of the same oil-on-canvas picture are made by more than one workshop.

The process embodies the idea of the beginningless and endless stream of simulacra; it is really impossible to say at which stage of the copying process the art act itself is performed. Only, at a certain point the process is stopped, and the viewer beholds what is left over from it. In addition, there is a back and forth reciprocity involved. The work starts in the medium of the street, is translated into the high art medium of oil on canvas, then is retranslated back into the medium of the street with the variations of content that it acquired in the high art realm still in it; finally it is transposed back into the high art realm by exhibition in a gallery.





FRANCIS ALYS, *Catalogue 10*, 1993-94. Scene in commercial signpainter's workshop of three paintings for "The Liar / The Copy of the Liar."

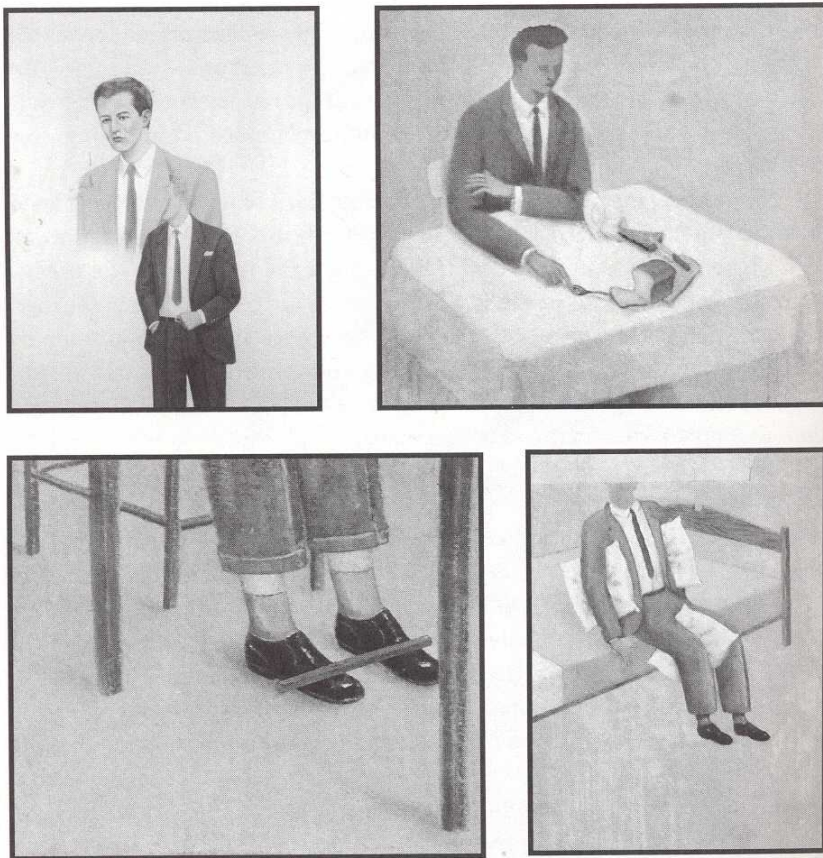
The issue of the status of the work—as original artwork, artisanal handicrafts, or quasi-mechanical reproduction—is further made ambiguous by the marketing strategy. The works refer, by their connection with street advertisements, to issues of commodification, and reduce that process to absurdity by marketing the advertisement as the thing itself. Tilting toward the proletarian aspect, Alys's intention is that they will be priced for sale on the same considerations that the commercial workshops would use—the work's size and the amount of labor that went into its execution. The result is a series of works produced from an elaborate, complicated, and somewhat arbitrary set of conditions.

The cultural meanings that emanate from such objects involve, at least, the evacuation of Modernist value categories in favor of an indefinite anti-art realm. Their point is not the aesthetics of pictorial reality, nor the precise expression of a nuanced sensibility. These values are conspicuously spurned, as in many classical works of Conceptual Art where also the conditions are predetermined without specific meaning and then the work to a degree produces itself. The archetypal work of this type is Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14, in which he made up rules for creating three lines that did not derive from the exercise of his taste, then did so, accepting the results without adjustment.

Barnett Newman remarked that he could phone the specifications for a painting out to a sign painter—but he did not do so. John Baldessari did in fact exhibit paintings made to his specifications by sign painters. Alys's system is more complex, involving first the style seen in the street, then the artist's imitation of it, then the re-imitation of that by artists of the community from which the "original" had come. The work appears out of a series of social transactions that cross class lines and conflate differing agendas into the same pleonastic objects. There are implications about transgressing or leveling class boundaries, and these implications are repeated in regard to artistic genres. The late and post-Modernist search for new media to supersede the traditionally separate and inviolable painting and sculpture has led to such hybridization and amassing of contradiction within complex objects that point various ways at once, denying the idea of crystalline identity.

Finally, within these broader contexts of class and genre conflation, the works present a consistent pictorial realm with a distinctive iconography. Alys's point of departure for beginning these pictures was to make illustrations of an elementary set of sculptural relationships—"subjecting the body," as he put it, "to a range of physically feasible relations of weight, balance, etc."... "to clarify my methods and concerns in the tri-dimensional field."





FRANCIS ALYS, clockwise from upper left: *Catalogue 1.3* (1993), *3.1* (1994), *2.1* (1993), *11.1* (1993). From "The Liar / The Copy of the Liar."

This modest expression of purpose—flash-cards for the study of sculptural positions—is a premise from which the work emerged, while the work itself goes far beyond that premise.

THE PROTAGONIST OF MANY OF THESE STREET ADVERTISEMENTS, as of so many of Magritte's pictures, is a generic business executive who is presented in mundane but bewildering circumstances. Some of the individual pictures have a distinctly Magrittean look, such as *No. 2*, 1992, which shows a man's feet, ensconced in solid respectable shoes, with a little stick lying across them for no apparent reason. Even clearer is the Magrittism of another picture, which shows a man in a suit seated alone at a table with a woman's blond wig hanging over his face. The mute matter-of-factness of these pictures, which do not seek to create awe but to present the strange as everyday, echoes Magritte's straight-faced presentation.

The subject matter of the pictures seems deadpan in that it is adopted from found pictures on the street with no interpretive emphasis. Yet it is conspicuously adaptive too, not just adopting but adapting what is adopted. Whereas the well-dressed executive figure in the street signs is always on top of it all, supremely privileged in his wish-fulfillment world, Alys's business man is more threatened and vulnerable. He is forever seeking to protect himself from the sharp edges of experience. It's true that he is at the top of the heap, but even so he can barely, or not at all, escape discomfort. Indeed, discomfort seems to increase or multiply in proportion as he tries to avoid it.

The pictures of his avoidance devices comprise a kind of specialized Tarot or Stations of the Cross, in which the business man is the Hanged Man/Christ. There's a lot of quiet tension in all these pictures. The protagonist sits leaning precariously on a table which has only three legs. He sits gazing at his hand hidden under the tablecloth. (*Why* is it under there?) He has his hand in his shoe—his shoes hold a stick—he fingers a stick—he fingers a something under his arm—what *is* it?

The glimpses of his travail have an iconic intensity that a certain naïvete to the style enhances starkly. The grey-suited businessman, seated awkwardly and stiffly on the edge of a bed, pillows tucked beneath his arms and between his thighs, seems almost Promethean as he protects himself from some torment or discomfort. At the same time, what he is doing seems pointless or unaccountable despite its simplicity and obviousness. This too, though commonplace in the extreme, involving no metaphysics, no rare objects, no unusual artistic means, is something one had not seen before, nor expected



exactly to see. There are similar hints of concealed (or off-stage) violence in the picture which shows an ordinary chair, with a pillow on its back, overturned on the floor of an ordinary room, but in a detail too cropped to see the room itself.

The business executive, the central subject or protagonist of capitalist society, seems to be undergoing a series of quiet sacrificial rites. He stands mawkishly with his face inexplicably caught behind the lapel of another, half-present, larger business executive whose presence somehow diminishes him. He sits at a table, his face outside the frame, attempting to protect himself from its hard edge by an interposed pillow. The ankle and shoe of another business executive hang down from the frame's upper edge, almost kicking him in the ear. Through it all he is supremely alone. His face is usually not seen. His world of barter and commodification, strained through class structure, is a drama which, even as he works it through, seems meaningless and without individual feeling-tone. He is a figure we have seen before in Late Modernism—in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," in Magritte, in Brecht. He is not posing for us or waiting for us to see him. He is alone and evidently without purpose except defensively seeking to shield himself moment to moment from discomfort. He seems a dead-end figure of Late Capitalist alienation, observing meaningless forms that no longer go anywhere. In terms of Marx's famous observation in the *18th Brumaire*, his drama is the second run-through of capitalist reality, this time as farce.

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## *Performance Art*



## Anti-Art as Ethics

### *Themes and Strategies*

PERFORMANCE ART USUALLY INVOLVES THE ARTIST'S OWN BODY and occurs in the real space in which bodies meet and act upon one another; hence it is inherently ethical and social. When the Kantian trichotomy fell apart, as Conceptualists banished the aesthetic and raised the cognitive to an elevated authority, so Performance artists, also banishing the aesthetic, introduced the ethical (or social) faculty into the position of authority. In both cases the aesthetic was banished partly from a sense that its legitimacy had become questionable once its function of clouding the mind to the realities of history was seen, and partly as an attempt to right all at once a balance that had long been skewed the other way.

The two new media—the genres in which the urgent need for anti-art established itself—were born and grew up together, and have remained like siblings, “porous” to one another, as Bird and Newman put it,<sup>1</sup> or even a single entity that can be seen from different aspects. They often involve the same motives and principles, and often are practiced by the same artists. Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Jannis Kounellis, James Lee Byars, Valie Export, Dennis Oppenheim, Adrian Piper, John Baldessari, Gilbert and George—indeed, most artists in either medium—have also practiced the other, and most of the general theoretical remarks in this book apply to both.

Born together, the two new genres evolved as a kind of family act. While the precocious sibling Conceptual Art uttered its brittle insights, it brought with it, tagging along as it were, a gangly, adolescent, younger sibling, Performance Art, which could not rise above, or indeed see beyond, the awkward embarrassments of living in a body. As the cognitive imperative drove Conceptual Artists to a self-conscious questioning and analysis of every aspect of their situation, the ethical or affective imperative drove Performance Artists into searching the depths of the unconscious. While Conceptual Art investigated the cerebral cortex, Performance was diving



into the brain stem. Body Art—which might be regarded as the “strong” or undiluted genre of Performance Art—sought to uncover every hidden social taboo, exploring madness as a hypothetical path to sanity, confounding the craze for order with the simplest infantile regressions.

The descent into the unconscious—or regression to infantilism—brought with it, on the plane of cultural history, a parallel regression to earlier ages of pre-civilizational social forms. Pre-Modern-Revivalism, or neo-pre-Modernism, was an attempt to adopt a cultural stance in which one could pretend that Modernism never really happened. This was the stance of the hippy drop-out and commune movement of the '60s and '70s, with its attempt to re-enter a Neolithic social and spiritual milieu, and of the psychedelic movement with its belief that drugs could restore one's consciousness to root levels that preceded cultural conditioning. Much Performance Art is of this type, not only shamanically-based Body Art like that of Chris Burden or Stelarc, but also ritually based therapeutic Performance—a genre which Carolee Schneemann has called the woman's answer to Body Art, and which includes Schneemann's bacchanalian *More than Meat Joy*, Herman Nitsch's *Orgy-Mystery Theater*, and seasonal fertility rites like those of Donna Henes and others.

The urge to forget one's inherited cultural situation and enter another led not only to historical regression but also to multiculturalism. Conceptual and Performance Art revealed different attitudes toward non-western cultures. “Strong” Conceptual Art has been more conservative, or more committed to the correction of western values than to their rejection in favor of non-western ones, while Performance Art has been more aggressively multicultural or pro-non-western in its orientation.

SIMILARLY, PERFORMANCE ART IS MORE AWARE OF ANCIENT ANTECEDENTS or roots than Conceptual Art is. It looks more toward the past for its self-definition, while conceptualism has generally seemed oriented more toward the future.

Much Body Art, for example, is based on the shamanic performances of Paleolithic cultures, in which the performer would drum, dance, speak animal and bird languages, invoke unseen spirit and animal allies, and finally fall into a trance-like stillness during which, he would later report, his consciousness left his body and travelled abroad in the cosmos on errands undertaken for the good of the community. Much Performance Art was in fact based on this Paleolithic level of exemplum from the beginning. Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* is a book that many practitioners—Chris Burden, Terry Fox, Paul McCarthy, and others—imbibed in their youth.

Much ritually based art—often that by women—is consciously rooted in the Neolithic rather than the Paleolithic age. In the period of pre-literate proto-urbanism—roughly 7,000 to 3,500 B C in the Old World—the individual cosmic adventures of the shaman were replaced by rituals enacted by organized priesthoods. Ancient Egyptian rites sometimes involved hundreds of musicians, dancers, and actors, along with the props and pageants of mythological combats.

While usually unable to create such massive spectacles, a number of Performance artists have nevertheless incorporated into their work elements of ancient Neolithic or Early Bronze Age rite. Henes, for example, schedules ritual performances for the astronomical turning points of the year—the solstices and equinoxes. The tactic not only links her work with nature, but also with pre-Modern societies, in which ancient seasonal rituals such as the Akitu festival of the Babylonians were “often made to coincide with the solstice or equinox;” “the rites of Tammuz were held in the month of the spring solstice,”<sup>2</sup> and so on.

The connection with pre-Modern societies is often conceived as a connection with the matriarchal, and thus the solstices and so on function as nerve points for both feminist and primitivist meanings. It would be roughly—but by no means exactly—accurate to say that Paleolithic-based Performance has been done mostly by men, Neolithic-based mostly by women. In terms of cultural history, this rough division may parallel ancient gender distinctions (or modern ideas about them). In a tradition that is now much questioned by scholars, men are often regarded as having been dominant in the Paleolithic age when hunting, supposedly, provided more of the community's biomass than did the gathering of edible plants. In the long transition to the Neolithic, hunting evolved into herding, and gathering into agriculture. By the high Neolithic—say, 7,000 to 5,000 B C—agriculture (which probably was invented by women) was the dominant livelihood of the community, and it seems that in consequence (as superstructure follows base) what might be called a female spirituality came to dominate.

FOR ABOUT FORTY YEARS (SINCE 1962<sup>3</sup>) HERMANN NITSCH HAS PRESENTED his *Orgy Mystery Theatre* performances in which a human subject is surrounded by animal sacrifices, receives their blood on his or her body, drinks the blood, and much more, sometimes in the midst of elaborate pagentry. The Theatre is based on several ancient rites, above all what Franz Cumont calls the “redemption by the bloody baptism of the taurobolium.”<sup>4</sup> The taurobolium is described in verses by Prudentius which seem to have



been involved in Nitsch's scenario: "The neophyte receives the falling drops on his head, clothes and body. He leans backward to have his cheeks, his ears, his lips and his nostrils wetted; he pours the liquid over his eyes, and does not even spare his palate, for he moistens his tongue with blood and drinks it eagerly." Cumont adds: "After submitting to this repulsive sprinkling he offered himself to the veneration of the crowd."<sup>5</sup> "The taurobolium," Cumont explains, "a disgusting shower-bath of luke-warm blood, had become a means of obtaining a new and eternal life; the ritualistic ablutions were... supposed to cleanse the soul of its impurities and to restore its original innocence."<sup>6</sup> Schneemann's performances, such as the classical exemplum *Meat Joy*, 1964, similarly are based on Neolithic orgiastic festivals in which sexual restrictions are suspended, often at planting time, in hopes of promoting the fertility of the earth.

When references to and re-enactments of such ancient events happen in context of Performance Art there is often an ambiguity about motivation: is the ancient goal of spiritual regeneration invoked as a serious, albeit archaic, ambition or simply as an historical reference to strengthen the theoretical underpinning of the work? Insofar as the individual artist often is, in fact, strongly influenced by the spiritual ambition his or her work refers to, Performance Art is revealed as having somewhat naïve inner aspirations, not so different from those of Conceptualism (spiritual innocence vs. mental innocence). The intense commitment often encountered in the Performance artist creates a sense of urgent necessity about such works which substitutes for the original belief that "the purity and holiness imparted by the practice of sacred ceremonies were the indispensable condition for obtaining eternal life."<sup>7</sup>

CONCEPTUALISM CAN ONLY BE TRACED BACK AS FAR AS DADA AND Duchamp. There are earlier candidates for inclusion in the category (like Zeno's Paradoxes or Plato's *paignia*), but they are all stretching it a bit. Performance Art, however, has a pedigree almost as long as that of the human species. It is a continuation of a type of activity that all times and places have honored, and in a sense its history *is* its substance, its material, though it connects much more intimately with some phases of this history than with others.

For Performance Art of a neo-pre-Modernist tendency, shamanism and Neolithic ritual are almost shockingly appropriate. But the Greco-Roman milieu has had less impact, seeming perhaps too secular and too close to home. The remnants of ancient texts provide glimpses: a Pythagorean dancer is said to have developed a way to dance a presentation of the Pythagorean

doctrines; the audacities of Cynic posturing were guerilla street theater. But these have not been among the principal models Performance artists have gravitated toward.

Neither have monumental statist performances such as the triumphs of ancient Rome, or the courtly pageants of the Renaissance, in which the practice of *sprezzatura*, or postural expressiveness, was a kind of Body Art involving displays of nonchalance and inner harmony evinced through body language, facial expression and gesture—an approach parodied by some Gilbert and George performances, such as *Under the Arches*. *Sprezzatura* was an art-life tactic, bringing the motives of art into life—somewhat as Performance Art would be called "living sculpture." Some Renaissance pageants were more abstract and metaphysical. In Leonardo's *Paradiso*, for example, he "caused performers costumed as planets to revolve and recite verses proclaiming the return of the Golden Age while crystalline globes like planets, filled with water and illuminated by fires, evinced the Music of the Spheres."<sup>8</sup> (Some of Oskar Schlemmer's performances at the Bauhaus were in this tradition.) The practice continued in the Baroque, when Bernini produced "staged spectacles, for which he wrote the scripts, designed the scenes and costumes, carved the sculptures, planned effects of lighting and sound."<sup>9</sup> Huge effects based on the circuses of the Roman Empire included "real rushing waters" (*L'Inondazione*, 1638), orchestrated banks of fireworks (*Allestimento di una Girandola*, 1659), and "sacred performances transforming entire church interiors for such ceremonies as the marathon 'Forty Hours of the Sacrament.'"<sup>10</sup>

Renaissance and Baroque performance works were designed and executed by master painters and sculptors, as happened again in the mid-twentieth century when a group of painters turned to Happenings. But there were differences. In all known Renaissance and Baroque examples everything is scripted, choreographed, planned out and executed according to its plan. There is no Action Painting frenzy or gestural worship of the immediate, no existentialist spontaneity or life-as-art expression of real emotion. So when Modern painters and sculptors went into performance (in the Futurist period, the Dada period, the Bauhaus period, and again in the late 1950s and '60s with Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and others in the United States and Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni and others in Europe) they were reclaiming the fuller-bodied role of the Renaissance artist, attempting to reconstitute a sense of the fulness of art-and-life such as informed the Neoplatonism of the Renaissance. For various reasons, pageantry and performance passed out of the realm of art in the 18th and 19th centuries.



THE THEATER AND/OR PERFORMANCE DEDICATED TO THE ABSURD and shocking is often traced back to Alfred Jarry. The Futurist founder Marinetti knew Jarry and was present, at age 17, at the first performance of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1896. Thirteen years later he produced, in the same Parisian theater, his own shocking play with a similar title, *Roi Bombance*.<sup>11</sup> This link suggests that Futurist performance did in part grow from the influence of Jarry—as Dada performance, a few years later, would be influenced by the German avant-garde playwright and actor Frank Wedekind.

In 1910 Marinetti began producing "Futurist evenings" in various Italian cities, the model of the Dada *soirees* in Zurich and later Paris. He called on painters (Boccione, Carra, Russolo, Severini, Balla) to lay down their brushes for a while and collaborate with him—somewhat as Happenings would, fifty years later, be introduced by a group of painters in New York. It was specifically the "alogical branch of the New Theatre," as one author puts it, that was "produced almost exclusively by painters and sculptors."<sup>12</sup> The aggressiveness of these evenings sometimes extended to fisticuffs and what Marinetti would call the pleasure of being booed. Applause, he said, indicated something mediocre.

The Futurist performances that unfolded over the next few years introduced many elements of the avant-garde or anti-art of the rest of the century. Russolo's *Art of Noises*, written in 1913 and executed with motorized machine and crowd sounds, anticipated John Cage's focus on the everyday sounds of the street. Marinetti prescribed rules for human body actions to imitate machines—as Duchamp was portraying the human body as a machine/contraption. Marinetti's use of blackboards in his "declamations" foreshadowed Joseph Beuys's use of them in performances. In one performance the set was a blown-up version of one of Balla's paintings, as Rauschenberg's White Paintings would form the set for the Black Mountain performance of Cage's *Theater Piece #1* in 1952. In *There Is No Dog*, "the only 'image' was the brief walk of a dog across the stage," somewhat like LaMonte Young's later performance in which he would release a butterfly on the stage. In *Silences Speak Among Themselves* periods of silence are used, long before Cage's 4'33". And so on. "Thanks to us," Marinetti wrote, "the time will come when life will no longer be a simple matter of bread and labour...but a work of art."<sup>13</sup> By the time the Dada evenings began in 1916 the Futurists had already "achieved many of the things for which Dada is given credit."<sup>14</sup>

DADA PERFORMANCE WAS DERIVED IN PART FROM THE FUTURIST desire to shock performatively and certain Expressionist events arranged in

Berlin in 1915 by Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings and Richard Huelsenbeck.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to periods when performance had been sponsored by the state, the church, and the court, Dada performance arose as a means of anti-institutional protest. It was explicitly an anti-art, an attempt to turn art against the feelings and institutions that had fostered it in the past. Like the wave of Performance Art that followed World War II, it was partly brought into existence by a feeling that civilization as a whole had discredited itself and some radical cultural rebeginning was urgently needed. Dadaists sought innocence in the state of infantilism; the Dada performer engaged in "phonetic gibberish and cacophony...as suggestive of childish regression."<sup>16</sup>

According to Hugo Ball, the aim of Dada performance was to "surpass oneself in naïvete and childishness." He would be "carried onstage in darkness and suddenly revealed to begin his incantatory chants" "in a state of such fevered exaltation that it result[ed] in his nervous collapse."<sup>17</sup> "The childlike concepts I am referring to," Ball wrote, "border on the really infantile...[they] stem from a belief in a primordial memory, in an unrecognizably repressed and buried world which is liberated through the uninhibited enthusiasm of the artist or through a breakdown in a mental hospital."<sup>18</sup>

In its reversal of all values, Dada affirmed chance and spontaneity rather than maturity of calculation and orderliness of expression. Both Jean Arp and Duchamp used chance in their artwork, and Tristan Tzara used it in his poetry. Improvisation was of the essence of performance. Ball, for example, would appear on stage with hardly any idea of what he was going to do there. According to Tzara, "What we want now is spontaneity...[because] everything that issues freely from ourselves...represents us."<sup>19</sup> The poet Jacques Rivière exhorted his colleagues "to seize being, before it [has] surrendered to consistency, overtaking it in its...primitive coherence before the notion of contradiction [has] appeared..." In Dada performance the life-world gained recognition through the rejection of artistic skill, which was understood as making things false by making them untrue to the unconscious. "No Dadaist who ventured on stage did so with a performing skill greater than that of the average artist in the street"<sup>20</sup>—as first Yves Klein, then Joseph Beuys, would later proclaim Everyman a performer.

IN 1921, TWO YEARS AFTER ITS FOUNDING, THE BAUHAUS INSTITUTED a course in performance<sup>21</sup> in which "language was reduced to emotionally charged stammering, movement to pantomimic gestures."<sup>22</sup> Schlemmer devised a theory, based on Nietzsche, which regarded painting and performance as complementary to one another, painting being Apollonian,



performance Dionysian. In *Chorus of Masks*, 1928, he reconstructed on the stage the composition, perspective, and atmosphere of an earlier painting of his. In the same year, Wassily Kandinsky “used paintings as the ‘characters’ of the performance itself.”<sup>23</sup> The Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis in 1932 and soon thereafter Josef Albers, who had taught there, took a position in the United States, teaching at a small college in South Carolina, where his path would cross John Cage’s.

JOHN CAGE ENTERED THE STREAM OF ART HISTORY INDIRECTLY, from outside, and never abandoned his initial professional commitment, which was to music. After studying music with Arnold Schönberg and Henry Cowell, Cage lived in New York for several years, where he met Marcel Duchamp and attended the famous lectures on Zen Buddhism by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki at Columbia University from 1948 to 1951.<sup>24</sup> The years in which he was listening to Suzuki saw his two great musical innovations, the introduction of silence (or ambient noise) as a musical element, and the introduction of chance methods into composition. In 1949 he began constructing musical works by throws of the I Ching and a little later, in 1952, *4’33”* occurred, the work that remained his favorite till the end of his life, in which a pianist sits silent at the piano for 4 minutes and 33 seconds, then bows and leaves the stage. If it were visual rather than musical, there would be a good argument that this work, one year earlier than Rauschenberg’s *Erased DeKooning Drawing*, 1953, should be treated as the chronological beginning of American Conceptualism. Meanwhile, in 1951 Robert Motherwell’s collection, *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, was published and had a strong effect. Dada had been so nearly forgotten, in America anyway, that Motherwell’s anthology has been hailed as functioning “virtually to resurrect...the Dada movement.”<sup>25</sup> Through this book (aided by Cage’s promulgation of it in his New School classes) “the Dada spirit gained a kind of second life and exerted its force on a new generation of artists and writers.”<sup>26</sup> Cage managed to integrate these three influences—Duchamp, Zen, and Dada—and treat them as three strands of one cord.<sup>27</sup>

When he taught experimental music at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1958-59, Cage’s teachings were based on this chain of influences. Sometimes he read from Zen texts, sometimes from Motherwell’s anthology of Dada texts, and sometimes he talked or read about Dada or Duchamp. His great emphases were on something like what Duchamp called indifference, and on Duchamp’s appeal to chance as an intrusion from a larger and free-er realm than the individual imagination. Both were com-

bined in Cage’s emphasis on ambient environmental sound, as in a remark he once made to me, “I don’t need a piano, I’ve got Sixth Avenue.” In this remark he was consciously following the Ch’an and early Zen traditions, as seen, for example, in the Sung Dynasty artist Ma Lin’s famous thirteenth century painting, *Listening to the Wind in the Pines*. “I’m out to blur the distinction between art and life,” Cage said, “as I think Duchamp was.”<sup>28</sup>

Cage inherited from Duchamp the affirmation of chance as a healing value. The acceptance of random rather than willed outcomes involves both a submission of the self and an above-it-all attitude. The random brings with it surprise and hence attacks the habit system. As Duchamp would say that he thought the Readymade was his most important accomplishment, Cage said that his own was “the practicality of making artworks by chance.” “Practicality” is the key word. Duchamp had used chance to undermine the ideology in which the artist was to seek aesthetic perfection through precise expressions of his or her sensibility; it was Cage who showed that one could continue using chance to guide works into existence creatively and successfully without end, not to deconstruct some other approach, but simply because the results were rewarding in themselves.

All this was a part of his teaching at the New School, where his students included Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, George Brecht, Al Hanson, Jackson MacLow, and others who would go on to create both Happenings and Fluxus performances involving chance, indifference, and the absurd. One simple lineage for Performance Art traces it from Dada through Cage to Happenings and Fluxus. No doubt there were other elements involved, such as the Hans Namuth/Jackson Pollock influence on early Happenings, but this is a strong one.

An early exponent of the meltdown of cultural distinctions that would characterize post-Modernism, Cage, though working in what once had been a separate field from the visual arts, exercised enormous influence over the development of both Conceptual and Performance Art. In the 1960s his influence was everywhere in the American counterculture, though somewhat in the background, as if he represented principles that controlled all fields at once from a position above or behind them.

FROM THE AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW AN EPOCHAL MOMENT OCCURRED when, in 1948, John Cage and Merce Cunningham taught beside Joseph Albers at the summer school at Black Mountain College. Along with the breakthroughs into personal styles that Pollock and Newman had achieved the year before, this was the initial sign of serious American awak-



ening to the arts. But the direction was opposite: Abstract Expressionism would go down in history as the last Modernist movement, Black Mountain as among the first anti- or post-Modernist ones. As the Abstract Expressionists had been influenced by European Surrealism, so Albers's presence at Black Mountain connected American art with the Bauhaus and, behind it, with Dada. This was the moment when the current of western art history turned away from Europe toward its inheritor, America—at least for a while.

That summer, Willem DeKooning and Buckminster Fuller were also teaching at Black Mountain, and the group reconstructed Erik Satie's *Ruse of the Medusa*, hoping to reconnect with the European avant-garde of early in the century. In a 1952 untitled event (later called *Theater Piece #1*) which marks the maturity of the brief moment, seven or eight disconnected threads of action, music, recitation, and movement were going on at the same time. "Four all-white paintings by Robert Rauschenberg were hung from the rafters. 'Poetry was read from ladders' by M. C. Richards and Charles Olson...and a 'lecture' [was given] by Cage."<sup>29</sup>

The Black Mountain spirit was carried on by painters with performative impulses, like Rauschenberg, and spread to a group of others such as Jim Dine, Robert Whitman, Claes Oldenburg, and Allan Kaprow, with whom the Happenings movement quickly came to full bloom. In Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959, the audience moved among three spaces while eighteen actions occurred in six groups of three: for example: figures march in a row, a woman points at the floor, slides are shown; ukulele and violin are played, painters paint, gramophones are rolled in on trolleys—and so on. "The actions," said Kaprow, "will mean nothing clearly formulable so far as the artist is concerned."<sup>30</sup> In the next decade, various works appeared that have attained iconic status in the history: Nitsch's OM Theatre in 1962; Rauschenberg's *Pelican* in 1963; Wolf Vostell's *You* and Schneeman's *More than Meat Joy*, both 1964, and so on. Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas and many others began to perform.

FLUXUS WAS UNDERWAY BY 1963—WITH PARTICIPANTS INCLUDING George Maciunas, Henry Flynt, LaMonte Young, Jackson MacLow, Wolf Vostell, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Ben Vautier, Joseph Beuys, and others—and was in full flow by 1966. Until about 1964, it attempted to unite political and artistic activities, under the influence of Maciunas and the Leninist activist Henry Flynt. Those early years are referred to by Utopian activists as the "heroic period."<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, Fluxus, "like the Situationist

International before it, proved incapable of sustaining itself as simultaneously a political and cultural movement."<sup>32</sup> With some exceptions, such as Flynt's radical 1968 pamphlet *Down With Art*, "the aesthetic tendency toned down Maciunas's political stridency."<sup>33</sup>

The Fluxus style was more austere and elegant than that of the American Happenings, though both arose to a degree from Cage's influence. As opposed to a Happening's Action Painting frenzy, Fluxus performances featured "the reduction of gesture,"<sup>34</sup> showing "leanings toward Zen in austere and often ritual works."<sup>35</sup> Still, these ritualistic performances were not celebratory or Romantic, but enshrined the anti-art motive. Nam June Paik (in *Exposition of Music—Electronic Television*, Wuppertal, 1963) showed three damaged pianos, and "Joseph Beuys hacked one apart with an axe at the opening."<sup>36</sup> In *Destruction in Art Symposium*, 1966, Raphael Ortiz swung an axe at a piano in front of an audience. Five years earlier Fluxus artist George Brecht's Word Event of 1961, *Exit*, silently instructed the audience, by a printed sheet, to leave the theater. Paik's and Ortiz's direct physical attacks on a symbol of traditional art contrasts sharply with the hands-off negativity of Brecht's approach. Alison Knowles' *Shuffle*, also 1961, presents only a performer shuffling through the performance space, "above, behind, around or through the audience." Reflecting Cage's influence, Fluxus dealt in a "continual revision of the boundaries between performance and life."<sup>37</sup> So, for that matter, did Happenings. Oldenburg, for example, said (in *Store Days*, 1967), "I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero."

BY 1970, PERFORMANCE ART HAD MAPPED ITS TERRAIN IN ROUGH outlines and, like Conceptual Art, had come to exercise an uncanny power at infiltrating everywhere. As Conceptual Art has been called "effectively a synonym for postmodernism,"<sup>38</sup> so performance art has been called "constitutive of postmodernism."<sup>39</sup> (Subjectivity as embodied rather than transcendental, notes one author, expresses the same tendency as the "decentered subjectivity in...phenomenology, feminism, and poststructuralism."<sup>40</sup>) The '70s have been described as "a period when the medium grew from an array of eccentric gestures...aimed at unsettling the art establishment to a fully accepted art form."<sup>41</sup> It is in that decade that much of the performance activity discussed in this book occurred.

The '70s have been called "The Amazing Decade" because of the emergence into prominence of women performance artists with their thematics based on a neo-pre-Modernist return to something like a matriarchal (or, now-



adays, matrilineal) foundation for culture.<sup>42</sup> Feminists of the first generation of the Women's Movement asserted that the destructive influence of the patriarchy threatened civilization and that in order to save it a new age of something like a restored matriarchy would have to ensue. Much Performance Art of the 1970s acted out this premise, as well as avant-garde dance groups such as The Judson Dance Theater.

The desperation and urgency of so much Performance Art of the '70s derived from this feeling that the world needed help and this help would require self-sacrifice. Hence the messianic implication in works such as Burden's '70s oeuvre—having himself shot, or crucified, or crawling through glass—and Terry Fox's—feigning cataleptic trance while connected telepathically to a fish—though these works operated not through direct social activism but symbolic analogy or sympathetic magic. Neo-pre-Modernists were convinced that the Enlightenment was virtually the source of all evils, at least for the Modernist period, which had become, as Schneemann once remarked, “phallicized by its conceptual rigor.”<sup>43</sup> The emergence, as colonialism ended, of dozens of formerly hidden, still quasi-primitive societies reinforced a sudden sense that anything was possible—that one could make any choice one wanted, pre-civilizational, post-civilizational, whatever. In addition, a number of influential works of scholarship of the '60s and '70s—works by Giorgio DeSantillana and Hertha Van Dechend, Alain Danielou, and others<sup>44</sup>—held that there had been an earlier civilization—call it matriarchal, Neolithic, pre-Indo-European—that had been wilfully destroyed and repressed by patriarchal civilization when it appeared, and which could still somehow be revived. This Neolithic wing of Performance Art, though often feminist in orientation, was not by and large anti-male. Its promotion of heterosexual participation in the moods and rhythms of nature led to the phenomenon of performing couples, usually male and female, whose works tended to plumb nature and psychology.

LIKE CONCEPTUALISM, PERFORMANCE OFTEN USED THE DUCHAMP-ian strategy of appropriation or designation. The artist symbolically acted out the role of god, “making” the universe by designating everything as his or her art. (“If the artist says it's art, then it's art,” said Donald Judd.)<sup>45</sup> The act of universal appropriation was explored early on by Klein (signing the other side of the sky in 1947), Piero Manzoni (putting the earth on his sculpture base in 1961), and others. The designation of every moment of one's life again goes back to Duchamp, who in the conversations with Pierre Cabanne remarks that one could designate every breath one took as

an artwork.<sup>46</sup> Various artists installed themselves in exhibition spaces as art works—James Lee Byars, Linda Montano, Chris Burden and Tom Marioni, to name a few. In a 1963 performance, *Living with Pop*, Gerhard Richter displayed himself as a commodity for sale. This tendency opened out into women's autobiographical Performance Art of the mid-70s to mid-80s.<sup>47</sup> The focussing by women artists on emotions and memories gradually superseded the dominance of ritualism; as the men used their own bodies, the women used their own lives.

By the 1980s Performance, like Conceptualism, was seen as a universal solvent which could fuse with other media and be incorporated into artworks in general. As Conceptualism could claim it was universal because for anything to be made it had first to be conceived, so, in support of the view that all art is performative, one might observe that everything that is made has to *get* made: every artifact implies a performance. The archetypal Hans Namuth pictures of Pollock leaning over, in T-shirt and blue jeans, cigarette clenched in his lips, gazing down as his arms drip aureoles of color around him, contributed to the feeling that there is something sneaky and dishonest about making a painting secretly in your studio, then bringing it out to be seen. The same spirit in which Allan Ginsberg had renounced revision (saying it was an attempt to hide one's nakedness) led to the desire to do everything out in the open. Georges Mathieu and others made paintings in public, leading to the dilemma whether it was the performance or the resultant object that was the primary artwork. Like Conceptualism, Performance moved out as a new universal linkage, joining other media in combination: Performance painting, Performance sculpture, even Performance Conceptual Art.

IN EUROPE, PERFORMANCE ART, THOUGH FIRST ENACTED IN THE Futurist case by painters, grew out of the avant-garde theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in the United States that theatrical tradition was lacking. Performance Art was first inspired by the spirit of Action Painting as enshrined in Namuth's photographs of Pollock at work, and first executed by painters such as Oldenberg, Kaprow and Schneemann.

The art historical cliché is that “the exuberant gestural of Abstract Expressionism...lent Happenings their textural richness and expansive flavor...”<sup>48</sup> But the spirit of Action Painting was just one variety of the “exuberant gestural of the culture of the post-War era. This exuberance was born out of relief at the end of the War, and also, more subterraneanly, at the sense that the long and increasingly painful European moment of his-



tory at last was over. In addition, there was (in both Europe and America) an optimistic sense of the emergence of Walt Whitman's America, with its rough-hewn free enterprise and naïve spontaneity. In the center of the arena where European *sprezzatura* had strutted so long, America, a hearty bumpkin not yet debauched, was striding smilingly on. At the same time, the improvisatory mode of both Be-bop and Action Painting were contextualized and legitimized by a European element, a general existentialist quest for authenticity without essence. Many had the contradictory sense that one could reject essence and still find ontological authenticity through a relentless pursuit of self in the midst of flux. The relentless pursuit itself was the desired condition. Through a keenness and alertness of will, something like essential trueness could maintain itself in the midst of a burst of free-wheeling change. The idea of the gratuitous or motiveless act, as in Camus, was formalized as a fierce insistence on creativity, a spirit of improvisation among verities. Be-bop musicians improvised as a gesture toward pure freedom, but at the same time their improvisation was based on chord progressions that represented an underlying framework of European tradition. The desire for and sense of the loss of spontaneity, authenticity, and so on, informed films of the era by Antonioni, Bergman and others. Both Abstract Expressionism and Happenings were participants in this outburst of creative spontaneity. It had a dark side, however, a kind of degraded sublime, which balanced its gestures of freedom with sinister counter-moves.

1. In Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 2.
2. Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), p. 47.
3. According to Kathy O'Dell (*Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998], p. 6), "As early as 1957, Nitsch had begun his complicated theorization of the OMT..."
4. Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 198.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
8. Di Felice in Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, eds., *Art of Performance, A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1984), p. 10.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
11. This link was pointed out by RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Futurism to the Present*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 13.
12. Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), p. 7.
13. Goldberg, *Performance*, p. 30.
14. Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, p. 6.
15. For these events see Malcolm Green, trans. and intr., *Blago Bung, Blago Bung Fateba: The First Texts of German Dada* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 13-16.

16. Anabelle Henkin Melzer, "The Dada Actor..." in Battcock and Nickas, eds., *The Art of Performance*, p. 42.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.
18. Quoted by Hans J. Kleinschmidt, "The New Man—Armed with the Weapons of Doubt and Defiance: Introduction," in Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, English translations by Joachim Neugroschel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. xxxiii.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
21. "The first ever course on performance in an art school," says Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Abrams, 1979), p. 63.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
24. The dates are not final. According to Jacquelyne Baas (*Smile of the Buddha: Influences in Western Art from Monet to the Present* [forthcoming by University of California Press]), Suzuki "only returned to the United States in 1949 and didn't begin teaching at Columbia until 1951."
25. Jack Flam, "Forward," in Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. xi.
26. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
27. See appendix 2.
28. Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1991), p. 227.
29. Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, n.p.n. According to Mary Emma Harris (*The Arts at Black Mountain College* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, n.d.], p. 228) Cage read either Zen or Eckhardt from one ladder, "Richards and Olson read at different times from another ladder." Was Cage thinking perhaps of Tzara's "miracle ladder of the DADA MOVEMENT" (Motherwell, ed., *Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 240)?
30. Goldberg, *Performance*, p. 130.
31. For example, Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling, Scotland: AK Press, 1991), p. 55.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
34. Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object: A Short History of Performance Art in the USA Since 1950* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), p. 40.
35. Ken Freidman, "Fluxus Performance," in Battcock and Nickas, eds., *The Art of Performance*, p. 60.
36. Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, n.p.n.
37. Friedman, "Fluxus Performance," pp. 60-61.
38. Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), p. 75.
39. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 21. And see *ibid.*, chapter 1, note 2 for extensive bibliography on this point.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
41. Roselee Goldberg, "Performance, the Golden Years," in Battcock and Nickas, eds., *The Art of Performance*, p. 72.
42. Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz Press, 1983).
43. In conversation with the author.
44. Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*, (Boston: David R. Godine, 1977); Alain Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism*, Bollingen Series 73 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964); *Śiva and Dionysus* (London and the Hague: East-West Publications, 1982, and Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1984).
45. Quoted by Wood, *Conceptual Art*, p. 27.
46. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York, Viking Press, 1971), p. 72.
47. See, for example, Roth, *The Amazing Decade*, pp. 18 ff.
48. Brentano, "Outside the Frame," p. 40.

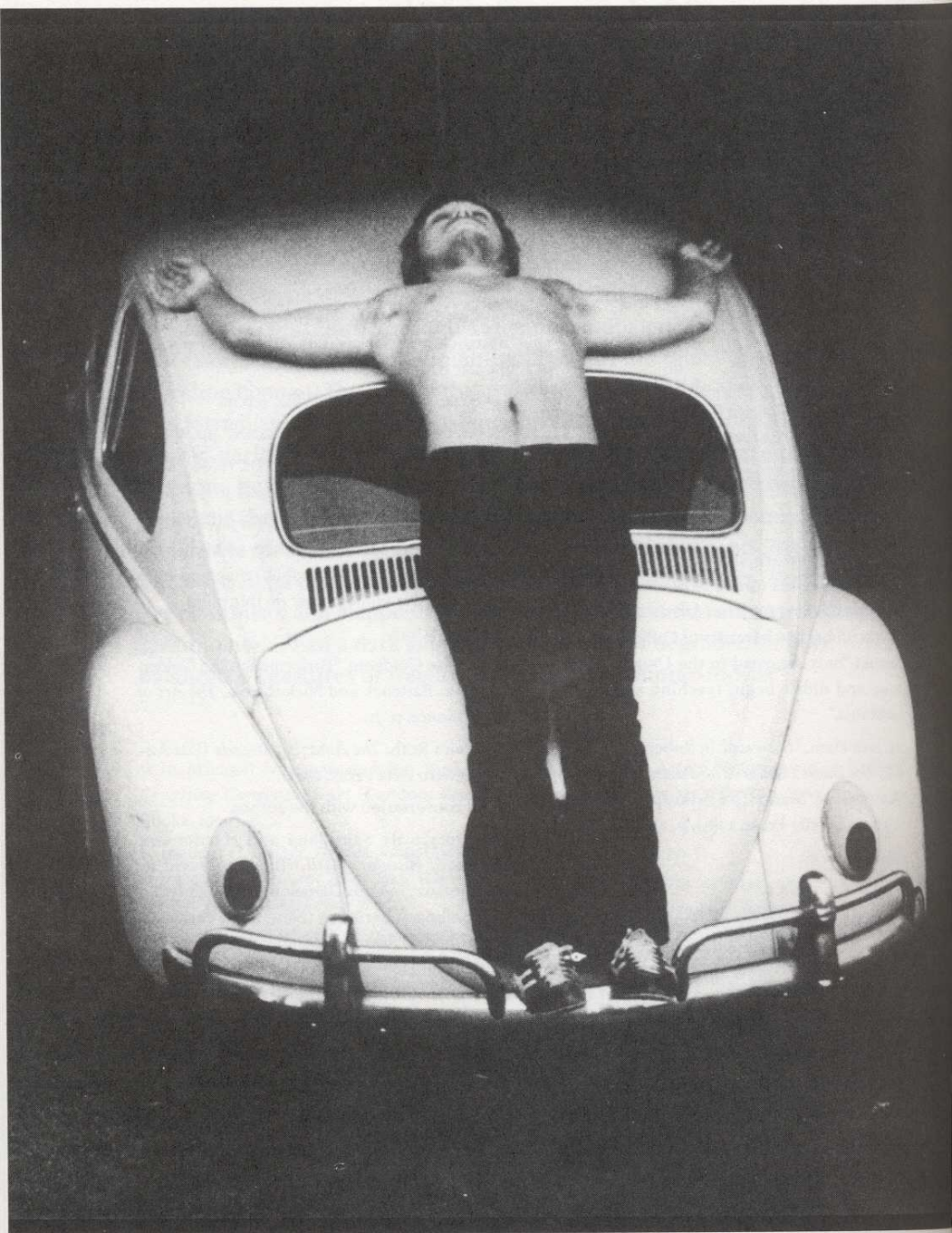


## Art in the Dark

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL AND PERFORMANCE genres changed the rules of art until it became virtually unrecognizable to those who had thought it was theirs. The art activity flowed into the darkness beyond its traditional boundaries and explored areas that were previously as unmapped and mysterious as the other side of the moon. When Piero Manzoni, in 1959, canned his shit and put it on sale, in an art gallery, for its weight in gold; when Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm and crucified to the roof of a Volkswagen (in 1971 and 1974 respectively); when two American performance artists, in separate events, fucked human female corpses—how did such activities come to be called art?

In fact, the case at hand is not unique. Similar movements to *epater la bourgeoisie* have occurred occasionally in cultural history, when the necessary conditions were in place. A striking parallel is the development, in the Cynic school of Greek philosophy, of a style of “performance philosophy” that parallels the gestures of Performance Art in many respects.<sup>1</sup> If this material is approached with sympathy and with a broad enough cultural perspective it will reveal an inner seriousness and meaning.

One of the necessary conditions for activities of this type is the willingness to manipulate linguistic categories. This willingness arises from a nominalist view of language which holds that words lack fixed ontological essences that are their meanings; meanings, rather, are seen to be created by convention alone, arbitrary, and hence manipulable. Ferdinand de Saussure pointed toward this with his perception of the arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified. Even more, Ludwig Wittgenstein—by dissolving fixed meaning into the free-for-all of usage—demonstrated a culture’s ability to alter its language games by rotations and reshapings of the semantic field. By manipulating semantic categories, by dissolving their boundaries selectively and allowing the contents of one to flow into another,



CHRIS BURDEN, *Trans-fixed*, 1974. Performance detail, Venice, California.



shifts in cultural focus can be forced through language's control of affect and attitude. In the extreme instance, a certain category can be declared universal, coextensive with experience, its boundaries being utterly dissolved until its content melts into awareness itself. This universalization of a single category has at different times taken place in the areas of religion, philosophy, and, in our time, art.

A second necessary condition is a culture that is hurtling through shifts in awareness so rapidly that, like the tragic hero in Sophocles just before the fall, it becomes giddy with prospects of new accomplishments hardly describable in known terms. At such moments the boundaries of things seem outworn; the contents flow into and around one another dizzily. In a realm that, like art some fifty years ago, feels its inherited boundaries to be antiquated and ineffective, a sudden overflow in all directions can occur.

The tool by which this universalization of the art category was effected is a form of appropriation. In the post-War period, appropriation was practiced (if at all) with certain limits; the art category as a whole was left intact, though inner divisions such as those between stylistic periods were breached. The model of Francis Picabia is relevant here. But when anti-art picked up steam, appropriation worked on the more universalizing model of Duchamp. In this case, the artist turns an eye upon preexisting entities with apparent destinies outside the art context, and, by that turning of the eye, appropriates them into the art realm, making them the property of art. This involves a presupposition that art is not a set of objects but an attitude toward objects, or a cognitive stance (as Oscar Wilde suggested, not a thing, but a way). If one were to adopt such a stance to all of life, foregrounding the value of attention rather than issues of personal gain and loss, one would presumably have rendered life a seamlessly appreciative experience. Art then functions like a kind of universal awareness practice, not unlike the mindfulness of southern Buddhism or the "Attention!" of Zen. Clearly there is a residue of Romantic pantheistic mysticism here, with a hidden ethical request. But there is also a purely linguistic dimension to the procedure, bound up with the nominalist attitude. If words (such as "art") lack rigid essences, if they are, rather, empty variables that can be converted to different uses, then usage is the only ground of meaning in language. To be this or that is simply to be called this or that. To be art is to be called art, by the people who supposedly are in charge of the word—artists, critics, curators, art historians, and so on. There is no appeal from the foundation of usage, no higher court on the issue. If something (anything) is presented as art by an artist and contextualized as art within the system, then it is art, and

there is nothing anybody can do about it. Conversely, the defenders of the traditional boundaries of the realm will be forced to reify language. They will continue to insist that certain things are, by essence, art, and certain other things are, by essence, not art. But in an intellectual milieu dominated by linguistic philosophy and structural linguistics, the procedure of appropriation by designation, based on the authority of usage and the willingness to manipulate it, has for a while been rather widely accepted.<sup>2</sup> During this time the artist has had a new option: to choose to manipulate language and context, which in turn manipulate mental focus by rearrangement of the category network within which experience is organized.

THE PROCESS OF UNIVERSALIZING THE ART CONTEXT GOES BACK AT least as far as Duchamp's showings of Readymades. Dada and Surrealism had their input. But the tendency came to maturity in the middle to late '50s, when Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example, insisted that if art is going to be anything it has to be everything.<sup>3</sup> At about the same time, Yves Klein, extending the tradition of French dandyism, said, "Life, Life itself...is the absolute art."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in America, Allan Kaprow suggested that "the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps as indistinct, as possible."<sup>5</sup> Duchamp had appropriated by signature, as Klein did when, in about 1947, he signed the sky. Later Klein would designate anything as art by painting it with his patented International Klein Blue. Manzoni sometimes designated preexisting objects as art by signing them, and at other times by placing them on a sculpture base. In 1967, Dennis Oppenheim produced his "Sitemarkers," ceremonial stakes used to mark off areas of the world as art.

These procedures were sometimes employed in conscious parody of the theological concept of creation by the word. In 1960, Klein, imitating divine fiat, appropriated the entire universe into his *Theater of the Void*, as his piece for the Festival d'Art d'Avant-garde in Paris. In the next year he painted a topographical globe International Klein Blue, thereby appropriating the earth into his portfolio; soon Manzoni, responding, placed the earth upon his *Sculpture Base (Socle du monde, 1961)*, wresting it from Klein's portfolio into his own.

But there is a difference between fiat and appropriation. The purely linguistic procedure of forcefully expanding the usage boundaries of a word does not create a wholly new reality, but shifts focus on an existing one. Any entity that is appropriated in this way had a double reality. In the appropriation-zone it functions through its new designation, as something that has been appropriated into the art realm thenceforth functions, at least in one

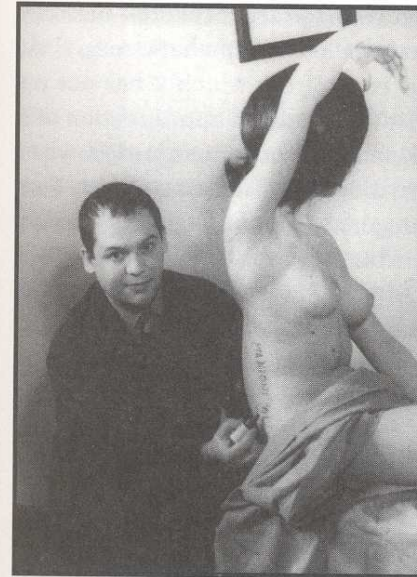


aspect, as art. Still, insofar as the entity's prior category is remembered, it remains, in another aspect, what it was, just as a loan-word may retain a trace of its prior meaning—only it is reflected, as it were, into a new semantic category. Thus, the process of universal appropriation has certain logical limits; it is based on the assumption that a part can contain the whole, that art, for example, can contain life. But the only way that a part can contain its whole is by reflection, as a mirror may reflect a whole room; or by implication, as a map of a neighborhood implies the surrounding city. The appropriation process, in other words, may rearrange the entire universe at the level of a shadow or reflection, and this is its great power. At the same time, as with the gems strung together in the Net of Indra, only the shadowy life of a reflection is really at issue, and this is its great limitation.<sup>6</sup>

The infinite regress implicit in such a procedure was illustrated when, in 1962, Ben Vautier signed Klein's death and, in 1963, Manzoni's, thereby appropriating both those appropriators of the universe. The idea of signing a human being or a human life was in fact the central issue. In 1961, Manzoni exhibited a nude model on his sculpture base and signed her as his work. Later he issued his "Certificates of Authenticity," which declared that the owner, having been signed by Manzoni, was now permanently an artwork. But it was Klein who most clearly defined the central issue, saying, "The artist only has to create one masterpiece, himself, constantly." The idea that the artist is the work became a basic theme of the period in question. Ben acted it out, not long after the signing of Klein's death, by exhibiting himself as a living moving sculpture. Soon Gilbert and George did the same thing. As early as 1959 James Lee Byars had exhibited himself seated alone in the center of an otherwise empty room. Such gestures are fraught with strange interplays of artistic and religious forms, as the pedestal has always been a variant of the altar.

It was in part the Abstract Expressionist emphasis on the direct expression of the artist's unique personality that prepared the way for the claim that the artist's person was in fact the art. Through the survival in the art realm of the Romantic idea of the specially inspired individual, it was possible, though in a sort of bracketed parody, to confer on an artist the status of a royal or sacred being who is on exhibit to other humans.

The underlying question is that of the relation between substance and attribute: how does one tell the agent from the activity? Certain Indian texts, exploring imagistically the relation between god and the world, ask how one can tell the dancer from the dance. In the visual arts the question has always seemed easier, since the painter or sculptor or photographer has traditionally



PIERO MANZONI, *Scultura Vivente*, 1961

made an object outside him- or herself. But universalizing appropriation has dissolved such a conception, and in Performance Art, as in the dance, the agent and activity often seem inseparable. In the last thirty years various performance artists (James Lee Byars, Chris Burden, Linda Montano, and others) carried this category shift or semantic rotation to its limit by moving into galleries and living there for extended periods as performances. In this situation even the minutest details of everyday life are temporarily distanced and made strange—made art, that is—by the imposition on them of a new category overlay that alters the cognitive focus of both the performer and the beholder. Something parallel, though with fewer possibilities for irony, occurs when novices in ashrams are advised to regard their experience, at every moment of the day, as sacred and special.

That these creations by designation are linguistic, involving a willed change in the use of the word "art," does not altogether rob them of mystery and effectiveness. It should be emphasized that category shift by forced designation is the basis of many magical procedures. In the Roman Catholic mass, for example, certain well-known objects—bread and wine—are ritually designated as certain other objects—flesh and blood—which, in the manifest sense of everyday experience, they clearly are not; and the initiate who accepts the semantic rotation shifts his or her affection and sensibility accordingly. Art has often been thought of as exercising a sort of magic;



around 1960, some artists adopted an actual magical procedure—basically a linguistic form of what Sir James Frazer called “sympathetic magic.” At that moment art entered an ambiguous realm from which it has not yet definitively emerged. For the magical rite is already an appropriation of a piece of reality into a sheltered or bracketed zone of contemplation; when it is reappropriated into the realm of art, a double distancing occurs. Furthermore, the universalization of any category, or the complete submission of its ontology to the process of metaphor, blurs or even erases its individual identity. To be everything is not to be anything in particular. In regard to the universal set, the Law of Identity has no function. The semantical co-extensiveness of art and life means either that art has disappeared into life, melting into it everywhere like a new spark of indwelling meaning, or (and this departs at once into theistic metaphor) that life has dissolved into art. In short, it means ultimately that the terms have become meaningless in relation to one another, since language operates not by sameness but by difference, and two sets with the same contents are the same set

The art of appropriation then, is a kind of shadowy recreation of the universe by drawing it, piece by piece, into the brackets of artistic contemplation. Artists engaged in this pursuit have concentrated on the appropriation of religious forms, of philosophical forms, of political forms, of popular forms, and of art historical styles. These enterprises have met different fates. The appropriation of religious contents has been the most unpopular, even taboo, while that based on philosophy, especially linguistic philosophy, for a while acquired a marketable chic. In this discrimination the Apollonian (to use Nietzsche’s dichotomy) surfaced over the hidden depth of the Dionysian. Apollo represents the ego and its apparent clarity of identity; Dionysus represents the unconscious, in which all things flow into and through one another. In the Apollonian light, each thing is seen clear and separate, as itself; in the Dionysian dark all things merge into a flowing and molten invisibility. That our culture, in the age of science, should favor the Apollonian is not surprising. The value of light is beyond question; but where there is no darkness there can be no illumination. Rejection of the Dionysian does not serve the purpose of clear and total seeing.

Universal appropriation has an exacting task if it is to be practiced with sufficient range of feeling not to trivialize life. The levity, the sense of the will to entertain, that prevailed when Ben or Gilbert and George displayed themselves as sculptures was balanced by the sometimes horrifying ordeal through which the appropriation of religious forms unfolded. It was necessary to descend from the pedestal, with its Apollonian apotheosis of the

ego, into the Dionysian night of the unconscious, and to bring into the light the logic of its darkness.

IN VIENNA IN THE EARLY 1960S, HERMANN NITSCH BEGAN PRESENTING a series of performances that, in 1965, he would consolidate as the OM, or Orgies Mysteries, Theatre.<sup>7</sup> His work was a focused exercise to bring the performance genre to its darkest spaces, its most difficult test, at once. In OM presentations the performers tear apart and disembowel a lamb, kid or bull, cover themselves and the environment with the blood and gore, pour the entrails and blood over one another, and so on. These events have varied in duration from three hours to several weeks. They have occasionally been shut down by the police. They have sometimes occurred in art galleries and have been reported in art magazines and books.

The OM Theatre performances open into dizzyingly distant antiquities of human experience. In form, they are essentially revivals of the Dionysian ritual called the *sparagmos*, or dismemberment, in which the initiates, in an altered state produced by alcohol, drugs, and wild dancing, tore apart and ate raw a goat that represented the god Dionysus, the god of all thrusting and wet and hot things in nature.<sup>8</sup> It was, in other words, a communion rite in which the partaker abandoned his or her individual identity to enter the ego-darkened paths of the unconscious, and emerged having eaten and incorporated the god—redesignated as divine. In such rites, ordinary humanity ritually appropriates the aura of godhood, through the ecstatic ability to feel the Law of Identity and its contrary at the same time.

Euripides, an ancient forerunner of the Viennese artists, featured this subject in several works. Like Nitsch, he did so partly because this was the subject matter hardest for his culture, as for ours, to assimilate in the light of day. In the *Bacchae*, especially, he presents the dismemberment as a terrifying instrument of simultaneous self-abandonment and self-discovery. The Apollonian tragic hero, Pentheus, like our whole rationalist culture, thought his boundaries were secure, his terrain clearly mapped, his identity established. Rejecting the Dionysian rite, which represents the violent tearing apart of all categories, he became its victim. Disguising himself as a Maenad, or female worshiper of Dionysus, he attempted to observe the ritual, but was himself mistaken for the sacrificial victim and slaughtered. His ego boundaries were violently breached, the sense of his identity exploded into fragments that were then ground down into the primal substrate of Dionysian darkness which both underlies and overrides civilization’s attempts to elevate the conscious subject above nature.



Nitsch writes of his work in consciously Dionysian terms as celebrating a “drunken, all-encompassing rejoicing,” a “drunken ecstasy of life,” a “liberated joy of strong existence without barriers, a liturgy of exultation, of ecstatic, orgasmic, boundless joy, of drugged rapture...”<sup>9</sup> He has created, in fact, a purely classical theory for it, based on Freudian and Jungian reinterpretations of ancient religious forms, on Aristotle’s doctrine of catharsis, and on the ritual of the scapegoat as the wellspring of purification for the community.

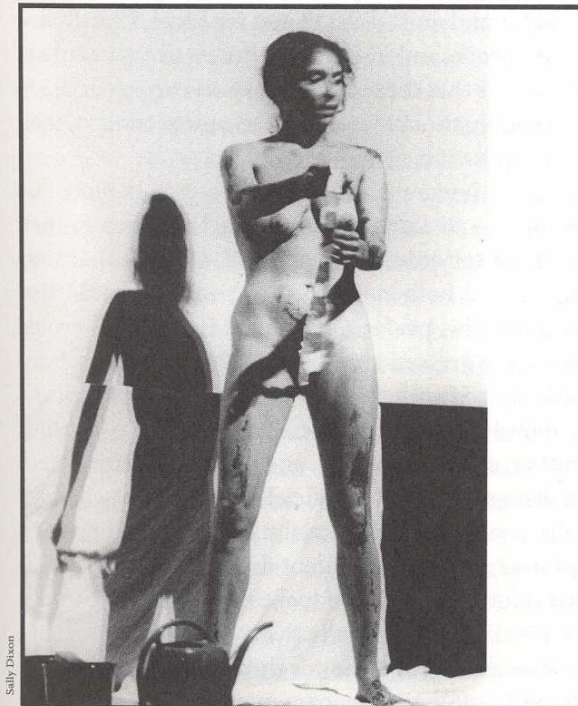
Another stage of the OM ritual finds a young male standing or lying naked beneath a slain carcass marked with religious symbols and allowing the blood and guts to flow over his naked body. Again an ancient source has been appropriated. In the initiation rite called the *taurobolium*, the aspirant was placed naked in a pit over which, atop a lattice of branches, a bull, representing the god, was slain and disemboweled. When the initiate emerged covered with the bull’s blood and entrails, he was hailed as the reborn god emerging from the earth womb.<sup>10</sup>

These works demonstrate the category shift involved in the appropriation process. In part this shift from the zone of religion to that of art represents the residual influence of Romanticism: the artist is seen as a kind of extramural initiation priest, a healer or guide who points the alienated soul back toward the depths of the psyche where it resonates to the rhythms of nature. In addition, it is the neutrality of the unbounded category that allows the transference to occur. Religious structures in our society allow no setting open enough or free enough to equate with that of ancient Greek religion, which was conspicuously nonexclusionary; the art realm in the age of boundary dissolution and the overflow did offer such a free or open zone. Gunter Brus, another Viennese performer, has claimed that placing such contents within the art realm allows “free access to the action”<sup>11</sup>—a free access that the category of religion, with its weight of institutionalized beliefs, does not allow. The assumption, in other words, is that in the age of the overflow the art context is a neutral and open context which has no proper and essential contents of its own. Art, then, is an open variable which, when applied to any culturally bound thing, will liberate it to direct experience. That this was the age of psychedelic drugs, and that psychedelic drugs were widely presumed to do the same thing, is not unimportant. As this tradition advanced along the path to the underworld, it was increasingly influenced by psycho-pharmacology with its sense of the eternally receding boundaries of experience.

Soon after Nitsch’s first performances in Vienna, Carolee Schneemann presented a series of now-classic pieces also based on the appropriation of

ritual activities from ancient and primitive sources. The general shape of these works arose, as among ancient shamans and magicians, from a variety of sources, including dream material and experiences with psychedelic drugs. Like Nitsch’s works, Schneemann’s are based both on depth psychology and on the appropriation of contents from the Neolithic stratum of religious history, especially the religious genre of the fertility rite.

In *More than Meat Joy* (Paris, 1964), nearly naked men and women interacted, in a rather frenzied, Dionysian way, with one another and with hunks of raw meat and carcasses of fish and chickens. They smeared themselves with blood, imprinted their bodies on paper, tore chickens apart, threw chunks of raw meat and torn fowl about, slapped one another with them, kissed and rolled about to “exhaustion,” and so on.<sup>12</sup> The sparagmatic dismemberment and the suggestion of the suspension of mating taboos both evoke Maenadism and the Dionysian cult. The wild freedom advocated by this ancient cult, as well as its suggestions of rebirth, seemed appropriate expressions of the unchecked newness that faced the art world as its



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN,  
*Interior Scroll*, 1975.



boundaries dissolved and opened on all sides into unexpected vistas, where traditional media, torn apart and digested, were reborn in unaccountable new forms. The Dionysian subversion of ego in the cause of general fertility has become another persistent theme of appropriation performance. Barbara Smith has performed what she calls a Tantric ritual, that included sexual intercourse in a gallery setting, as an artwork.<sup>13</sup> In *Interior Scroll*, 1975, Schneemann, standing naked before the audience during her menstruation, pulled from her vagina a ribbon-like scroll and read from it a text about the status of women artists.

In general, performance works involving the appropriation of religious forms have fallen into two groups: those that select from the Neolithic sensibility of fertility and blood sacrifice, and those that select from the Paleolithic sensibility of shamanic magic and ordeal; often the two strains mix. Both may be seen as expressions of the desire, so widespread in the '60s and early '70s, to reconstitute within Modern civilization something like an ancient or primitive sensibility of oneness with nature.

Though the erotic content of the works based on the theme of fertility has been received with some shock, it is the work based on the shamanic ordeal that the art audience has found most difficult and repellent. Clearly, that is part of the intention of the work, and in fact a part of its proper content. But it is important to make clear that these artists have an earnest desire to communicate, rather than simply shock. Seen in an adequate context, their work is not aggression but expression.

In 1965, Nitsch formed the Wiener Aktionismus group in conjunction with Otto Mühl, Gunter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. Much of their work focused on the motifs of self-mutilation and self-sacrifice that were implicit, though not foregrounded, both in Klein's career and in the OM Theatre performances. Brus, during his performing period (1964-1970), would appear in the performance space dressed in a woman's black stockings, brassiere, and garter belt, slash himself with scissors till he ran with blood, and perform various acts ordinarily taboo in public settings, such as shitting, eating his own shit, vomiting, eating the vomit, and so on. Schwarzkogler's pieces presented young males as mutilated sacrificial victims, often wounded in the genitals, lying fetally contracted and partially mummy-wrapped as if comatose, in the midst of paraphernalia of violent death such as bullet cartridges and electrical wires. Not only the individual elements of these works, but their patterns of combination—specifically the combination of female imitation, self-injury, and the seeking of dishonor through the performance of taboo acts—find striking homologies in shamanic activities. The same

motifs reappeared, not necessarily with direct influence from the Viennese, in the works of several American performance artists who have stretched audiences' sympathies beyond the breaking point.

Paul McCarthy, a major exponent of the art of the taboo gesture, first heard the calling not from the Viennese but from Klein. As a student at the University of Utah in 1968, he leapt from a second story window in emulation of Klein's *Leap into the Void*.<sup>14</sup> By about 1974 his work had found its own distinctive form, developing into a modernized shamanic style so difficult for audiences to bear that the pieces were usually published only as video tapes. These performances, like Schneemann's, were often developed from dream material, indicating their intimate relation both with shamanic magic and with depth psychology. Like Brus, McCarthy has sometimes appeared dressed as a woman, and has worked, like Schwarzkogler, with the themes of self-mutilation and castration; some pieces have acted out the basic female imitation of feigning menstruation and parturition (magical pantomimes that are common in primitive initiation rites). In others, McCarthy has cut his hands and mixed the blood with food and water in bowls, clearly echoing various sacramental rites from the Dionysian to the Christian. In still others that, like Nitsch's, have sometimes been shut down by the police, he has acted out the seeking of dishonor as an exploration of the Dionysian-Freudian depths of psychobiological life. In *Sailor's Meat*, a videotape from 1975, for example, he appeared in a room in a wino hotel wearing black lace panties smeared with blood and a blonde female wig and lay on the bed fucking piles of raw meat and ground hamburger with his cock painted red and a hot dog shoved up his ass. As *Old Man in Doctor*, 1978, he slit a rubber mask over his head to form a vagina-shaped opening on it and from the vagina gave birth to a ketchup-covered doll. The piece was a conscious remaking of the myth of the birth of Athena from the cleft brainpan of Zeus, a myth that reverts to the age when male priests and their divinities sought to incorporate the female principle and its powers. In *Baby Boy*, 1982, McCarthy gave birth to a doll from between his ketchup-covered male thighs as he lay on his back with his feet in the air like a woman in missionary-style sexual intercourse. In these and other works, self-mutilation, female imitation, and the performance of taboo acts are combined in a structure roughly parallel to that of Brus's work, though with a greater range of expressiveness.

Similar materials recur in the work of Kim Jones. In a performance in Chicago in 1981, Jones appeared naked except for a mask made of a woman's panty-hose, covered himself with mud (as both African and Australian shamans have done when performing), and lay naked on the fire escape in the



cold to accumulate energy (a shamanic practice known worldwide but most famous from Tibet). Returning to the performance space, he produced a mayonnaise jar filled with his own excrement, smeared himself with it, embraced members of the audience while covered with it, and finally burned sticks and green plants till the smoke drove the remaining audience from the gallery. In another piece, Jones cut himself with a razor blade twenty-seven times in a pattern suggesting the body's circulatory system, then pressed himself against the gallery wall for a self-portrait.<sup>15</sup>

Understandably, to audiences habituated to the traditional boundaries of art, to audiences for whom easel painting was still the quintessential art activity, these performances were offensive and even insulting. The point of such works when they first appeared was in part their seeming to be radically, even horrifyingly, out of context. But for almost forty years now they have been part of the art scene, if somewhat peripherally, legitimized by art world context and critical designation again and again. In order to understand the wellsprings of such works, in order to approach them with a degree of sympathy and clarity, it is necessary to frame them somewhat in cultural history, where in fact they have a clear context.

Many of the artists discussed here feel that shamanic material and primitive initiation rites are the most relevant cultural parallels to their work. But most of them feel that the tone of their work arose first, often under Freudian or Jungian influence, and was later confirmed and further shaped by some study of shamanic literature.<sup>16</sup> The question of origins—whether from shamanic literature, or from the Jungian collective unconscious, or from the Freudian timeless repository of infantile memory, or from all these sources—then, though it is worthwhile to state, cannot be answered. In any case, it is important in terms of any theory of the function of art that these artists have introduced into the art realm materials found elsewhere only in the psychiatric records of disturbed children and in the shamanic thread of the history of religion.<sup>17</sup>

In societies where the shamanic profession is intact, shamans have been perhaps the most fully rounded and powerful cultural figures in history. The poets, mythographers, visual artists, musicians, medical doctors, psychotherapists, scientists, sorcerers, undertakers, psychopomps, and priests of their tribal groups, they have been one-person cultural establishments. They have also been independent, uncontrollable, and eccentric power figures whose careers have often originated in psychotic episodes—what anthropologists call the “sickness vocation.”<sup>18</sup> As a result, when societies increase their demands for internal order, the old shamanic role, with its

unassimilable combination of power and freedom, is broken up into more manageable specialty professions; in our society, the doctor, the poet, the artist, and so on, have each inherited one scrap from the original shaman's robe. Beginning with the Romantic period an attempt was made to reconstitute something like the fullness of the shamanic role within the art realm; poets especially were apt to attribute both healing and transcendentalizing powers to the art experience. This project has been acted out in the last thirty years by those artists whose work appropriates its materials from the early history of religion.

Perhaps the most shocking element in the various performance works mentioned here is the practice of self-injury and self-mutilation. This has, however, been a standard feature of shamanic performances and primitive initiation rites around the world. Siberian shamans cut themselves while in ecstatic states brought on by drugs, alcohol, drumming, and dancing.<sup>19</sup> Tibetan shamans are supposedly able to slit their bellies and exhibit their entrails.<sup>20</sup> Related practices are found in the Performance Art under discussion. Chris Burden crawled through broken glass with his hands behind his back (*Through the Night Softly*, 1973). He was crucified (with nails through the palms of his hands) to the top of a Volkswagen “Bug” (*Trans-fixed*, 1974). He was shot in the arm with a .22 calibre rifle from about 15 feet away, in an art gallery (*Shoot*, 1971). Dennis Oppenheim did a piece in which for half an hour rocks were dropped upon him from overhead (*Rocked Circle/Fear*, 1971). Linda Montano inserted acupuncture needles around her eyes (*Mitchell's Death*, 1978). Vito Aconci bit himself all over, leaving visible toothmarks (*Trademarks*, 1970). Gina Pané walked barefoot through fire (*Nourriture, actualités télévisée, feu*, 1971). The Australian performance artist Stelarc, reproducing a feat of Ajivika ascetics in India, has had himself suspended in various positions in the air by means of hooks embedded in his flesh.<sup>21</sup> The instances could easily be multiplied.

The element of female imitation, found in the works of Brus, McCarthy, Jones, and others, is also a standard shamanic and initiatory motif, involving sympathetic magic. Male shamans and priests around the world, as well as tribal boys at their puberty initiations, adopt female dress to incorporate the female and her powers.<sup>22</sup> In lineages as far apart as North Asian and Amerindian, shamans have worn women's clothing and ritually married other men.<sup>23</sup> Akkadian priests of Ishtar dressed like their goddess, as did Ramakrishna in 19th-century India. A Sanskrit religious text instructs the devotee to “discard the male (purusa) in thee and become a woman (prakriti).”<sup>24</sup> Various tribal rites involve the ritual miming, by men, of female menstruation and



parturition, as in the works of McCarthy.<sup>25</sup> Freudian and Jungian theories of the bisexuality of the psyche and the need to realize it are relevant both to archaic and to modern exercises of this sort.<sup>26</sup>

Female imitation and self-mutilation combine in certain practices of ritual surgery found in primitive cultures around the world, though most explicitly in Australia. In Central Australian initiation rites, for example, a vulva-like opening is cut into the urethral surface of the penis, symbolically incorporating the female principle into the male body.<sup>27</sup> Bruno Bettelheim has observed this motif in the fantasies of disturbed children. Brus, in a performance, once cut a vulvalike slit in his groin, holding it open with hooks fastened in his flesh. Ritual surgery to create an androgynous appearance is common in archaic religious practice generally, as an attempt to combine male and female magical powers into one center. The emphasis on the mutilation of the male genitals in much of the Viennese work is relevant here. In classical antiquity the priests of Cybele castrated themselves totally (both penis and testicles) in their initiation, to become more like their goddess; thereafter they dressed like women and were called "females." In subsequent ecstatic performances they would cut themselves in the midst of frenzied dancing and offer the blood to the goddess.<sup>28</sup>

The public performance of taboo acts is also an ancient religious custom with roots in shamanism and primitive magic. Both art and religion, through the bracketing of their activities in the half-light of ritual appropriationism, provide zones where deliberate inversions of social custom can transpire; acts repressed in the public morality may surface there, simultaneously set loose for their power to balance and complete the sense of life, and held safely in check by the shadow reality of the arena they occur in.

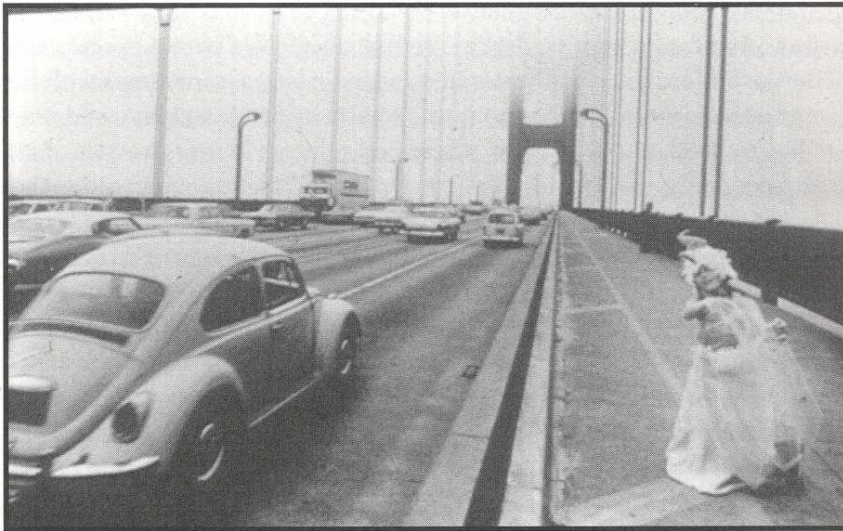
A little-known Sanskrit book called the *Pasupata Sutras* formulates this practice in detail, under the heading of the Seeking of Dishonor.<sup>29</sup> The practitioner is enjoined to court contempt and abuse from his fellow humans by behavior deliberately contrived as the most inappropriate and offensive for the situation, whatever it may be. In shamanic contexts, such practices had demonstrated the shaman's special status beyond convention, his ability to breach at will either metaphysical or ethical boundaries. In yogic terms the goal of the practice was the effacement of ego by the normalization of types of experience usually destructive to the self-image.<sup>30</sup> The shaman, the yogic seeker of dishonor, and the ritual scapegoat figure all offered themselves as targets for calamity, to draw it away from the communities they served. They were the individuals who went out on the razor's edge and, protected in part by the brackets of religious performance, publicly breached the taboos of

their times. Today the exhibitionistic breaching of age and gender taboos, as well as other forays into the darkness of the disallowed within the brackets of the art performance, replicates this ancient custom, sometimes with the same cathartic intention. As the shoals of history break and flow and reassemble, to break and flow again, these and other primitive practices have resurfaced, in something like their original combination, in an altogether different context.

The preparation of his or her own body as a magico-sculptural object, for example, is a regular and essential part of the shaman's performance. An Australian shaman may cover his body with mud (symbol of recent arrival from the netherworld) and decorate it with patterns of bird down fastened on with his own blood; an African shaman may wear human bones, skulls, and so forth, and may surgically alter his or her body in various ways; a Central Asian shaman may appear in a skeleton suit with mirrors on it. Frequently the shaman's body is tattooed or scarified or painted with magical symbols. Similarly, Schneemann has presented herself as a "body collage" decorated with symbols from ancient fertility religions. In a mixture of archaic and Christian materials, Linda Montano in *The Screaming Nun*, 1975, dressed as a nun, "danced, screamed, and heard confessions at Embarcadero Plaza [in San Francisco]."<sup>31</sup> Other pieces by Montano have involved dancing blindfolded in a trance, drumming for six hours a day for six days, shape-changing and identity-changing, self-injury (with acupuncture needles), and astral travel events. Mary Beth Edelson's "Public Rituals" have involved the marking of her naked body with symbols from ancient goddess cults, the equation of her body with the earth, and the declaration of the end of patriarchy (*Your Five Thousand Years Are Up*, 1977).<sup>32</sup> Kim Jones, as Mud Man, or Bill Harding emerging covered with mud from a hole in the ground in the middle of a circle of fire, are reconstituting before our eyes images from the elementary stratum of religious forms.

A motif that is absolutely central to shamanism, and that often also involves body decoration, is the attempt to incorporate the power of an animal species by imitation of it. Shamans in general adopt the identities of their power animals, act out their movements, and duplicate their sounds.<sup>33</sup> The claim to understand animal languages and to adopt an animal mind-set is basic to their mediation between culture and nature. Echoes of the practice are common in the annals of Performance Art. In Joseph Beuys's conversation with the dead hare (*wie man dem Hasen die Bilder erklärt*, 1965), the knowledge of an animal language combines with a belief in the shamanic ability to communicate with the dead. In *Chicken Dance*, 1972, Montano,





LINDA MONTANO, *Chicken Dance*, 1972. Golden Gate Bridge.

attired in a chicken costume, appeared unannounced at various locations in San Francisco and danced wildly through the streets like a shaman possessed by the spirit and moved by the motions of her animal ally. Terry Fox slept on a gallery floor connected with two dead fish by string attached to his hair and teeth, attempting, like a shaman inviting his animal ally to communicate through a dream, to dream himself into the piscine mind in *Pisces*, 1971.

In such behavior a style of decision-making is involved that has much in common with the peculiar arbitrariness and rigor of religious vows in general, and with one called the Beast Vow in particular.<sup>34</sup> Among the Pasupatas of India (the same who formalized the Seeking of Dishonor), the male practitioner commonly took the bull vow. (The bull is the most common shamanic animal by far.) He would spend a good part of each day bellowing like a bull and in general trying to transform his consciousness into that of a bull. Such behavior was usually vowed for a specific length of time, most frequently either for a year or for the rest of one's life. A person who took the frog vow would move for a year only by squatting and hopping; the snake vower would slither. Such vows are very precise and demanding. The novice, for example, may pick a certain cow and vow to imitate its every action. During the time of the vow the novice follows the cow everywhere: when the cow eats, the novice eats; when the cow sleeps, the novice sleeps; when the cow moos, the novice moos—and so on. (Cow-vowers were known in ancient Mesopotamia as “grazers.”) By such actions the paleolithic shaman

attempts to affect ecology by infiltrating an animal species which can then be manipulated. The yogic practitioner hopes to escape from his or her own intentional horizon by entering into that of another species.

These activities are echoed in performance pieces in various ways. Bill Gordh, as *Dead Dog*, spent two years learning how to bark with a sense of expressiveness. James Lee Byars wore a pink silk tail everywhere he went for six months. Vito Acconci, in his *Following Piece*, 1969, would pick a passerby at random on the street and follow him or her till it was no longer possible to do so.

What I am especially concerned to point out in activities like this is a quality of decision-making that involves apparent aimlessness along with fine focus and rigor of execution. This is a mode of willing which is absolutely creative in the sense that it assumes that it is reasonable to do anything at all with life; all options are open and none is more meaningful or meaningless than any other. A Jain monk in India may vow to sit for a year and then follow that by standing up for a year—a practice attested to in the *Atharva Veda* (about 1,000 B C) and still done today.<sup>35</sup> In Performance Art the subgenre known as Endurance Art is similar in style, though the scale is much reduced.

In 1965, Beuys alternately stood and knelt on a small wooden platform for 24 hours during which he performed various symbolic gestures in immobile positions. In 1971, Burden, a major explorer of the Ordeal or Endurance genre, spent five days and nights fetally enclosed in a tiny metal locker (2 feet by 2 feet by 3 feet). In 1974, he combined the immobility vow with the keynote theme of the artist's person by sitting on an upright chair on a sculpture pedestal until, 48 hours later, he fell off from exhaustion (*Sculpture in Three Parts*). In *White Light/White Heat*, 1975, he spent 22 days alone and invisible to the public on a high shelf-like platform in a gallery, neither eating, nor speaking, nor seeing, nor seen by, another human being.<sup>36</sup>

The first thing to notice about these artists is that no one is making them do it and usually no one is paying them to do it. The second is the absolute rigor with which, in the classic performance pieces, these very unpragmatic activities are carried out. This peculiar quality of decision-making has become a basic element of performance poetics. To a degree (which I do not wish to exaggerate), it underscores the relationship between this type of activity and the religious vocation. A good deal of Performance Art, in fact, might be called Vow Art, as might a good deal of religious practice. (Kafka's term “hunger artist” is not unrelated.)

Enthusiasms of this type have passed through cultures before, but usu-



ally in the provinces of religion or, more occasionally, philosophy. What is remarkable about our time is that it is happening in the realm of art, and being performed, often, by graduates of art schools rather than seminaries or ashrams. In our time religion and philosophy have been more successful (or intransigent) than art in defending their traditional boundaries and preventing universal overflow with its harrowing responsibilities and consequences.

A classic source on the subject of Ordeal Art is a book called the *Path of Purification (Visudhimagga)* by Buddhaghosa, a 5th century AD Buddhist writing in Ceylon.<sup>37</sup> It includes an intricately categorized compendium of behavioral vows designed to undermine the conditioned response systems that govern ordinary life. Among the most common are the vows of homelessness—the vow, for example to live out-of-doors for a year. This vow was acted out in New York by Tehching Hsieh, who stayed out-of-doors in Manhattan for a year as a work of art. Hsieh (who also has leapt from the second story of a building in emulation of Klein's leap) has specialized in year-long vows acted out with great rigor. For one year he punched in hourly on a time clock in his studio, a device not unlike some used by forest yogis in India to restrict their physical movements and thus their intentional horizons. The performance piece of this type done on the largest scale was Hsieh's year of isolation in a cell built in his Soho studio, a year in which he neither left the cell nor spoke nor read. Even the scale of this piece, however, does not approach that of similar vows in traditional religious settings. Himalayan yogis as recently as a generation ago were apt to spend seven years in a light-tight cave, while Simeon Stylites, an early Christian ascetic in the Syrian desert, lived for the last 37 years of his life on a small platform on top of a pole.

The reduced scale of such vows in the art context reflects the difference in motivation between the religious ascetic and the performance artist. Religious vows are undertaken for pragmatic purposes. The shaman seeking the ability to fly, the yogi seeking the effacement of ego, the monk seeking salvation and eternal bliss, are all working within intricately formulated belief systems in pursuit of clearly defined and massively significant rewards. Less is at stake for the performance artist than for the pious believer; yet still something is at stake. An act that lacks any intention whatever is probably a contradiction in terms. For some artists (for example, Burden), work of this type has functioned as a personal initiation or catharsis, as well as an investigation of the limits of one's will; others (including Nitsch) are convinced that their performance work is cathartic for the audience as well and in that sense serves a social and therapeutic purpose. Rachel Rosenthal describes

her performance work as “sucking diseases from society.”

But in most work of this type attention is directed toward the exercise of will as an object of contemplation in itself. Appropriation art in general (and Vow Art in particular) is based on an aesthetic of choosing and willing rather than conceiving and making. Personal sensibility is active in the selection of the area of the universe to be appropriated, and in the specific, often highly individual character of the vow undertaken; the rigor with which the vow is maintained is, then, like a craftsman's devotion to perfection of form. Beyond this, the performance is often based on a suspension of judgment about whether or not the act has any value in itself, and a concentration on the purity of the doing. This activity posits as an ideal (though never of course perfectly attaining it) the purity of doing something with no pragmatic motivation. Like the Buddhist paradox of desiring not to desire, it requires a motivation to perform feats of motivelessness. It shares something with Arnold Toynbee's opinion that the highest cultures are the least pragmatic, and something of formalism's belief in art's autonomy.

In this mode of decision and execution the conspicuously free exercise of will is framed as a kind of absolute. Displays of this type are attempts to break up the standard weave of everyday motivations and create openings through which new options may make their way to the light. These options are necessarily undefined, since no surrounding belief system is in place (or acknowledged). The radicality of work in this genre can be appraised precisely by how far it has allowed the boundaries of the art category to dissolve. Many works of the last forty years have reached to the limits of life itself. Such activities have necessarily involved artists in areas where usually the psychoanalyst or anthropologist presides. The early explorations discussed here required the explicit demonstration of several daring strategies that had to be brought clearly into the light. Extreme actions seemed justified, or even required, by the cultural moment. But the moment changes, and the mind becomes desensitized to such direct demonstrations after their first shock of brilliant simplicity. When an artist today announces that his or her entire life is designated as a performance, the unadorned gesture cannot expect to be met with the enthusiastic interest with which its prototypes were greeted a generation or two ago.

1. See Thomas McEvilley, “Diogenes of Sinope (c. 410–c. 320 B C): Selected Performance Pieces,” *Artforum*, March 1983, and above pp. 9–12.

2. For a more detailed discussion of this process see Timothy Binkley, “Piece: Contra Aesthetics,” in Joseph Margolis, ed, *Philosophy Looks at the*



Arts (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), pp. 25-44.

3. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 43.

4. Yves Klein, "Discourse on the Occasion of Tinguely's Exhibition in Dusseldorf, Jan. 1959"; see my translation in exh. cat. *Yves Klein (1928-1962), A Retrospective*, (Houston, Texas: Institute for the Arts, and New York: The Arts Publisher, 1982).

5. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments, Happenings* (New York: Harry N Abram, Inc., 1966), p. 188.

6. For the image of the Net of Indra see Garma C.C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1974), pp. 165-66.

7. In English, see, e.g. Hermann Nitsch, in exh. cat. *The Spirit of Vienna* (New York: Renee Block Gallery, 1977), p. 64.

8. For the *sparagmos* see W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), pp. 45, 149, 171-72, and Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus, Myth and Cult* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 192, etc. For the presence of various drugs in ancient wines, see Carl A.P. Ruck's essay in R. Gordon Wasson, *The Road to Eleusis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978).

9. *The Spirit of Vienna*, pp. 31-32.

10. For the *taurobolium* see Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 66.

11. Brus in *The Spirit of Vienna*, p. 8.

12. Carolee Schneemann, *More than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works and Selected Writings* (New Paltz, New York: Documentext, 1979), p. 66.

13. "As Above, So Below," 1981: see *High Performance 15*, vol. 4, no. 3, Fall 1981, pp. 19-25. Many of the performance works mentioned in this essay were first documented in *High Performance*, a basic source on the subject.

14. I have written about the history of Klein's

leaps elsewhere (see note 4 above). The famous photograph is a photomontage of a leap made over a net (tarpaulin, really). But the evidence is indisputable that Klein did, on two occasions before the photographed event, make leaps from comparable heights, sustaining injury both times. It is intriguing to note how resistant people are to accepting this fact; at a panel discussion at the Guggenheim Museum in New York after the opening of the Klein retrospective (Nov. 21, 1982), this was the central, and often heated, topic of discussion.

15. The making of blood imprints, which was found also in Schneemann's work and embodied in McCarthy's performances of painting with his penis dipped in ketchup, reverts to Yves Klein. In addition to his body prints in ultramarine blue, Klein on two occasions made blood prints of women's naked bodies (once using the model's own menstrual blood), which he subsequently destroyed for fear of their negative magic. The directness of the imprint method influenced neo-primitive performance widely. The Italian performance artist Giuditta Tometta has made blood imprints of her own pregnant body as artworks.

16. The works most commonly mentioned as influential are Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, often in the abridgment and revision of Theodore Gaster; and Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, dist. by Pantheon Books, 1964).

17. The parallels between tribal initiatory customs and the behavior of disturbed children are brought out by Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

18. Eliade, *Shamanism*, chapters 1 and 2.

19. See, for example, S.M. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1935), p. 364; V.M. Michaelowski, "Shamanism in Siberia and European Russia, Being the Second Part of Shamanstro," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 24 (1914), p.66.

20. Fokke Sierksma, "Tibet's Terrifying Deities," from *Art in Its Context: Studies in Ethno-Aesthetics* (Museum Series, vol.1, the Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 73.

21. For the Ajivika austerity of hanging by hooks inserted in the flesh see Richard Morris, "Notes and Queries," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* (1884), p. 95.

22. The classic source for shamanic transvestitism is Robert Briffault, *The Mothers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), vol. 2, pp. 532ff. For speculations on the female origin of shamanism see Georg Nioradze, *Der Schamanismus bei den sibirischen Völkern* (Stuttgart: Strecker und Schroder, 1925), pp. 51ff., and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1959), p. 285.

23. Waldemar G. Bogoras, *The Chukchee, Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* 11, vol XI (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1904-09), p. 448; Hans Findeisen, *Schamanentum, dargestellt am Beispiel der Bessenheitspriester hordëurasischer Völker* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1957), ch. XIII.

24. Cited by Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata*, p. 284.

25. Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds*, pp. 109-121.

26. See, e.g., Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," *Collected Papers* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), vol. 5.

27. Subincision is reported by Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899), p. 263, and described in detail by M. F. Ashley-Montagu, *Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1937), p. 293; varying psychoanalytic interpretations are given by Geza Roheim, *The Eternal Ones of the Dream* (New York: International Universities Press, 1945), and Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds*.

28. Grant Showerman, *The Great Mother of the Gods* (Chicago: Argonaut, Inc., 1969), pp. 16-18. For a psychoanalytic interpretation see E. Wei-

ger-Vowinkel, "The Cult and Mythology of the Magna Mater from the Standpoint of Psychoanalysis," *Psychiatry* 1 (1938), pp. 348-49.

29. The text as a whole is not available in English; for excerpts and summary see Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "Cynics and Pasupatas," *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962).

30. Yoga is primarily a redefining of shamanic practices in terms of later forms of thought. See Thomas McEvilley, "An Archaeology of Yoga," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 44-77.

31. Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz Press, 1981).

32. Mary Beth Edelson, *Seven Cycles: Public Rituals* (New York: Privately Published, 1980).

33. Shirokogoroff, *Psychomental Complex*, p. 309; Wilhelm Radloff, *Aus Sibirien* (Leipzig: T.O. Weigel, 1884), vol. 2, pp. 20-50; Mary A. Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), pp. 171ff.; Findeisen, *Schamanentum*, pp. 30ff.; Adolph Friedrich and Georg Buddrus, joint eds. and translators, *Schamanengeschichten aus Sibirien* (Munich: O.W. Barth, 1955), p. 212.

34. On the Beast Vow see M.G. Bhagat, *Ancient Indian Asceticism* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1976), p. 145; Chattopadhyay, *Lokayata*, ch. 2; Ingalls, "Cynics and Paspatas."

35. *Atharva Veda*, XV. 3; and see Haripada Chakrabarti, *Asceticism in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1973), pp. 388, 371, 437.

36. For the works by Chris Burden cited here see *Chris Burden 71-73* (Los Angeles: Privately Published, 1974), and *Chris Burden, 74-77* (Los Angeles: Privately Published, 1978).

37. Bhikkhu Nyanamoli, trans., *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* (Berkeley, California: Shambhala Publications, dist. Random House, 1976). For the parallels drawn here, see, for example, the "tree-root-dweller's practice" (p. 74), and the "open-air-dweller's practice" (p. 75).



## Beuys and Warhol

### *The Poseur's Mantle*

JOSEPH BEUYS DIED IN 1986 AT THE AGE OF 64, AND ANDY WARHOL in the following year at the age of 58. Within that strange, small enclave which chooses to call itself “the art world,” these events were regarded as having special portent.

Any important artist's death is considered an event of consequence. There is not only a sense of loss attendant upon it, but in certain ways a sense of gain as well. Death becomes like the golden mask that covered Tutankhamen's face as he lay in the Valley of the Kings, across the muddy river from Karnak—it denies the deceased's mortality rather than confirming it: a new immortal has entered the pantheon! The market for the artist's works tends to go up. Often he is sanctified in art history to an extent that he was not when alive.

These two deaths, however, had an additional and special impact. Both artists were poseurs for whom life itself was a performance, and at their deaths there was a perception, on each side of the Atlantic, that something historic, even semi-mythic, had occurred. A period of several years ensued in which there was talk about who would inherit the mantle of one or the other. In Europe there were mentions of Jannis Kounellis, Sigmar Polke, and Anselm Kiefer as candidates for Beuys's mantle. In New York the discussion of who might be the “new Warhol” centered (after Keith Haring's death) around Jeff Koons and Mark Kostabi.

The differences in these lists of contenders is revealing. The European artists involved were known for what Matthew Arnold called “high seriousness.” The American artists involved were, on the contrary, known for what one might call ‘high frivolousness.’ To put it simply: Beuys had been the king, Warhol the jester.

Both followed the Performance tradition in which an artist exhibits himself or herself in actual life situations, a tradition that goes back to the



Warhol and Beuys at Dinner, Naples, April 9, 1980. Contact sheet.



nineteenth century model of the Dandy. The extreme of this mode occurs when artists designate their personas and their public lives as continuous artworks (or anti-artworks) to be ended only by their deaths. Examples within the time frame of this book include Yves Klein, James Lee Byars—and Beuys and Warhol. Each of them affected a costume and public manner that were out of the ordinary and meant to make a point. Each of them was therefore a Performance artist who was performing on many, perhaps most occasions when he was seen in public.

In addition some of them were Performance artists in the specific sense of designating certain actions as artworks which would be listed in their resumes. Both Byars and Beuys were performers in this double sense, sometimes performing actions that would be listed in their resumes as official Performances, sometimes performing actions that would flavor the atmosphere of their lives without being listed among their works. Klein and Warhol were not Performance artists in this double sense. They flavored their lives and their work with constant performative actions, but rarely included these actions in their lists of works.

In about 1970, for example, Warhol once arrived at a museum where an excited crowd was waiting for him. He entered carrying a tape recorder and microphone, with superstar Ultraviolet at his side. When approached by any would-be interlocutor he silently held up the mike and Ultraviolet, fixing the visitor with an intense gaze, uttered some pre-ordained line designed to unsettle, like, “Are you a good fuck?” Warhol didn’t speak all evening, then left silently. His career involved hundreds (thousands?) of such mysterious theatrical apparitions, but they were not listed among his artworks. Other artists have chosen to list them. Chris Burden, for example, in 1976, once arrived at his performance venue in chrome-rimmed dark glasses, remained “distant and aloof, and had as little interaction with students and faculty as possible,” and left the next day as he had arrived. He listed the event (or non-event) among his works on his resume.

This distinction between Beuys’s and Warhol’s approaches to Performance is meaningful. Beuys was culturally more formal in his use of the proscenium arch, Warhol more common in his use of ordinary social encounters to generate performative friction. Beuys sought to elevate lowly materials (fat, junk, withered sausages) into near-sacramental status; Warhol preferred to bring the high low. Similar contrasts extend throughout their works.

Beuys’s work, and his legacy, had to do with nature and the flaws of so-called civilization—indeed, a questioning of the premises of civilization itself; Warhol’s work had to do with the folly, yet reality, of civilization,

which the artist understood, in a raw down-to-earth way, as the market and capitalism and their puny cultural offshoots. Beuys appealed to nature for redemption or escape from culture. Warhol looked more pragmatically to culture, whatever its flaws, as the only available option. If there were a theological duel, Beuys would represent the soul, Warhol the anti-soul.

Yet various traits of these two figures on different sides of the Atlantic somehow brought them together in a linkage that has lasted now for more than a decade. This linkage is not merely a theory or proposal. It has already been written into art history. In dealing with the pivotal generation between, say, 1965 and 1985, at least in terms of the Western tradition—one confronts the opposed and equated figures of Warhol and Beuys. Through these two personas, as through archetypes, the tradition has articulated its directions.

The sense of a connection between these two artists already existed in their lifetimes. In 1980, as a part of his conflation of images of icons from pop and high culture, Warhol began a series of portraits of Beuys, somewhat nastily parodying the role of a commoner painting a nobleman. Beuys attended an exhibition of these works held at Lucio Amelio’s gallery in Naples later that year. The two artists fraternized somewhat warily for the sake of a hungry press. Beuys seemed uneasy that he might be degraded by the photo-op; Warhol seemed shy and hardly there.

Their meeting was such a media event because both artists had always gone to great pains to attract attention to their personas, their public, media-situated images. The trajectory of Beuys’s career describes a gradual shift from an early persona as self-appointed shaman healing the indelible wounds of post-War Germany, later inflated by ego to the persona of deity or king presiding over a court of acolytes. Warhol’s portraits of him, beginning in 1980, more or less exploited this weakness. Warhol, on the other hand, went from an early role as shy provocateur, coyly puncturing with his works of the early 1960s the bubble of metaphysical pretension with which Abstract Expressionism had surrounded itself, to a later, more ambitious role of mastermind of popular culture and of the conflation of high and low.

Both Warhol and Beuys acted out their often theatrical personas through the creation of trademarked looks that were easily recognized. In Beuys’s case, in the early period, the costume involved the rumpled fedora which referred to gangsterism and the hunting vest which associated him with nature and the outdoors. Later in life a fur coat constituted an implicit claim to a kind of animal identity, while brass cymbals chimed a regal presence. For Warhol the principal piece of costuming was an outlandish fright



wig of white hair, along with the wrinkled jeans that proclaimed, "America." Both men also operated in more or less personal enclaves which attracted eccentrics. Beuys did so in the public domain, at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie or the various shifting sites of the Free International University, venues in which his gestures were understood as relating to the concept of the state, or of the reform of the state. Warhol, on the other hand, pursued his often bizarre social aims in a privately controlled setting which did not relate to the idea of the state except through a desire to circumvent and subvert it. This was the Factory, where both famous and infamous deeds transpired in an atmosphere of charismatic secrecy.

Each of these artists made of his life a performance piece for the public eye. However, the ever-increasing grandiosity of Beuys's posing has sometimes been seen as his great flaw. Surely it did idealize and divert his work from the toughness of early pieces such as *Fat Chair*, 1964, which looked like a human being melted down to a mound of fat in his chair, with Nazi overtones, to the regal decorativeness of late ones such as his exhibition in late 1985 about his own death (presented, appropriately, in the Palazzo Regale in Naples), in which the fur coat, laid out in a coffin-like vitrine, represented the artist's vacated, or transmogrified, selfhood. In Warhol's case, on the contrary, his success at aggrandizing his persona is commonly seen as his great triumph. From the midst of car wrecks and electric chairs he glimmers with a shady iconicity.

The different evaluations of their roles as poseurs also reflect differences between the two cultures. In the realm of American glitz, Hollywood, and the land of market obsession, Warhol's achievement at manipulating the public through his persona was cynical but realistic. At the same time that he critiqued late capitalism, he also embodied it with a straight face. Beuys, on the other hand, formed by his association with the deep roots of Teutonic mythos and classical German Romanticism, was neither cynical nor realistic, but increasingly overpowered by the sense of his own greatness.

Though it seems primarily because of the cultic attention to their personas that Beuys and Warhol have come to be linked, still the thematic parallels that run throughout both oeuvres are twisted and skewed. A pattern of simultaneous sameness and difference extends throughout the comparison: a structural sameness tends to be balanced by deep differences of mood or spirituality.

The art-historical turning point on which both Beuys and Warhol focused involved a rejection of the traditional craft of easel painting, which seemed polluted by its long association with western hegemonic designs. (A

poster designed by Beuys in 1985 read, "The mistake begins as soon as you buy canvas and paint.") Both were sceptical about Late Modernist modes of aestheticism, elitism, and the cult of the sublime. In Warhol's case this resulted in the photography-based silkscreen works, which denied the tradition of "touch" through chemical and mechanical intervention. Beuys adopted a more varied means of avoidance, including Performance Art, sculpture, and concept.

In the years when both oeuvres began to attain maturity—the early 1960s—painting was regarded as corrupted, in part because of its association with illusionism. If the picture was a window on the wall—whether a window into the surrounding world, as in the Renaissance, or a window into the sublime, as in the last century or so of Modernism—then it simultaneously represented the avoidance of the wall itself. It sacrificed the reality of the moment in favor of an imagined vision beyond. The nature of this vision was another problem. By presenting, or representing, the world as a finite terrain to be conquered and possessed, easel painting since the Renaissance had become associated with imperialism and private property: the desire of the subject to control the object. Alternatively, by implying an escape into the sublime, as, say, the Abstract Expressionists did, painting cajoled the viewer into a neglect of social criticism and again affirmed the rightness of western leadership by suggesting its apparent occupation of a metaphysical cutting edge which led toward the Hegelian End of History.

Theirs was no longer the Modernist moment, but it was not yet the post-Modernist one, either. It was the moment in between, when artists still felt they might forge ahead into a future culmination, yet had lost the crypto-religious faith in the old order of aesthetic determination that was articulated in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1790 and culminated in Clement Greenberg's boosting of the New York School in the 1950s and '60s. In the decade from the early '60s to the early '70s, a variety of strategies was developed to counteract the illusionism of traditional easel painting.

A prominent element, especially in American Pop art but also in various European contexts, was the appropriation of media images to collapse the traditional distinction between high and low culture. Both Beuys and Warhol incorporated into their work popular imagery that reflected the field of power relationships at a raw level—but they did it very differently. For Warhol the United States dollar, represented in *Forty Two Dollar Bills*, 1962 (or the Campbell's soup can, in *Campbell's Soup Can (Vegetable)*, also 1962), was simply an ultimate fact about the reality of the moment. That's all there is, his work proclaims: don't look any farther. For Beuys, on



the contrary, *Tafel III (Kapital = Kunst)*, 1978, a pedagogical Performance with blackboards, involved a protest against the misuse of art by capitalist society—with an implied plea for a return to a spiritual and nature-based relationship to culture.

A standard range of comparisons has developed which is intended to support the linkage of these two artists but which, upon closer analysis, may point more prominently to their differences. Beuys's use of media images of Greta Garbo, for example, has understandably been regarded as thematically linked with Warhol's use of images of Marilyn Monroe. There is a clear structural parallel in that both used found media images which were partly overpainted. But the underlying themes or intentions behind these works may not have been so similar. Beuys fantasized Garbo as the lingering presence of a repressed goddess, who would be restored to power in a future age when the destructive aspect of the male personality was offset by a restoration of female spirituality. His Garbo was an optimistic or at least hopeful glance toward the future, a fundamental principle that could not be brushed aside by changing circumstances. Her moment, it was implied, would swing round again.

Warhol's Marilyn Monroe comes to the viewer with a different aura. She seems to be presented as a victim, not a triumphant force. True, Warhol seems to have presented her as a kind of goddess, but a pathetic goddess, demeaned and destroyed by patriarchy. She will preside over no future age. She is a casualty on the side of the capitalist patriarchal road, like Warhol's disaster pictures of car wrecks.

In the *Greta Garbo Cycle*, 1964-69, Beuys presented eleven overpainted photographs, newsprint photographs, and photocopies of the actress, both in her phase as superstar and in her hermetic retirement. The eleven portraits are exhibited in a row, flanked by two similarly made images of male figures: Al Capone, and Ho Chi Minh. The implied meanings are ambiguous. It may seem that Capone and Ho represent the patriarchal establishment that confined the goddess within its stern parameters. Or it may imply that with her new ascendancy these media-heroic male figures may emerge as her attendants.

For Warhol the first and foremost popular image was neither the dollar nor the soup can but the face of Marilyn Monroe. Her almost white-blond look may indeed have been the source of elements of his own persona. Some feel that he identified with her simultaneous celebrity and victimization.

The next two faces on the coins of his imaginary realm, so to speak, were Elvis Presley and Elizabeth Taylor. Warhol was clearly disaffected from Amer-

ican society; yet these images affirmed it aggressively. In *Double Elvis*, 1964, the poor-white-trash American icon quick-draws, with his right hand, upon the world, like late capitalism saying, Look out, world; I'm comin' atcha.

In his iconography of rootless, late-capitalist America, Warhol was not creating a new pantheon so much as pointing to one that already existed but had not been fully recognized. It was a pantheon underpinned by a theology of indifference. Relentlessly, as the decades passed, Warhol would reduce everything to lifeless substance through the silkscreen, all things treated alike: electric chairs, car wrecks, movie stars, flowers. As the years passed, his archetypal portraiture expanded to the western tradition in general, incorporating images of Beethoven, Einstein, Geronimo—and Beuys. He was picking out the elements for a new mythos, and this was a leveling gesture, subverting the European tradition of high culture in the name of American mass-marketing. Just as Marilyn Monroe was transported from the popular to the high culture, so Ludwig van Beethoven was translated from high culture to pop icon.

Garbo seems to have functioned for Beuys's persona somewhat as Monroe did for Warhol's. Beuys's gaunt, poetic, ravaged and melancholy look might have been to a degree based on the visual record of Garbo's personality. But he tended to feature male-heroic figures in a less ironic or distanced way than Warhol did. The gangster Al Capone, who held American governmental authority at bay with his ornery assertion of opposition and independence, and Ho Chi Minh, who also held off the massive might of the superpower, represented for Beuys the power of opposition and single-minded determination. That both Capone and Ho Chi Minh attained heroic stature through opposing the American government demonstrates Beuys's recognition of the domination of American-style capitalism in the post-War world. Warhol's inclusion in his canon of a portrait of Geronimo, the renegade Apache chief who became an exhibit at the Columbian world exposition in Chicago in 1893, is not dissimilar to Beuys's cult of Capone. Both instances encapsulate a grudging acknowledgment of American post-war hegemony with an implicit critique of its legitimacy. Beuys's *Dillinger-Aktion*, 1974, in which he had himself photographed in front of the Biograph Theater in Chicago, where Dillinger was gunned down by the FBI, shows how much he identified with the cult of the outlaw.

In acting out their public personas both artists worked on the social body more prominently than most artists have done, but seemingly in opposite directions. Warhol wanted to subvert it, Beuys to redeem it. There is no sense of redemption underlying Warhol's work, and no genuine sense





ANDY WARHOL, *Self-portrait in Drag*, 1981/82.

of subversion underlying that of Beuys, who, though critical of his society, never seems to have lost hope for social rectitude. One can see this in works each artist exhibited in Germany in 1982, two years after their meeting in Naples. At the *Zeitgeist* exhibition in Berlin, Warhol showed paintings of Nazi architecture, while at Documenta 7 Beuys supervised the planting of 7,000 trees. Warhol, whose persona involved the idea that he was without a sense of social responsibility, was making a gesture of provocation toward the citizens of Berlin and at the same time creating pop icons from this forbidden imagery. Beuys, comparably double-edged, seems to have been referring to the project of tree-planting in the desert in Israel in the years following the war (the Gandhian idea of people acting on their own), while at the same time invoking nature as a palliative for the pangs of civilization in general. Their tendencies toward double-meaning are structurally parallel, but Warhol's moves go toward provocation and subversion, Beuys's toward reconstruction and shamanic healing.

The linkage of these two artistic personas has led to a situation in which each of them represents his own culture in relation to the other; yet neither can be said to celebrate his cultural heritage in an unmediated way. Beuys was the first German artist to confront openly the recent historical problems of his culture, especially the Holocaust, which was a major theme of his work virtually from its beginning. In his early work, Warhol stressed the destructiveness of American civilization, in the Disaster pictures portraying car wrecks (such as *Five Deaths (red)*, 1962-3), and electric chairs (such as *Double Silver Disaster*, 1963). Though each pointed to problems in his culture, Beuys seems to have felt there was something to be done about them, while Warhol seems to have been unconcerned with this question.

The difference between the two artists can be measured by a comparison of the cultures from which they came. Warhol's work referred to a culture that was recent and rootless, while Beuys's was formed in part by the deep roots of Germanic tradition. In his performances Beuys sometimes feigned inarticulateness or the use of a language other than human. Examples include *The Chief (Der Chef)*, 1964, in which, rolled up in a sheath of felt fabric, Beuys uttered a sound which, as he described it, "was deep in the throat and hoarse like the cry of the stag," and *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (wie man dem Hasen die Bilder erklärt)*, 1965, in which, immortalized by gold leaf, he spoke to his animal ally a language that transcended the distinction between nature and culture.

In terms of the Germanic tradition from which Beuys never escaped, these and other works related backward to the myth of Siegfried, who grew



up in the forest. Siegfried knew the language of the birds and thus emerged from the forest singing beautifully, but knowing no human language. Similarly, Beuys's work stressed the idea of returning to nature and to a pre-linguistic state. Warhol, on the contrary, represented capitalist market forces. He stressed language-like iconographic elements as commodities, without any belief in a higher truth value they might possess. He treated them as empty signifiers, mediated by continual irony. Unlike Siegfried, he knew human language, but knew it as a system of lies. Beuys self-consciously stood for the idea of truth, Warhol just as self-consciously for the idea of falsehood. Beuys came from a deep and ancient civilization, Warhol from a more superficial, or at least more recent society without deep roots in tradition.

In their rejection of painterly passion these two artists represented the same moment, but their responses to that moment, characteristically, went in different directions. When Modernism lost credibility in the generation following the Second World War, two options offered themselves. One was an often sentimental desire to revive pre-Modern (and supposedly pre-patriarchal) forms and moods of culture. This was the tendency of the Flower Child movement, with which Beuys took pains to associate himself as a kind of elder statesman. The other was a colder-hearted rejection of Modernism for some unknown, post-Modernist social form which could not really be predicted but did not seem to involve much sentimentality. Warhol can be seen as a seminal figure in this tendency, at least in the visual arts.

Their different responses to the moment of the end of Modernism were individual choices. But their responses can also be appreciated by regarding these two artists, for the moment, less as individual sensibilities than as representatives of different cultures. Beuys was from the more ancient culture, whose record goes back to Tacitus's *Germania*, a work of the first century AD. In that essay the Roman author criticizes his own society in contrast to an idealized view of the Germanic tribal society of his period. The concept of the noble savage was articulated for the first time in this text, in reference to German culture. Beuys, falling in line with this ancient tradition which had been bolstered by the 19th-century preoccupation with Germanic folklore, chose, or at least made gestures toward, the pre-Modernist option. Many of his works, from the early beeswax sculptures of the late 1950s to later works such as *Bog Action (Aktion im Moor)*, 1971, *The Pack (Das Rudel)*, 1969, and others, suggested that a retreat from civilization was the only recourse. In *Bog Action* Beuys ran into an Irish peat bog, sinking deeper and deeper into the swamp until he disappeared completely, leaving only his trademark fe-

dora floating on the surface. The message is: sink beneath civilization; return into nature and the unconscious as into a cleaner and realer realm. In *The Pack*, one-person snow sleds, each equipped with a felt blanket, a lump of animal fat, and a flashlight, stream out of the rear hatch of a Volkswagen bus. The message, again, is: get out of civilization fast; head for the wilderness; sink yourself into its depths of unconsciousness and be redeemed by them. Many other works mime the shamanic ability to infiltrate nature and occupy it from within.

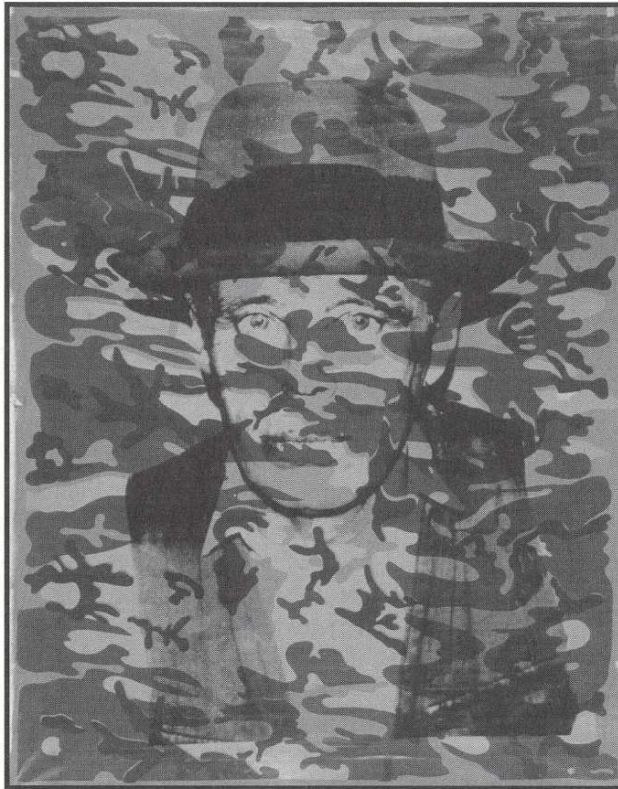
Warhol, on the other hand, embraced or at least acknowledged the decadence of civilization as if without alternative. The dollar bill, the electric chair, the car wreck, and the Hollywood icon are simply what we have to work with. Beuys's desire to return to a natural state is countered by Warhol's famous response, in an interview, to the question, "What do you want?": "I want to be a machine." Both of these approaches could be called post-Modernist in that they assumed a rejection of Modernism, but spiritually they went in opposite directions.

The relationship between art and spirituality has been a troubled topic for a generation or so. When, in the 18th century, secularism gained the upper hand in European high culture, the de-Christianization of Europe was buffered, as Matthew Arnold remarked, by the creation of the cult of art and poetry. The Romantic era was underway. Art came to be associated with the idea of the quest for the Grail. As the German Romantic poet Friedrich Schiller put it, the artist or poet was essentially a freed being; he already existed partly in the future and was engaged in dragging the present toward it. The artist's intuitions were not merely personal caprice, but communal involvements that would hasten history on its path toward its culmination. This was the gigantic role that the Abstract Expressionists inherited. It seems to have been a devastating burden that few of them lived through safely.

In the generation after the Abstract Expressionists, various revisions came into play. In the United States, the first exhibitions of Pop art, in 1962 and 1963, mocked the metaphysical pretension that had surrounded art for centuries. In Europe, similar iconoclastic events were happening, in France among the Nouveaux Realistes, in Germany among the artists of the Zero Group and, subsequently, in the international Fluxus movement.

But there was a difference. The American practitioners of post-metaphysical art were solidly centered around the theme of degradation. Acknowledgment of the market, and of desire in itself as the fungible commodity, the blank check underlying all exchange value, led to a mixing of high and low, elite and popular, spiritual and material. In Europe it was less





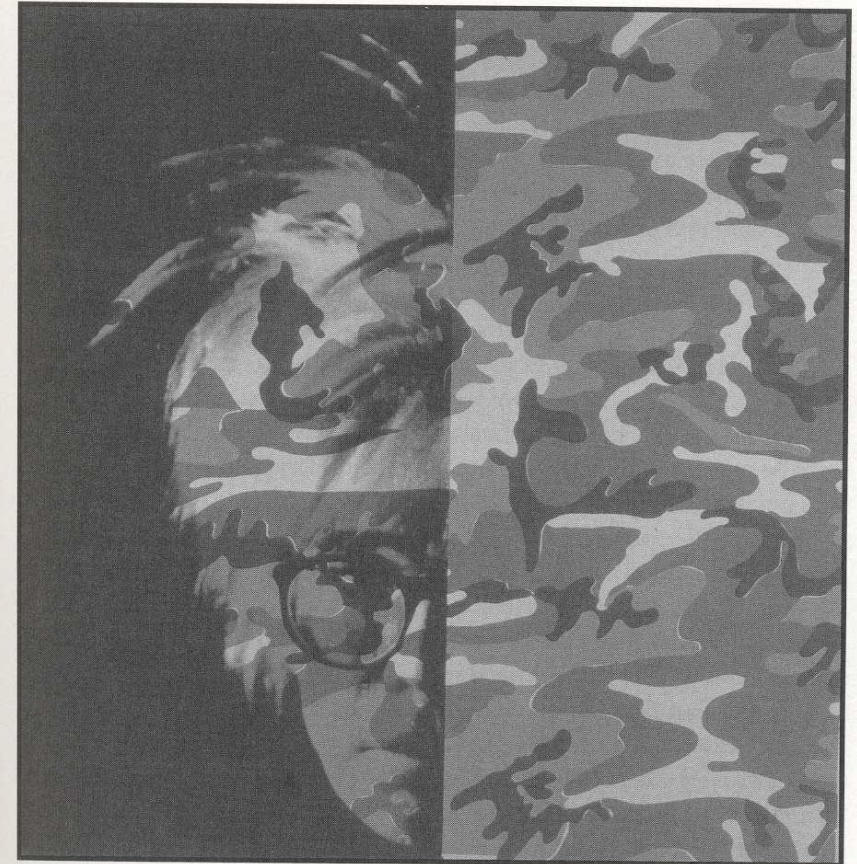
ANDY WARHOL,  
*Joseph Beuys*, 1986.  
Synthetic polymer  
paint and silkscreen  
ink on canvas  
100×80".

ANDY WARHOL,  
*Self-Portrait*, 1986.  
Synthetic polymer  
paint and silkscreen  
on canvas, 80×80".

easy to let go of the spiritual heritage. A commitment to the Kantian-Hegelian type of meaning remains widely in place.

As the art-historiographic web has unwound itself in the last generation, Beuys (for Europe) and Warhol (for America) have become the principal performative symbols of differing approaches to the relationship between art and spirituality. Beuys remained committed to the idea of the spiritual in art, and Warhol was uncompromisingly against it from the beginning. Beuys has come to represent a celebration of a deep pre-Modernist tradition of Old European spirituality. Warhol seems to celebrate the shallower tradition of American capitalist commodification. Yet both were engaged, from different angles, in the project of dismantling the Kantian, formalist heritage.

For Beuys the way to regain spirituality was embodied in his performance gestures of regressing into pre-Modernist forms of life, thought, and action. He was moved by a feeling similar—whether or not there was actual



influence—to Theodor Adorno's pronouncement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is obscene". Extending this dictum to the visual arts meant that the making of pretty paintings was obscene. Beuys set out to find ways to make art after Auschwitz which acknowledged it honestly and thus were not obscene. Still, he was not naked and direct about it, but dealt in parables and suggestions.

For Warhol, however, the project of writing poetry—or making pretty pictures in the old sense—seemed obscene absolutely, at any time and in any place. Warhol characteristically accepted the War, the Holocaust, all the horrors of Late Modernism, with equanimity. The *Double Silver Disaster*, 1963, with the electric chair ironically elevated as the throne of heaven, is a sign of a deep cynicism which Beuys did not share. Beuys's answer to the



*Double Silver Disaster* was articulated repeatedly in his regression works. His empty felt suits suggest that the problems of recent civilization will require a reconceived humanity to resolve them.

Beuys's blackboard works (such as *3 Tafeln*, 1978) point to the idea of the artist as a teacher who can suggest a direction toward this new humanity. They embody a desire to teach, which implies a hunch that salvation is somehow still obtainable. Even though they often appear to have been thrown about on the floor as if the class had ended in failure—or perhaps had culminated in the dissolution of the old ways into a fruitful chaos—still the urge to correct and improve is there. Warhol had no such urge. In fact, he seemed to take a perverse glee in the acknowledgement of the horror of modern life. While Beuys devoutly desired some resolution to the horror, Warhol celebrated it coldly and casually, as if it were all, after all, that could have been expected of the human species. There is a reversed electrical charge in their relationships to the idea of spirituality. Beuys saw in it ennoblement, Warhol degradation.

A bottom line about an artist's intentionality is the list of materials he or she uses. In the cases of these two artists, the usual inverted inflections arise. Warhol showed no sentimental commitment to materials. His most characteristic mode, the silkscreen, was ideologically significant only through its introduction of photography into the painting process—its dilution of the cult of the touch. Beuys's materials, however, were ideologically saturated. Many of them were based on a sense of antiquity, or primevalness. In one direction, this led into the theme of regression into nature—the use of natural substances such as beeswax and animal fat, or even of living animals, as in *Titus/Iphigenie*, 1969, in which Beuys performed on stage with a white horse, and *Coyote: "I like America and America likes Me"*, 1974, in which he lived in a gallery space with a coyote for several days. The choice of materials was an aspect of Beuys's orientation towards pre-Modernism and his sense that a close identification with nature might be redemptive in terms of the overwhelming problems of history and civilization. It is in this respect that it has often been said that Beuys adopted the role of shaman in relation to his culture, attempting to heal it of its grievous ills through ritual and reidentification with the ground of being. The many fat, felt and battery works express this urge.

Beuys's apparent identification with the shamanic role extended beyond general themes to detailed articulations. From early on he adopted, or was directed toward, a particular shamanic ally—a non-human species with which he felt a bond through which natural power might flow. The first

was the honey bee, adopted in *Queen Bee*, a series of sculptures begun in 1947, shortly after his return from the Second World War. Subsequently, he extended and focused his shamanic realm, emphasizing over a long period the hare and the stag as his animal allies. In the famous performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965, he presumed to speak the language of the animal ally—as Siegfried had known the language of birds, and as shamans the world over inaugurate their performances by summoning their bird or animal allies in the allies' own language. Beuys's performances with the white horse and the coyote were related incidents of shamanic communication with the non-human.

A famous biographical incident also contributed to Beuys's selection of motifs and materials. In 1943, while a pilot in the Luftwaffe, he was shot down over the Crimea in winter and, according to his account, almost froze to death. Again according to his account, he was taken in by a clan of semi-primitive Tartar tribespeople who restored him to health, at the same time showing him the way out of civilization into nature. Stripping him, covering his body with animal fat, and wrapping him mummy-like in a felt material, they made of him a kind of human battery which could generate, contain, and reuse its own heat and energy. The truth of this episode and Beuys's account of it have been called into question, but in any case this saga became a foundation of his work for decades, beginning in 1964 with *Fat Chair*. Felt and fat became his signature materials, informing works such as *The Pack*, 1969 (sleds equipped with felt and fat), *The Chief* (in which he himself was rolled up in felt), and *Iphigenie* (in which he chewed lumps of animal fat and spat them onto the stage). His corner-sited sculptures based on the process of filtration (which circumvented the problem of the ideological pollution of both the wall and the floor) featured fat and felt, as did numerous other works based on ideas of filtration and battery accumulation. Beuys's massive oeuvre was shot through with the conflated themes of the near-death experience, the salvation through tribal culture, and the shamanic identification with animal species and substances.

By contrast, Warhol conspicuously did not use natural substances as art materials. The principal exception—the *Oxidation Paintings*, 1978 onwards, made by urinating onto canvases covered with metal paint which would then rust—was not so much an appeal to redemption through nature as a gesture of contempt for the tradition of Action Painting, in which Pollock and others spoke of the paint flung on the canvas as virtually a bodily fluid wrenched out of themselves in the creative process. Warhol's materials were mostly traditional art materials: photography, silkscreen, and overpainting.



He usually avoided oil on canvas for much the same reasons as Beuys; but his silkscreen works are nevertheless rectangles of images hung on the wall, like easel paintings or advertisements. Rather than totally avoiding the association, as Beuys had tried to do through his practice of sculpture and performance, Warhol infiltrated it and attempted to rob it of legitimacy from within.

In Warhol's career there was also an iconic moment which directed his work for decades—which might be suggested as an analogue of Beuys's fat and felt salvation story. When Warhol was a window decorator at Bonwit Teller in New York City, employing silkscreen imagery among other tools of the trade, he expressed to a friend the desire to become a legitimate painter, but said he didn't know what to paint. According to the legend, his friend replied, "Paint something you like." So he painted a United States dollar or rather, silkscreened it. As usual, the gesture was doubly pregnant with meaning. On the one hand, it has come to be seen as an early critique of capitalist commodification of the artwork. On the other, it was a simple homage to money and the power it brings—an icon of unmediated desire. It shows Warhol's peculiar dedication to truth, and his matter-of-fact acknowledgment of it.

This primal Warholian work involved a disavowal of all spiritual claims about the nature of the art experience, both the Modern and the pre-Modern. It made no obeisance to either metaphysics or nature, but insisted on the sole reality of culture, no matter how corrupt and degenerate it might seem. In fact, it altogether disavowed ideas such as corruption and degeneracy in favor of a simple acceptance of what might be called the facts of life.

Granting the differences between their cultures, Warhol, like Beuys, has come to be regarded as a shamanistic figure. But these cultural differences are very important. Warhol's shaman-like, or iconic, leadership conformed to an American (not Native American) pattern. His tribe was that of the United States, and he was sensing the future of his tribe under a new fetish. Both he and Beuys had somewhat outlandish faked appearances and personas which mimicked the outrageous behavior of shamans—the profession which the historian of religion Mircea Eliade has called an essentially psychotic role.

Indeed, much of Warhol's subsequent work can be seen as the presentation of new fetish objects to the other members of his tribe, from the Campbell's soup cans to the Brillo boxes to the silkscreened portraits of iconic figures. With his weird retinue of sexually ambiguous exhibitionists, Warhol traveled through the American art world like a stoned, spaced-out

Dionysus. In *The Bacchae*, the ancient Greek play by Euripides, when Dionysus walked by a jail the roof blew off and the walls fell out, releasing the prisoners. There could be no confinement of anyone within the field of his aura. In a limited sense Warhol's was a parallel role. He freed American art from its bondage to the metaphysical imperatives of the Kantian tradition.

As always, the nature of the shamanic roles played by these two avatars was very different in intention. Beuys sought to show a way out of civilization and its discontents; by his unimpassioned acceptance Warhol stressed them as the only available options. Both artists acted out partially didactic roles—indicated in Beuys's case most obviously by the blackboard works, and in Warhol's by his leading of American culture through a review of everything that it already knew, as if to see it for the first time. But the lessons they were inculcating were very different.

Finally, in analyzing this relationship, one has to acknowledge the fact that Germany and the United States fought on opposing sides in two world wars during the last century. In the massively influential oeuvres of Beuys and Warhol one can glimpse the traces of the foundational causes of these conflicts. Beuys's oeuvre, however enlightened its intentions, re-embodied the atavistic blood-and-soil tradition going back to Tacitus's *Germania*. Warhol's oeuvre, however anti-enlightenment its intention, embodies the stark reality of the enlightenment's entanglement with capitalism and its system of alienation. While parallel figures—each semi-regal, really, in his own tradition—they approached reality from opposite directions, one pointing hopefully backward, the other pointing bleakly forward.

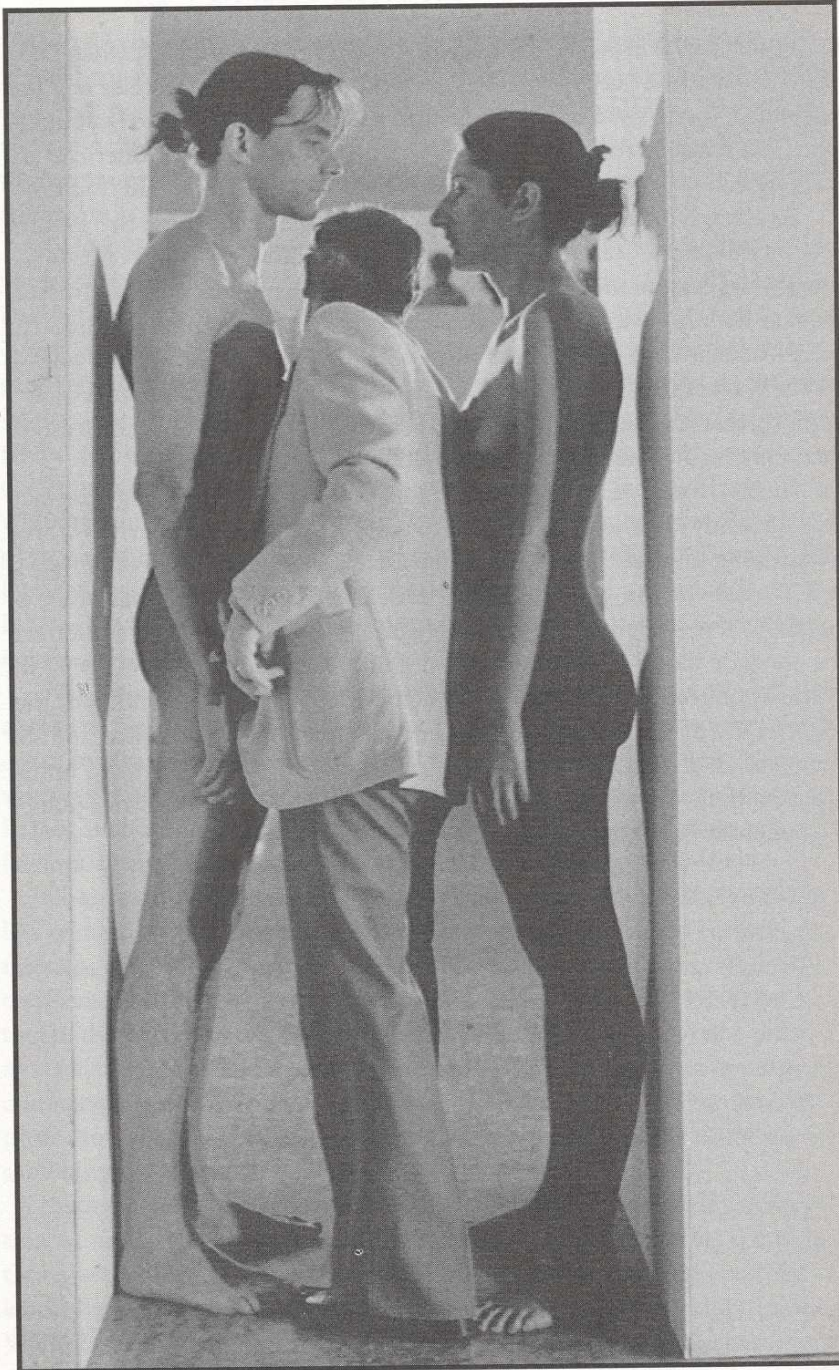


## Marina Abramovic / Ulay

### *Ulay / Marina Abramovic*

MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND FRANK UWE LAYSIEPEN (ULAY) MET IN Amsterdam in 1975 and recognized each other as Tantric collaborators.<sup>1</sup> In Tibetan Buddhist lore, which along with theosophy and alchemy had influenced them both, the recognition of a karmic acquaintance is a natural experience, not something unlikely or bizarre. Born on the same date (though he is three years older), Marina and Ulay, as they are usually referred to, exhibited remarkable similarities of physiognomy, personal style, and life-purpose. After that meeting they entered an artistic collaboration that lasted for twelve years and emphasized mediations and balancings of the male and female principles. Previously, each of them had done work that cut away the conventional shapes of the self; painfully at times, they had created the inner openness through which Tantric processes are said to operate.

Marina Abramovic's early work had publicly confronted the fears that arise from identification of the self with the body. She bears the scars of premeditated self-investigation with the knife. An early work, *Rhythm 0*, occurred in Naples, 1974. At an evening performance Marina was presented to an audience as a totally passive object. Near her was a table covered with instruments of pleasure and pain—from rose petals to razor blades. For six hours, the audience was told, Marina would not exert her own will. The piece was a classic of passive provocation. It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arm into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in



MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Imponderabilia*, 1977.  
Performance at Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna



the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina's head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions. Perilously, Marina completed the six hours.

The piece synthesized, in a form as simple and dynamic as, say, the lighting of a match, leading themes and questions of the time: the use of the art event as an instrument of both social and psychological criticism, the breaching of the proscenium arch to force the audience to relate to the work in extra-aesthetic ways, the expression of a life-and-death commitment to a process out of one's own control, the substitution of the artist's person for his or her work, and so on.

Ulay's work prior to their collaboration was equally uncompromising in its confrontation with the problem of selfhood; his own self-image was the art material he manipulated. For two years he dressed as a female and entered the social milieu of transvestites and transsexuals. For another year he presented himself as mentally defective and sought out the company of people with extreme physical abnormalities, miming their self-image to erode his own. The photodocumentation of these activities was both rigorously carried out and withheld from exhibition, as part of the piece.

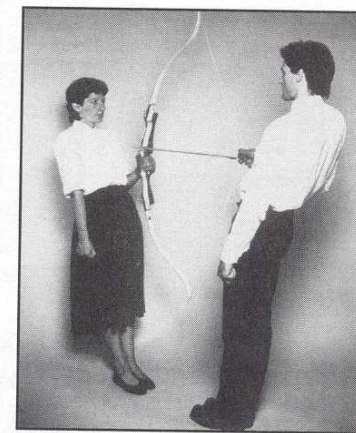
Ulay's first public exhibition, at De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam in 1975, shortly before he met Marina, synthesized these years of self-study in the theme he calls "photodeath," which used photographic technology to emphasize the transience of human selfhood. Nine photographs of Ulay in a wooded environment were prepared. In the first he was foregrounded and the environment was not seen. For each of the following eight, he retreated nine paces from the camera, at last disappearing totally into the environment. Unfixed prints of these photographs, each one meter square, were hung in the darkened gallery. When the visitors at the opening had been admitted to the darkened space a bright halogen lamp was switched on. As the viewers gazed at them, the photographs of Ulay darkened quickly to black, the process taking about 15 seconds. The viewers' reactions were photodocumented. With this event the gallery closed for the summer. When it opened in the fall, the same black squares hung in the same darkened room; but now the room also held a table with a photo album and a reading lamp on it. The album contained unfixed prints of the photodocumentation of the previous event. Responding to the invitation implicit in the environment, visitors switched on the lamp, leafed through the album, and found these pictures, of themselves in a previous time looking at darkening pictures, also darkening quickly to black.

In the same year Ulay began giving public performances. One was a

self-and-double piece which perhaps presages the recognition-meeting with Marina. Two mirrors were cut into the size and shape of his body. One was attached to him as he stood upright with the mirror reflecting the viewers, the other lay on the floor at his feet like a shadow. After standing motionless for about an hour he fell flat forward, the mirrors shattering on impact.

Starting in 1976, Marina and Ulay collaborated on the series of important performances called Relation Works. In line with their tantric and theosophical studies, these were, on one level, mystical-philosophical approaches to the concept of the two-in-one, the mutual dependence of opposites—even, the interchangeability of opposing forces. This type of thought was a prominent approach to world-modeling in ancient Neolithic and Early Bronze Age religions, as in much classical Greek and Indian thought, and has left its trace everywhere in the occult traditions of the West. In different contexts, duality has been imaged as male and female, solar and lunar, light and dark, subject and object, and so on. Marina and Ulay's innate quality as male and female doubles or complements, as well as the scattered parts of mystical lore each had imbibed, produced the Relation Works as with a kind of inevitability. Aesthetically, these works combine simplicity of form with subtle and complex ramifications of content. Characteristically minimal, they yet combine several genres. In a sense they are performance; but in another sense their proper art historical context would be iconography. They are symbolic rites and actual ordeals; they are theater that uses architecture as a material. They are like cartoons of the alchemical Great Work.

In *Rest-Energy*, 1980, Marina held a bow, Ulay the arrow, notched to the string and aimed at her heart; both leaned back in a relaxed tension and stood motionless. The life-and-death intensity of the male-female relationship seemed to carry a potential for both physical and Tantric types of death and rebirth. Ideas of sexual intercourse as a death—the wound and the spear—from Paleolithic walls to the psychoanalytic couch, are involved. In *Witnessing*, 1981, the pointing went the other way. Ulay sat motionless for several hours on the floor while Marina, standing on a raised platform, pointed at him with outstretched arm. Visitors saw this primal



MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Rest-Energy*, 1980. Performance at the National Gallery of Ireland,





MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Relation in Movement*, 1977.  
Performance at 10th Biennale de Paris, Musée moderne de la ville de Paris.

duality of subject and object as a motionless monument in the midst of a process of change; first washed in rich afternoon light, the two continued immobile until darkness had filled the room, and for some time after. For *Relation in Movement*, 1977, they had been assigned a space in the Paris Biennale, a square, cobblestoned outdoor courtyard. Bringing into the space the car in which they lived, Ulay drove for 16 hours in a counterclockwise circle; Marina, sitting in the passenger seat, counted off the revolutions (2,226). The inscribing, through a massive form of Action Painting or action sculpture, of a circle in the assigned square produced a primary shape performance print. Like all the Relation Works, it was a cosmogram, or metaphysical picture, based on the kinds of ancient thought that became the permanent underpinnings of the occult schools, such as Aristotle's teaching that all eternal things move in circles.

Aside from the aesthetic simplicity and the clean philosophical expressiveness of these works, they involve an architectural or architectonic choreography. The arrangements and movements of the artists' bodies are formalized in relation to the large classical spaces in which they usually perform. Some pieces have involved running and colliding in predetermined architecturally ordered ways; others have introduced random principles of movement that interact graphically with the architecture; still others have

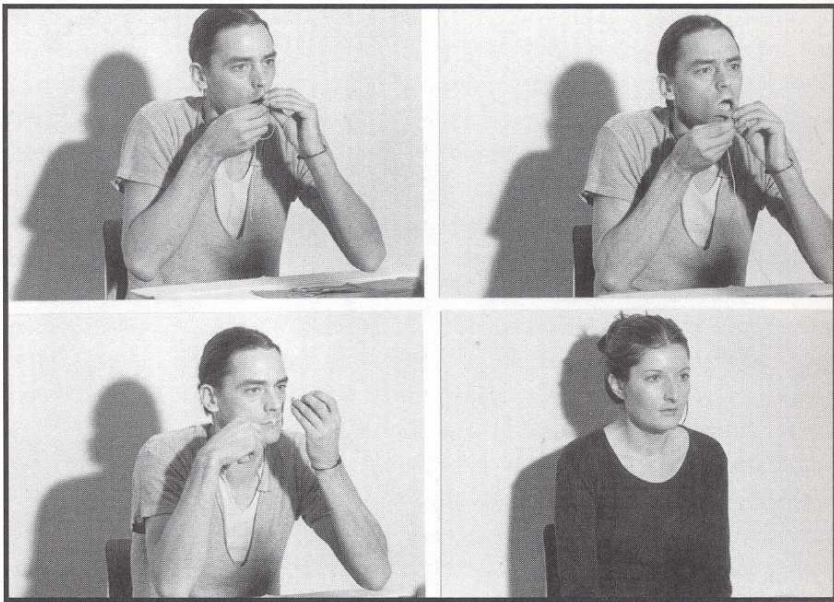


MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Relation in Space*, 1976. Venice Biennale.



stressed the monumentality of a place by their assuming an immobile iconic pose at a central point or axis. In *Three*, 1978, Marina and Ulay and a snake triangulated the space until sounds that Ulay and Marina produced by blowing across the mouths of bottles roused the snake to alter the geometry of the arrangement. In *...Stop...Back...Stop*, 1979, Ulay moved about a vast interior space in response to commands announced unpredictably by his own voice on audiotape, while Marina, seated near the center of the large arena, removed bits of swansdown from a pillow and counted them out one by one as she dropped them onto the floor. Such icon-like pieces turn architectural interiors into quasi-cosmic spaces in which seemingly primal movements cut the unhewn volume into primal differentiations; the cabalistic Zim-zum, a primal space rich in potentiality but as yet unformed, acquires inner shape as duality dramas transpire like dances of sun and moon in the original sky. The space becomes a “center,” as Mircea Eliade put it, which ritually links to the primal moment, overleaping its historical past.

Other Relation Works involved elements of Body Art. Ulay and Marina once, for example, sat crosslegged on a small platform in front of a seated audience. After a while one of them, when he or she felt, for whatever reason, that the moment had come, slapped the other in the face, as hard as possible.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Talking about Similarity*, 1976



MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Light/Dark*, 1977.  
Performance, Messegelände, Cologne.

The victim took the blow, assimilated it in silence for a while, then, when he or she felt that the moment had come, hauled off and struck back. Again a long silent wait, another blow, another wait, another blow. This went on till one of them failed to strike back for a long time, whereupon the other got up and walked off, followed by the partner. It lasted about 40 minutes and is said to have been hard on the audience.

In *Talking about Similarity*, 1976, the pair entered the performance space and took their seats behind a table facing a seated audience. Ulay produced a needle and thread and, without a word, proceeded to sew his lips shut. Meanwhile, Marina addressed the audience, saying that they should ask questions of Ulay, and Marina would divine his intended answers telepathically and answer for him. If she felt that she had faked an answer rather than genuinely getting it from him, she would get up and walk out; he would walk out with her. Again it lasted about 40 minutes.

As the Relation Works went on, the theme of immobility became increasingly pervasive. In *Relation in Time*, 1977, the two sat motionless back to back for 16 hours, tied together by their hair. (“Hair is a kind of antenna, like air roots of trees,” Ulay says.) The audience was admitted to watch the 17th and final hour of motionlessness. What was being exhibited in the immobility pieces was not a wax-works; it was the inner life transpiring invisibly within the immobile body that was the object exhibited—“some-

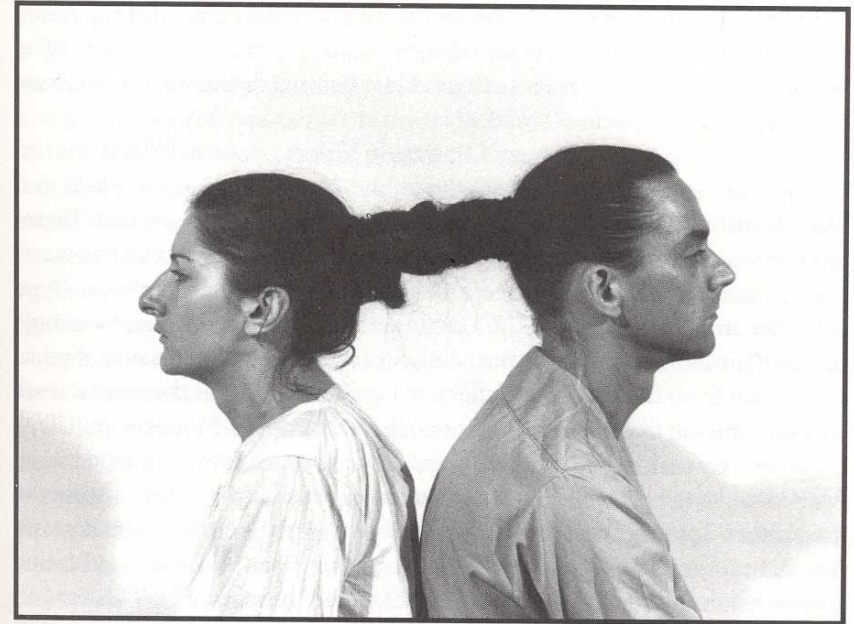


thing that comes into being but remains invisible,” as Marina and Ulay have described the intended subject of their work.<sup>2</sup> This inner life was not a matter of daydreams or trances; like Buddhist *vipassana* meditators, Ulay and Marina strove, in their immobility performances, to keep their attention alert upon the present moment as it unfolded around and within them.

In 1980, Ulay and Marina went into the Central Australian desert, approached aboriginal tribespeople and found them uncommunicative. They established a separate campsite and lived for three months in isolation in the summer heat. The desert became their teacher—and what it taught, they increasingly perceived, was immobility, silence, and watchfulness. “In the desert one thinks ten times before moving,” Marina says. “The company of a lizard is enough—to watch its throat pulsing,” says Ulay. For several weeks they sat silent and motionless not merely for a few hours on one day, as in previous *Relation Works*, but for the greater part of every day. Anyone who has practiced prolonged silent immobility knows the excruciating discomfort of it—not merely the discomfort of the body when it is not moved, but the dreamlike discomfort of where one goes when one sits still; there is not an unhappy spot of one’s own character, not a weakness of the will, not a hidden corner of the personality that one is not forced to scrutinize with uncanny clarity and at nightmarish length. This is a dark journey that one does not see the end of when embarking upon it, because one will not be the same person at the end. “Motionlessness,” says Ulay, “is the best thing I have done. It synthesizes everything. It is the homework.” After three months of learning from the desert, Marina and Ulay found the aborigines communicative.

Back in Sydney they began the major performance piece *Nightsea Crossing*. For sixteen days they sat publicly, for a seven-hour period each day, gazing motionlessly at each other across a table; for the same period they fasted and maintained silence 24 hours. Such conditions enforce a drama of their own, as the boredom and stress of sensory deprivation intermix with periods of bright clarity that may seem charged with higher meaning. This drama was presented in subsequent performances in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Kassel (at Documenta 7), Toronto, and elsewhere. When the total of days spent in public immobility reached 90, *Nightsea Crossing* was over as a performance.

People have sat, and been silent, and others have watched them sit, and be silent, since, no doubt, Australopithecine evenings. The implications of such activity vary with context. Pilgrims still climb to certain Himalayan caves to watch yogis sit silent. Southern Buddhist lore includes definitions



MARINA ABRAMOVIC AND ULAY, *Relation in Time*, 1977

of 23 kinds of silence. The late Sankaracarya of the Vedantin order of India maintained *mowna*, or religious silence, for the last several decades of his life; in context, this was appreciated as a communicative gesture. Yet our culture at large has not provided a context in which such gestures can function as communication, and has often regarded them as solipsistic. In *Nightsea Crossing*, Marina and Ulay functioned as champions of the rich communication of silence.

*Nightsea Crossing* is not, however, to be regarded strictly as a work of Endurance Art featuring silence and immobility. Always, the architecture was important, and grand classical forms were preferred; the event is understood as transpiring very much within the space of a building, held by it, contained by it—the whole building is a space that the work must relate to. One changing element of design is clothing color; each always wore a solid color, the combinations varying for each event. The tables at which they sat are serious design objects, created with shamanic attention to materials, numerological relationships, and so forth. In the center of the table some object was placed, to serve as both a visual focus and a symbolic center. In Sydney it was an aboriginal boomerang with a living snake coiled around



it; the snake remained on the table, more or less in the center, for the entire piece. At Documenta 7, various objects—four boomerangs, a sheaf of 13 golden spears, a water cooler with gold leaf floating in the water—were arranged about the spacious room.

The first episode of *Nightsea Crossing*, in Sydney, was carried out with no barrier separating the sitters from the public. Numerous interruptions that were disturbing to the rhythm of long concentration discouraged this. Thereafter, the audience was separated from the seated artists in various ways, and the settings in which they were viewed, seen from behind a theater-type rope, became like stagings. (The Documenta sitting is the clearest example of this.) The increasingly theatrical design, along with the increasing physical separation from the audience, reflected a gradual shift that the artists' work was undergoing in the direction known loosely as post-Modernism. Ulay's early private work negated the proscenium arch by avoiding the art context. Marina's, like the piece in Naples, constituted attacks on the arch, within the art context. Some of the Relation Works also denied the audience its separate world. In *Imponderabilia*, 1977, for example, Ulay and Marina stood facing each other, naked, in the narrow entrance to the museum. Every visitor had to brush between their bodies sideways and, in order to do so, had first to decide which of them to face. Most of the Relation Works, however, and especially the immobility pieces, found Ulay and Marina doing something and the audience watching them.

A subsequent work, *Positive Zero*, 1983, leapt behind the arch completely, being presented to the public on the ornate stage of the Theater Carré in Amsterdam. Nothing in *Positive Zero* was originated by the artists: here they showed not what they made but what made them. It was an ethnological collage of cultural found objects functioning both as homage and ritual celebration. *Positive Zero* arose from a collaboration among 30 or so participants, musicians and performers, who lived together in a Tibetan meditation center in the countryside near Amsterdam during the weeks in which the piece developed. The rural meditation center and the elegant urban theater were the two poles, inwardly and outwardly directed, of the experience. Two Australian aboriginal artists played the didjeridoo, an ancient shamanic instrument on which a variety of buzzing overtones can be attained; and six Tibetan lamas sang in their complex overtone style. Sound is an omnipresent example of "something that comes into being but remains invisible"; overtones are even more ghostly presences. *Positive Zero* saturated the audience with the mysterious hovering aura of the overtone series for an hour and a half. Meanwhile, the ten performers, accompanied by theatrical

lighting effects and changes, adopted immobile *tableaux vivants* upon the stage like a 3-D Tarot. In terms of occult and Tantric theory, sound reality produces image reality, according to the basic tuning of the Great Chain of Being. *Positive Zero* was an art-historically based intuitive approximation of this process. The sound aspect produced a stream of found elements from the whole sweep of cultural history. One saw Raphael's angels gazing at a megalithic pieta (Ulay motionless as if dead on Marina's lap), while Tarot images (the hoodwinked Two of Swords, the milling Eight of Staves) passed by. Certain parts of the piece, such as the presentation of immobile human figures in careful stagings, clearly derived from the earlier work. In other ways, however, *Positive Zero* was unusual, for the oeuvre, in its emphasis on sensuous expressiveness.

Ulay and Marina's period of collaboration occurred at a transitional moment in the development of Performance Art. By the time their collaboration began, post-Modernism was just beginning to make its inner dynamics clear. Their Relation Works occupy the turning point, with elements which hark back to anti-Modernist Body Art and forward to the more anonymous and communal Performance of post-Modernism. Their collaboration was one of the early instances of an attempt to quell the inflated egotism of Modernist individualism by burying one's own sensibility in a larger unit. Gilbert and George had been collaborating for a while already, but Marina and Ulay were the first major Performance couple consisting of a man and a woman. It was not only the clarity and precision of their work that has made them historic, but the social importance of their collaboration at the moment it occurred.

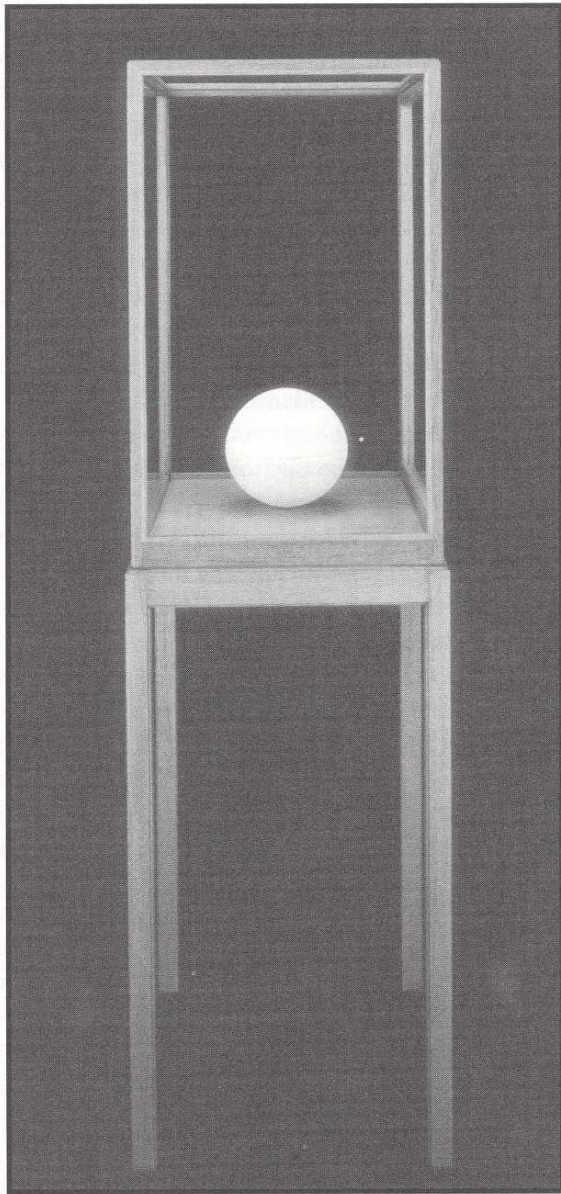
That collaboration ended, after twelve years, in 1988, following a massive piece in which they walked toward each other from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China till they met in the middle.<sup>3</sup>

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Marina and Ulay in this essay are taken from conversations with the author.

2. In a flyer distributed in connection with the work *Positive Zero*. Amsterdam, June 1983

3. For a detailed account see Thomas McEvelley, "Great Walk Talk," in Marina Abramovic, Ulay, and Thomas McEvelley, *The Lovers* (Amsterdam: The Stedelijk Museum, 1988).





JAMES LEE BYARS, *The Spherical Book*, 1989.  
Marble sphere in two halves, 8¼" diam.

## James Lee Byars *The Atmosphere of Question*

*"How does he question and how does he eat?"*<sup>1</sup>

IN APRIL 1969, THE GALLERY WIDE WHITE SPACE IN ANTWERP presented a month of continuously changing performance pieces by James Lee Byars. Byars himself was on display during the final week, seated in a Thonet chair in the all-white gallery, writing questions, enigmatic statements and fragments of autobiography on separate sheets of paper. Framed in his unusual personal brand of "abbrevé" English, these tiny word sculptures encapsulated enormous philosophical implications. When a visitor appeared, Byars would read aloud the last written question or statement and invite a response to it.

This text, known as *The Pink Book*, was later augmented and published under the additive title *100,000* (on the spine) and, over the first several pages, *100,000 Minutes* or *The Big Sample of Byars* or *½ an Autobiography* (he was 37 at the time, and the life expectancy of Americans was 74) or *The First Paper of Philosophy* (each phrase on a separate page). Some of the pages contain involuted metaphysical koans with a tendency to reject ontology ("Is is?"), to cast doubt on knowledge ("Judgment is impossible") and to focus on the intentionality of questioning and its ability to "create" new objects ("If you ask for something which doesn't exist, you deserve it on the intelligence of the request"). Others are apparently cryptic autobiographical questions ("I may be Ze-ami's ghost?") and statements ("His head weighs twenty-five pounds"), which bring into focus basic philosophical loci such as the problem of identity, the mind-body problem, etc.

The overriding theme that increasingly dominated Byars's work in the '70s was philosophical doubt. Byars's sensitivity to the problem of knowledge, increasing over decades, led him to posit, as an art object or the basis for a series of art objects, the primacy of the question over the answer. The self-sufficient question stood in his work as a symbol of indeterminacy, open-



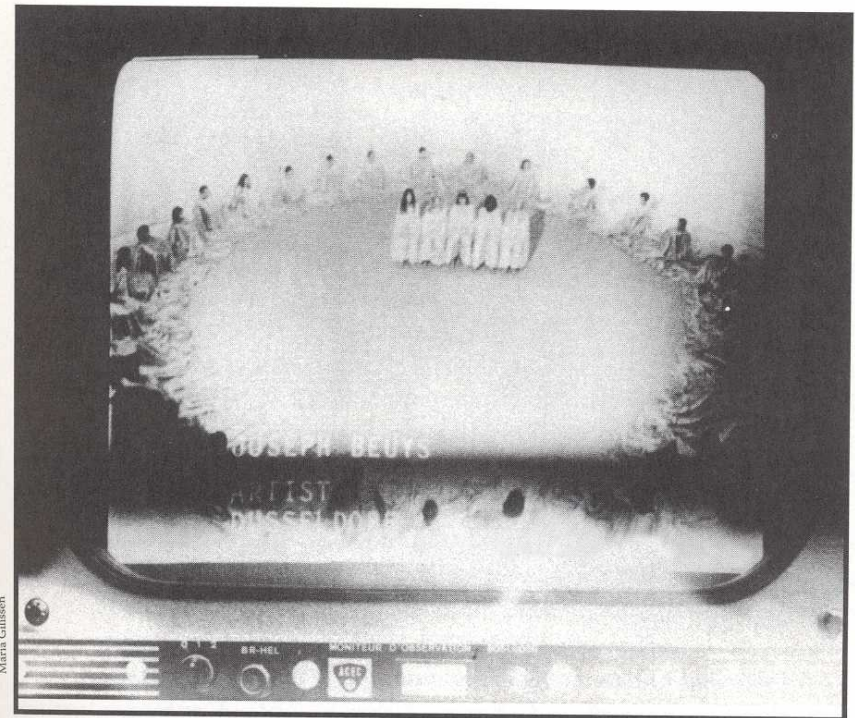
ness to the universe, freedom from the enclosing and restricting anxiety of the answer. For Byars, adding a question mark to any statement infuses it with life and moves into the realm of art or poetry. In his work the question mark functions as an analogue of the unfettered potentiality of the zero. Each discloses an empty space where any of life's infinite forms is invited to arise.

If, as Schelling said, art is the embodiment of an infinite contradiction in a finite product,<sup>2</sup> then an artwork is itself a pure interrogative, a question whose "answer" is the dissolution of one's accustomed identity. The facts of asking and requesting, in turn, when performed as open invitations to the universe to express itself, acquire the mystery and creative force of art. This process is infolded toward infinite regress in the activity of *requesting questions*.

In May 1969, Byars went from Antwerp to Oxford and spent a week of sculpted encounters requesting questions from the dons and finding that they were much more comfortable giving answers than questions—that, in fact, in this environment, the question apart from the answer was, as William James said, no question at all. That was precisely the problem: Byars had located a blind spot in attention. When one is asked a question, one immediately expends calories: the urgency of finding the answer becomes work. The question is not appreciated as an object in itself, but immediately forces a departure toward an answer; so an open, inquisitive stance is at once backgrounded behind a claim to knowledge.

Some two weeks after the Antwerp show, Byars was installed in the Hudson Institute, a private think-tank for "futurology" run by Herman Kahn at Croton-on-Hudson, about 30 miles north of New York City. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art had arranged the encounter as part of its "Art and Technology" program. For two or three weeks he lived at the institute, and for several weeks more commuted to it from New York City. The core of this piece was a search for "the one hundred most interesting questions in America at this time." Byars soon extended this to Europe and named it the "World Question Center." He contacted staff members at the institute, and telephoned prominent scientists and academics elsewhere, asking them not for answers but for questions.

Again he found that he had intruded in usually uninspected psychological spaces. So overwhelming was the dominance of the notion of answer that the request for questions caused anxiety. Most of the Hudson staff responded coolly; Herman Kahn, who was supportive of Byars, nevertheless described Byars's presence as "theoretically subversive of the goal" of good organization. Scientists and scholars contacted by telephone were both



Marian Gillissen

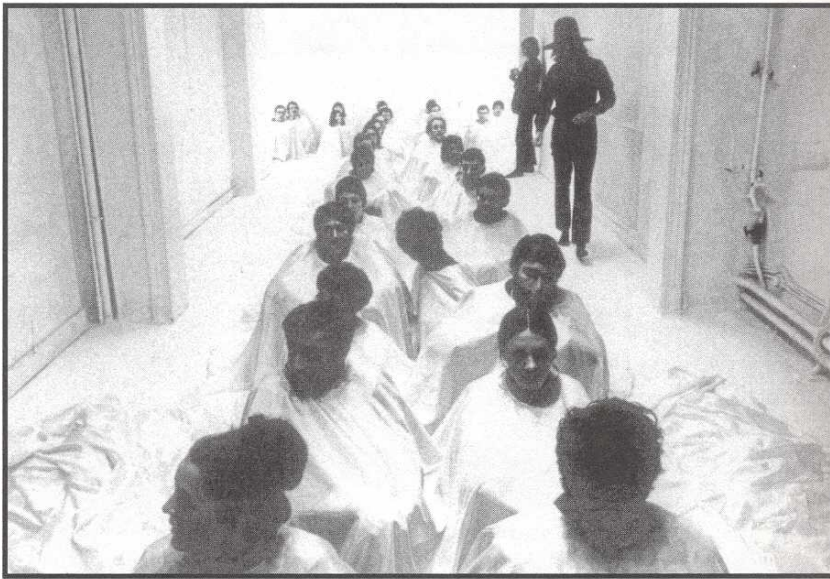
JAMES LEE BYARS, *World Question Center*, 1969. Broadcast on Belgian television from Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp.

confused and wary. Marshall McLuhan's "What do you mean, questions?" was a typical response. Alvin Weinberg, director of the Atomic Energy Commission, thought about it for a while, then asked, almost in good Byars-speak: "Axiology?"<sup>3</sup>

In November, the World Question Center was put on Belgian television. Byars, in a pink suit, with 50 students from the University of Brussels acting as "operators," telephoned people in Europe and the United States who had been forewarned of the event without being told that they would be asked for questions rather than answers. Ninety minutes of confused pauses followed, as the impenetrability of pure question held sway, and the event itself became a crowning question mark.

The following year, the Hudson Institute published a selection of 100 of the questions gathered by the World Question Center, in the form, specified by Byars, of an edible book printed on paper used in espionage. *The Edible Book of 100 Questions* presented questions both as secret, or contraband—





JAMES LEE BYARS, *Pink Silk Airplane for 100*, 1969.  
Performance at Wide White Space Gallery, Antwerp.

something spies are after—and as nourishment, indeed, as human nature, able to pass directly into the organism and constitute its substance.

The most piquant entries were usually Byars' own. These might pursue shifting cultural strata (*"Which questions have disappeared?"*), or confront the reader with the intimacy of question (*"Do you have an affection for question?"*), or posit question itself as a noematic object (*"Imagine the palpability of question?"*), or question the function of language (*"Is all speech interrogative?"*), or hint of a therapy (*"The question is the answer?"*), or present human identity itself as a question mark (*"Make a question as your autobiography?"*). The theme of macranthropology (familiar from Byars' earlier "plural clothes" and "giant" pieces) reappeared (*"I am the complete history of the world?"*), alongside dialectical implications of an infinite regress of question (*"This question is able to question itself?"*) and, finally, the interrogative re-casting of the artist's activity (*"Question is Big Art?"*). The themes of imagination and question mingle in the most tenuous of interrogatives: *"Is there an imaginary question?"*; *"The ghost of question?"*

*The Pink Book* and *The Edible Book* were the first of a series of "Byars-books" in which his distinctive "abbreviate" speech (*"Every word is a poem"*) compresses semantic fields into microdots of interrogation (*"Do?"*) and

shades the human being as an open question. These "Booksculptures," as Reiner Speck has called them, are among Byars's most characteristic products. In 1970 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art published the *One Page Black Book of 100 Questions*—tiny gold letters on black tissue paper, print of the smallest size that can be read without magnification by a person with 20/20 vision. In 1977 many of these linguistic "microdots," along with some newer ones, appeared as the *100 One Page Books* in Basel: each book, bound in black silk, contains, on black tissue paper in tiny gold letters, one question or question-related statement; at the opening, Byars, dressed in black suit, hat and gloves, opened and read each book.

The following year, the Bern Kunsthalle showed the *100 One Page Stone Books*, each comprising a round piece of tissue paper with one question or statement on it, placed between two thin, circular stone covers. *The Spherical Book*, 1979, capped the series: a selection of the interrogative semantic "microdots" on a single round piece of tissue paper, between two hemispherical stone covers, the resultant sphere approximately the size of the artist's head (*"His head weighs twenty-five pounds"*). The spherical universe of Parmenides and Plato was equated, à la Robert Fludd, with the human brainpan, both seen as containers of pure question.

The ongoing question of question reverberated out through Byars's sensitive mechanism in various forms. In 1962 he *"gave away 10,000 clear bags of air with tiny printed ? marks in each."* In 1972 he released, from the roof ledge of the New York Public Library, a thousand one-inch paper squares with "0?" on them. Later that year he went to the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, seeking questions, and again found the concept of question as end in itself regarded with suspicion. In Paris, Byars exhibited *What*, shouting the word *"faster than the speed of sound"* from one block away directly at the gallery. This unmitigated interrogative was then offered for sale: no object or documentation at all was involved. In 1977 the Marion Goodman Gallery in New York showed *The First Totally Interrogative Philosophy* (a correlate of the "presuppositionless" philosophy of the Pyrrhonists and phenomenologists): a golden chair is concealed inside a silken tent; as a visitor approaches, Byars whispers (in "abbreviate") "Hear the Fi' To' In' Ph," pulls aside the tent flap and shines a flashlight on the golden chair. The empty chair, around which the First Totally Interrogative Philosophy was to be heard in the air, sat there regal and mute, like the empty throne of the Buddha, or the empty chair of the ghost in Shinto rituals.

At times, this activity has focused on the "problem of identity" (*"Question takes name away"*). The mode of existence as *open question* suggests transcen-

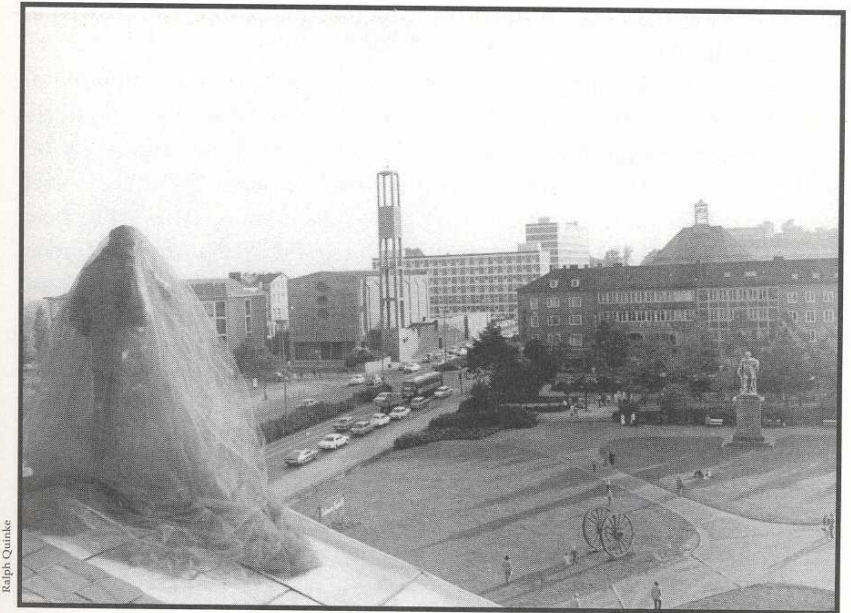


dence of individual answer-boundaries and self-definitions. Documenta V, 1972, opened with the photographing of Byars, in white suit and hat, standing with his back to the camera in the pediment of the Museum Fredericianum; on successive days, from the top of that building and related public monuments, trees, and statues, wrapped in gauze and silks like a Noh ghost, he shouted common German names down to the street through a megaphone. "Hans! Greta!" Passersby experienced their names as mighty summonses from the sky. They responded with the arrested gaze of open question.

*"Think yourself away."*

BYARS WAS CONCERNED WITH A MENTAL STYLE IN ART. MUCH OF his work involves the posing of philosophical questions and enigmatic statements as art objects, therapeutic devices, or simply mental objects worth contemplating. Rudolf Carnap said that the appeal of philosophical arguments is primarily aesthetic, yet the idea has rarely been adopted as an aspect of art activity proper. Like John Cage, George Maciunas, LaMonte Young, the Black Mountain group, and others, Byars was influenced by Eastern thought in the '50s and '60s. His idolatry of question is in the line of such iconic moments of skepticism as the Jain *syadvada* ("Maybe is what I know"), and the "Tropes" of Aenesidemus as well as the phenomenological reduction of Edmund Husserl and Ludwig Wittgenstein's desire to "get the fly out of the fly-bottle." Byars' reluctance to make physical art objects except out of the most perishable materials (tissue paper, silk, gold leaf, crumbly kinds of stone) responds to the primacy of the delicately constituted mental object. ("In 1964 I sold just the idea of a work of art.")

In 1969, *The Ghost of James Lee Byars* was exhibited in an apparently empty gallery in the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle. The viewer who looks into the room as empty room sees one thing; the visitor who looks into the room as container of ghost sees another. "What's a thing?", as a Byars question wonders. Moves in a language game, it seems, have altered reality in the life-world. (So keenly aware is Byars of this "creative" power of language that "He calls all his sentences 'Mr.')" As Husserl said, "The thing as strictly experienced gives the mere 'this,' an empty X."<sup>4</sup> This empty X is filled up through a summons to habitual systems of categories and distinctions. For Byars, Husserl's "Back to the things themselves" means a return to the empty X as an unanswered question that invites the subject into an indeterminacy where his own boundaries disappear. "To ask is enough," as Martin Heidegger said. The question is not an intolerable uncertainty that must be set straight by enforcing on its openness some recognizable hermeneutical



Ralph Quinke

JAMES LEE BYARS, *Calling German Names*, 1972.  
Performance at Documenta V, Kassel, Germany.



JAMES LEE BYARS, *The Perfect Epitaph*, 1975. Performance, Bern, Switzerland.



grid. Asking is the creative function. The question is free; the answer, an attempt to bind it.

"Information is undifferentiated at discovery," Byars wrote while on display in Antwerp, a remark in parallel with Husserl's definition of the thing-as-strictly-experienced as an empty X. The attitude extends far behind Husserl into the Pyrrhonist and Buddhist traditions. "Nothing in itself is either this or that," wrote Sextus Empiricus—that is, until it has been interpreted/created as a this or a that. "In the final truth," wrote the Tibetan Buddhist Tilopa, "there is neither this nor that." "Things," wrote Seng Chao of the Chinese Three-treatise School, "are neither this nor that."<sup>5</sup> Individual object-identities are, say the Prajnaparamita texts, "Like a dream, like a vision, like a bubble, like a shadow, like dew, like lightning"—a phrase that Byars adopted as his "eighth name."

Byars's works shift into the immaterial and hypothetical as a strategy for avoiding the claustrophobic object-identity of the physical artwork, meanwhile subverting viewers' attempts to locate themselves in a familiar universe of interpretation. At one extreme this tendency results in imaginary or hypothetical works: Byars announces that he will fly; at the appointed time a crowd has gathered in front of the gallery; Byars emerges, appropriately dressed, as always, stands for "a moment" near a gold-leaf line in the street, and re-enters the gallery. The viewers have been asked to imagine Byars flying and to accept this imagined event as an art object. Clearly, an imagining, like a question, is a "thing" in the life-world (Husserl: "The non-existence of the presented object...cannot steal the presented object from the presentation.")<sup>6</sup> And if it is a thing, then in the hands of an artist it can be an *art* thing. The presentation of noematic art objects is a concrete venture in the realm of immaterial art, an area usually dominated by an absolutism that is dogmatic at its root (as Rosicrucian doctrine constitutes Yves Klein's Void).

*Byars Invisible at the Met*, New York, 1970: Byars appears, quite visible, in red suit, mask and top hat, on the front steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; after "a moment," he returns inside. The viewer has been asked not merely to accept an imaginary object, but to accept, as an artwork, the dialectic between a verbally posited imaginary object (Byars invisible) and a verbally negated sensory object (the visible Byars); that is, to accept the mental experience of a conflict of noemata as a "thing" that has been presented to him by the artist.

Less extreme strategies of de-familiarization work by a withdrawal of known grids and the imposition of inscrutable ones, a scrambling of codes designed to prevent the viewer, in his urgent lust for answers, from escap-



JAMES LEE BYARS, *Be Quiet*, 1980, St. Mark's Square, Venice.

ing the indeterminacy of pure question. "In '60 I showed by looking at a different 100 eggs a day for 12 days to find the roundest whitest one." This new structure, lacking context and functional relationship to familiar code systems, is itself "a thing as strictly experienced," "an empty X," irreducible, functionless and perfect as the rules of a game. Art (or anti-art) is experienced as an invitation to voyage into the infinity of the unanswered question; as Gaston Bachelard says, the artwork questions the viewer, not the other way around.

Language criticism, primacy of question and the hypothetical as real are themes that intersect in silence. At the Venice Biennale of 1980, Byars, in gold suit, his face masked, stands in St. Mark's Square silently distributing tiny slips of paper that say: "*Be quiet.*"

"Questions are gifts?"

AFTER 1975, BYARS EMPHASIZED "PERFECT" WORKS AND TINY "PLAYS" that demonstrate a kind of phenomenological reduction wherein everything adventitious to the experience in its immediate and irreducible self-sameness has been stripped away. The viewer has neither time nor space in which to thrust around what he views the known categories of habitual prejudices.



A paradigmatic work is *The Perfect Theatre*. One hundred people are gathered in the garden of a European villa and directed to gaze toward a horizon; they hear the whispered phrase, “The Perfect Theatre is to look”; and exactly as far away as the eye with 20/20 vision can discern, a man in a pink suit appears for “a moment” on the horizon, then vanishes.

So stripped of content is the event, so reduced in terms of time, context and definition, that we are helpless to throw our mental lassoes around it. We need more before our categories can take hold—but there is no more. Viewers are apt to feel that such an event is “not enough,” a question that is of keen interest to Byars (“*What’s enough?*” asks *The Pink Book*). The denial that such a slender event is “enough” seems to mean that it is not yet “enough” to be a “thing” that we can recognize, categorize, strip of question, render safe answer, and integrate into our system of preconceptions. Only less than that is, in fact, “enough” for the event “as strictly experienced.” Only an event so tiny, or so displaced, or so stripped of habitual associations, is a thing-as-empty-X, neither more nor less than itself. “The Perfect Theatre is to look” means *only* to look, not to define, interpret, categorize and evaluate.

One of Byars’s tiny summations of his aesthetic is: “*Glimpse is enough.*” Glimpse is too slight, too quick, too evanescent, mysterious and half-concealed for analysis and classification. In the experience of “glimpse,” not yet “enough” to be converted from question into statement, the fly is already, for an instant, halfway out of the fly-bottle.

Both the Perfect works and the one-word plays (which Byars has been making since the ’60s), along with countless tiny pieces presented as private gifts to individuals, are voyages into the infinitesimal art of “glimpse,” which is in a sense an answer (appropriately sublinguistic and unformulable) to pure question. The style of these works, their rigorous formalism, which pierces into the zone of emptiness, reflects in part the influence of the seven trips Byars made between 1957 and 1967 to Japan, where the Noh theater and related Shinto ritual activities penetrated his sensibility.

Shinto, as the saying goes, is caught, not taught. It purveys, in place of doctrine and image, a style of attention, a delicate quality of presence, nurtured by rituals that are minimalist performances, in which the slightest gesture is charged with meaning by the intensity, yet delicacy, of the attention bestowed upon it. Shinto votive objects—often folded papers, usually white, or stones not carved but selected from nature—lie at some remove behind Byars’s paper, silk and stone works and continue to dominate his preferences in physical materials. Shinto settings and the approaches to them are always related to the natural environment, to some tree, grove,

garden or sea-shore, which alert but passive attention unites with the ritual in a fragile, sensuous atmosphere scented by a gong or bell, the rustling of silk, the fluttering of leaves in the wind.

The Shinto ritual style was converted into Noh theater by Ze-ami (1363-1443), whom Byars regards, in the spirit of Shinto ancestor worship, as a former self. From Ze-ami comes the abstract and formal aesthetic that is based on the primacy of simplicity and elimination of extraneous detail; the attempt to create vivid sensual atmospheres in fleeting impressions; the use of masks that repress both joy and sorrow in favor of a subtle and mysterious expression like a question mark; the assuming, by the leading figure (the *waki*), of the role of beholder, rather than participant and manipulator.

Byars’s Perfect works, like Shinto and Noh, seek to induce an evanescent but vivid flash of irreducible atmosphere, like the scent of a particular flower.

*The Perfect Love Letter*, Brussels, 1974: Byars (or someone else, it doesn’t matter) in white suit, black top hat and expressionless mask (to remove his personality from the equation, as the *waki* of the Noh is impersonal beholder), writes “I love you” backwards in the air.

*The Perfect Kiss*, Berkeley, 1977: each day at noon Byars enters the lobby of the University Art Museum, stands on a low platform, ever so faintly kisses the air (the universe), and leaves.

*The Perfect Tear*, Los Angeles, 1979: the audience/participants assemble by invitation in a Japanese garden, down in a hollow out of sight of buildings. As each arrives, Byars surreptitiously slips into his palm a one-inch square of black tissue paper on which is printed in tiny gold letters, “The Perfect Tear.”

Carried out with a solemnity that is not heavy but buoyant, at moments exhilarating, the Perfect works produce in the viewers a sense of floating between purposive behavior and functionlessness, among powerful but elusive atmospheres that are themselves the art objects. Other apparitionlike works involve brief but dazzling glimpses of messengers or visitors (not necessarily played by the artist himself) from exotic, possibly celestial, realms: Fifth Avenue in New York is cleared of traffic for about a mile north and south of the Guggenheim, police at cross streets diverting cars; Byars, in gold suit and gold top hat, is driven in a taxi at 100 miles an hour past the entrance to the museum, while he sits staring straight ahead in the back of the cab.

A group show on the theme of “circus,” Brussels, 1976: a circus tent has been set up, with a searchlight, perhaps half a mile away, pointing to it down a long, straight street. The lens is greased golden; the swath of light, into which the viewers gaze, is thick and dripping. At a point not visible





Morgan Thomas Butler

JAMES LEE BYARS, *The Holy Ghost*, 1979. Piazza San Marco, Venice.JAMES LEE BYARS, *The Book of the 100 Perfects*, 1985.  
Four black velvet sofas and book

Friedrich Rosenstiel

JAMES LEE BYARS, *The Play of Death*, 1976. Dom Hotel, Cologne.

from the tent, Byars, in gold suit and gold top hat, leaps into the beam of golden light and walks toward the tent. When close enough to be heard, he shouts the curator's name, turns, and walks back, disappearing again into the golden light.

*The Play of Death*, Cologne, 1976: thirteen rooms are booked on the second floor of the Dom Hotel; at noon the wing doors to each room open above the plaza and twelve doctors ("thanatologists") step into the doorways; in the center, flanked by six doctors on each side, Byars speaks the abbreviate for death ("th") into the rain. Says Reiner Speck, who commissioned the "play," "It was all of that which has entwined the word 'thanatos' since the medieval dances of death."

*"I founded a fictitious museum in New York in '68 and collected 1,000,000 minutes of human attention to show."*

MUCH RECENT ART—OR ANTI-ART—HAS BEEN INTERPRETED "PHENOMENOLOGICALLY," as directing the viewer to inspect or question his or her own perceptual processes. In the "Space Division Constructions" of James Turrell, for example, a rectangular aperture in the wall appears, from a distance, to be a flat surface, but at closer range reveals itself as the opening into a room behind. The demonstration is as old as Democritus displaying a straight oar, then plunging it halfway into water so that it appeared bent; Democritus also used the *exemplum* to question the ultimacy of our sensory equipment.



Byars's work is not "phenomenological" in this "oar-in-the-water" sense; it is not our perceptual processes but our cognitive overlays that he deals with, and he does not simply focus on them, but finds ways to forestall or circumvent them as the viewer's consciousness is nuanced through shifting noetic dances. He performs, in conjunction with the viewer, a type of phenomenological reduction wherein a slender datum is experienced in its self-sameness. A Byars event is self-identical and immediate, yet lacks definition because it doesn't relate to anything. There is an emphasis on a sense of the work's "purity" which relates to the way formalist Modernist works, however different, were experienced in their day.

Much Conceptual and Performance Art is based upon mixing of usually isolated cultural codes. Vito Acconci, for example, has set up a dialectic between public and private, and then breached it by establishing an unaccustomed intimacy between artist and audience—threatening the audience with a crowbar, telling the audience his most shameful secrets, etc. Byars, in contrast, does not meet the audience directly with an expression of personal feeling; this work is not aggressively thrust by the artist upon the audience, but is experienced by both with interpenetrated sensibilities. Again like formalist works, a piece is presented as if it were not essentially *of the artist*: it is *of itself*, produced by its own nature, the artist and audience together assimilating its elusive atmosphere, which vanishes into memory at once.

It is not perceptual quirks, cultural codes or patterns of relationship that Byars's work focuses on, but the quality of delicate and open attention itself. The artwork is less the object of this attention than the subjective experience of it. Attention relatively purified of past and future associations, attention that can see the thing as strictly experienced, *is* the substance of his art, and the purpose of his unusual persona.

Meetings with him observed no ordinary contextual patterns. They were apparitional flashes of intense awareness of something that falls through the blind spaces of cultural grids. You are to meet him for breakfast at the Plaza Hotel in New York. He appears "a moment" late and wordlessly, again and again, strews you and the tabletop with cherry blossoms. The event, though filled with human warmth, is performed impersonally, as a celebration of life itself "as strictly experienced." "Like a single flower blooming on an old tree," as Ze-ami says, it forces one into the mystery and isolation of the present.

1. All subheads and italicized quotations within the text are from the Byarsbooks mentioned in this article.
2. Friedrich Wilhelm Josef von Schelling, "System of Transcendental Idealism," VI: 3, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhn, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 368-9.
3. Quotes in this paragraph are from *A Report on the Art and Technology Program of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967-1971*, intro. by Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971), pp. 58-66.
4. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, English translation by W.R. Boyce Bigson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 116
5. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, English translation by R. G. Bury (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press [Loeb Classical Library], 1933), sec. 19; G. C. C. Chang. *Teachings of Tibetan Yoga* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1963), p. 34; *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Wing-Tsit Chang (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 356.



## Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland

### *Options Within the Grid*

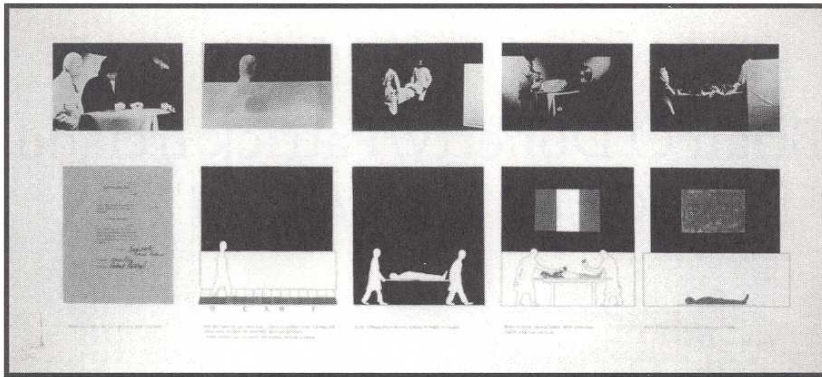


BRIAN O'DOHERTY/PATRICK IRELAND, *Five Identities*, 2002. Photcollage.

IN 1957 BRIAN O'DOHERTY EMIGRATED FROM IRELAND TO THE UNITED States. Fifteen years later, events in Ireland led to a formal change in his identity. On a day in 1972 that came to be known as Bloody Sunday, Irish civilians were marching peacefully in the area of Derry known as the Bogside, to protest internment of political prisoners. British soldiers opened fire on the marchers. Thirteen were killed. Later that year, at the Project Art Center in Dublin—"certified," as he has written, "in a performance before thirty witnesses and a notary, at a Dublin space, assisted by two radical artists"<sup>1</sup>—O'Doherty pledged to sign his artworks with the name Patrick Ireland "until such time as British military presence is removed from Northern Ireland and all citizens are granted their civil rights." In the identity change performance his body was painted orange from the head down and green from the feet up; each color was carried through to the other end of the body till it was uniformly covered with a muddy tertiary blend of the two. Realistically, he looked like an atrocity victim. Symbolically, his body had become Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

O'Doherty/Ireland's 1998 retrospective at the Orchard Gallery in Derry—virtually within sight of the Bogside area—happened in the midst of the peace process that had raised hopes high, but since has receded again. Should the process ever reach consummation, it will become time for Patrick Ireland to be painted as Brian O'Doherty again. The exhibition (which included works from the periods of both names) was centered around the theme of identity and the interesting fact that it can be changed. O'Doherty's change of name 15 years after emigrating to the United States might have had something to do with trying to retain connections with the homeland ("It was an expatriate's gesture," he says). But the works in his retrospective went beyond that particular occasion and showed an abiding and special concern with the issue.





BRIAN O'DOHERTY/PATRICK IRELAND, *Name Change*, 1972.  
Photographs, liquitex, printed matter.

*Five Identities* (1958–1998) comprised documentation of various identities that O'Doherty/Ireland has adopted and acted out over the years. Two of them are Brian O'Doherty and Patrick Ireland, suggesting that this person regards his birth name as essentially an assumed identity like the others. "Sigmund Bode" was the first of his adopted personae, dating from his years as a medical student in Dublin in the 1950s. At the time, O'Doherty was exhibiting his work in both Dublin and London, and was irritated by the limits on taste in those two cities, especially Dublin where the only acceptable art was, he says, "third generation Cubism."<sup>3</sup> The name Sigmund Bode combines Freud with William Bode, artist and director of the Berlin Museum in the 19th century—a persona who would make an art that was entirely different from what was acceptable in Dublin. O'Doherty made artworks for Bode, signed them with Bode's name, and submitted them to galleries; no one would exhibit them. A cultural dividing line had been located and specified, as if in a scientific experiment performed only for the scientist's appreciation.

"Mary Josephson" appeared in the early '70s. O'Doherty's given name was Brian Mary and his confirmation name was Joseph: he was Brian Mary Joseph. As Mary-and-Joseph-and-son his persona represented the holy family incarnate in an individual. Mary Josephson wrote a number of parables which were published—one in *Artforum*—without disclosure of the imposture.

"William Maginn" was a nineteenth century Irish poet who himself wrote under various pseudonyms including Morgan O'Doherty. Maginn's verse dealt satirically with embodiments of Irish ethnic clichés such as Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*. (A poem by Maginn, "The Irishman," bears

the refrain: "A nasty ugly Irishman—/A wild tremendous Irishman—/A tearing, swearing, thumping, bumping ranting, roaring Irishman.") An exile like O'Doherty, Maginn lived mostly in London, where his circle of friends included Coleridge, Southey, and Thackeray.

At the 1998 Derry exhibition, beneath photographs of O'Doherty in the guise of each persona stood a vitrine containing examples of their publications. This exhibition was the first public disclosure of the impostures, which O'Doherty/Ireland had maintained for about forty years. His point was not only the issue of identity, but also the effect of language and naming on experience. Once you are behaving under a different name, the artist notes, it releases new potential options and an actual sense of living responsibility: how to be true to an identity which circles around the question of what the self is, whether perhaps it is just language or—or what?

Another approach to the investigation of language began with O'Doherty's "Structural Plays" from the late 1960s. His artistic milieu in New York City at the time can loosely be described as the world of Minimalism. He attended virtually all avant-garde theatrical performances in those days, including the Minimalist early works of Richard Foreman and others of his generation, but, though he admired much of that work, "none of it," he has said, "was useful for my own work;"<sup>4</sup> "what I had in mind was more like anti-theatre, since it cancelled illusion and impersonation."<sup>5</sup> The structuralist idea of language as a transpersonal force that does not depend on the individual speaker, whom it will outlive, was related to his aim, but here too the connection was loose. He saw language, as he has remarked, as an "organism with life and color," a creative force that was virtually able to beget life, as when in the Annunciation the words of the angel inseminate the Virgin Mary. Language, it seemed to him, much as it seemed to Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, makes the individual, rather than the individual making his or her own use of language.

O'Doherty combined his linguistic preoccupation with the grid of the chessboard, partly as a Celtic reference. Old Irish culture featured board games seemingly similar to chess; in the game called *brandub*, for example, one piece is designated the king and others represent royal functionaries and enemies. Out of the combination of language and the chessboard O'Doherty devised the little works called Structural Plays.

A performance space is divided into two three-by-three grids three or four feet apart, each 60" on a side, each containing nine 20" x 20" squares (or "cells" as O'Doherty has called them).<sup>6</sup> In the central square of each grid, O'Doherty placed a performer wearing a white body stocking to obscure signs



of individuality. The performers, who can be male, female, or mixed, acted as writing instruments, or anonymous carriers of transpersonal language.

In a Structural Play each performer utters a statement, then makes a series of steps in the grid equal to the number of words in the statement. The other performer then repeats what the first has said, but each time the statement is uttered the stress switches to the next word. In the basic prototype, "I Am Here Now," performer A utters the primal statement "I am here now," then takes four steps in the grid. Performer B then says, "I AM here now," and takes four steps. The steps are pre-ordained by the artist and prememorized by the performers, and performer B's steps always echo or mirror those of performer A. If A has taken one step to the left, one up, and two to the right, then B takes one step to the right, one down, and two to the left. Beginning from the final positions of this first movement, the two performers repeat the procedure, the stress proceeding through the sentence until it has been borne by each word in turn. This Structural Play represents "Presence."

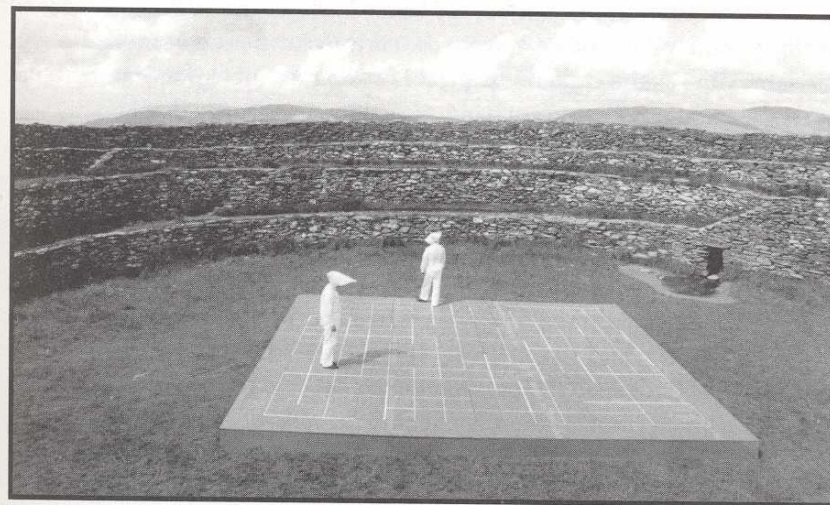
Though performer B is echoing and mirroring performer A mechanically, there is a conversation-like quality that comes out in the more complex cases. In *Structural Play: Violence*, for example, the statements seem to express personal feeling: "I'LL bust your fucking ass," "I'll BUST your fucking ass," and so on. Yet in every play, despite the fact that personal feelings may seem to be expressed, the performers remain anonymous and depersonalized; they are not expressing themselves so much as they are becoming or embodying language. In a sense they are not even there: it is only language acting itself out.

The *Chess Play* uses a similar performance arena—a single six foot square grid divided three by three—but what happens on it is altogether different. Four performers are involved, two chess players, who sit on white boxes on opposite sides of the grid, and two chessmen or chess pieces, in white suits, who stand in spaces on the grid. The chessmen are of neutral character and can shift at will among the moves proper to a bishop, a knight, a rook, or a pawn.

Each player owns one of the chessmen. When a player wishes to make a move he or she raises a hand. The chessman, who must be literate in chess, then chooses the move and takes it. At any moment when the two chessmen are face to face, one can choose to checkmate the other by becoming a queen. At that point the other becomes a king. The chessman who has been checkmated tests the checkmate by stepping into the adjoining squares on both sides. When the checkmate holds, the king sinks to one knee and bows his head. The chessmen pause, then walk off. The players rise, shake hands

and follow. The grid remains, overlaid with memory traces of the moves that have been made upon it. Unlike the other Structural Plays, the *Chess Play* is performed in silence. Here it is not language that is the overriding impersonal force but the chess-grid itself. A certain nostalgia for chivalry seems to underlie the graciousness of the checkmate and its acceptance.

The culmination of this trend in O'Doherty/Ireland's work, and the highlight of the 1998 Derry retrospective, was the mysterious masterpiece called *Vowel Grid*, a work from the artist's "ogham" period, 1967-72. Ogham is a Gaelic sign system from the early centuries A.D. In the romantic era of the Celtic twilight it was regarded as an encryption of one of the runic languages, currently unknown, described by R.A. Macalister in *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (1937). Nowadays that view seems a romantic projection, and ogham seems not to represent a secret, ritual language but a script which was a transliteration of twenty of the twenty five letters of the Roman alphabet. "This purest sign system ever devised," as O'Doherty has called it,<sup>7</sup> may be seen as an early expression of Irish nationalism toward the end of the Roman Empire, representing an unwillingness to adopt the Latin alphabet without first nativizing it. In this way the performance, like the works in the Orchard Gallery, seemed to involve the theme of identity—the idea that at last the true ancient identity of the Irish was going to be given an opportunity to re-emerge into the light. In another sense the revival of



BRIAN O'DOHERTY/PATRICK IRELAND, *Vowel Grid*, 1970.  
Performance, at Gríannan of Alleach, County Donegal, Ireland, 1998.



ogham refers to the British take-over of Irish real estate: the script was used on the corners of standing stones which functioned as boundary markers; the inscriptions pointed out who owned the land.

The formal properties of the Ogham script—"the most simple, logical, beautiful of sign systems"<sup>8</sup>—reminded him of Minimal Art. He chose the vowels as "pre-articulate chords of raw emotion"<sup>9</sup> before the emotion has been both complicated and in a sense confused by the intervention of the multitude of consonants. In Ogham, A is represented by one vertical stroke, O by two, U by three, and so on. O'Doherty translated this into spatial terms so it could be represented on a chessboard-like surface.

The strokes in the five vowels add up to 15 (1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5). 15 x 15 = 225. So on a 225 square 15 x 15 grid—in effect an expansion of the grids of the Structural Plays—the five vowels may be represented on each line both horizontally and vertically. Color changes (which are not represented in the "cells" but in the lines demarcating them) indicate shifts from one vowel to another. Only two colors are necessary to specify the shifts, though as many as five may be used, one for each vowel.

*Vowel Grid* was first performed in 1970, and has been presented three times since then.<sup>10</sup> The 1998 performance took place at a site called the Grianan Aileach, known colloquially as the Stone Fort, an archeological site about forty minutes from Derry. Despite the defensive military nature of the place, the name signifies something like "sun room for women." Regarded commonly as megalithic, the Stone Fort may more likely be second or third century A.D.—that is, from the early Celtic period of Ireland, about the same time as the Ogham script. It is a genuine ancient monument that bears the unforgettable look of hand-placed stone masonry that one still sees in so-called Scotch-Irish areas of Appalachia. It consists of four concentric circles of hand-laid stone surrounding a central grass circle.

The grid of 225 cells was laid out in the central circle, the whole surface coming to 22.5 feet square. Each line, either horizontally or vertically, is laid out to represent the five vowels, in some order. The color shifts may divide one line, for example, into groups of 3, 1, 4, 2 and 5 cells, another into groups of 4, 2, 1, 5, and 3, and so on. In any case, every line, either horizontally or vertically, contains spatial representations of all five vowels, in whatever order. There is no symbolic intention behind the relationship between specific vowels and colors. The colors are not important, only the color changes; each color change indicates the end of one vowel and the beginning of the next.

Two performers dressed anonymously in white and wearing foam-rubber cowl-like headpieces that direct their vision straight ahead and down,

like blinders, begin at opposite corners of the grid, standing at both ends of the same row; one performer faces the other, while the second faces away from the first at a 90 degree angle. They proceed to traverse the grid, one moving horizontally, the other vertically. As each walks he "reads" the vowels from the color shifts (two cells of one color = O, and so on) and each time he comes to the next color change, and can read the vowel, he utters it loudly and clearly. The performer who had been traversing the shorter vowel then waits till the other arrives at the end of his spaces and calls out the vowel. Then they proceed. When a "voweler," as O'Doherty has called them (they are simply "walking vowels"<sup>11</sup>) reaches the end of a row he turns round, steps into the first square of the adjacent row, and walks back the other way; by this zigzag (or boustrophedon) pattern each traverses the entire grid, one going east-west, the other north-south. There will be a single point when their paths intersect, at which point one will pause and let the other pass, then proceed. Each will reach the end of each line, and the completion of the whole grid, at the same time. "The grid," O'Doherty has said, "is the tissue of language, knitted warp and woof by two 'vowelers' possessed by language, which is the living entity here."<sup>12</sup>

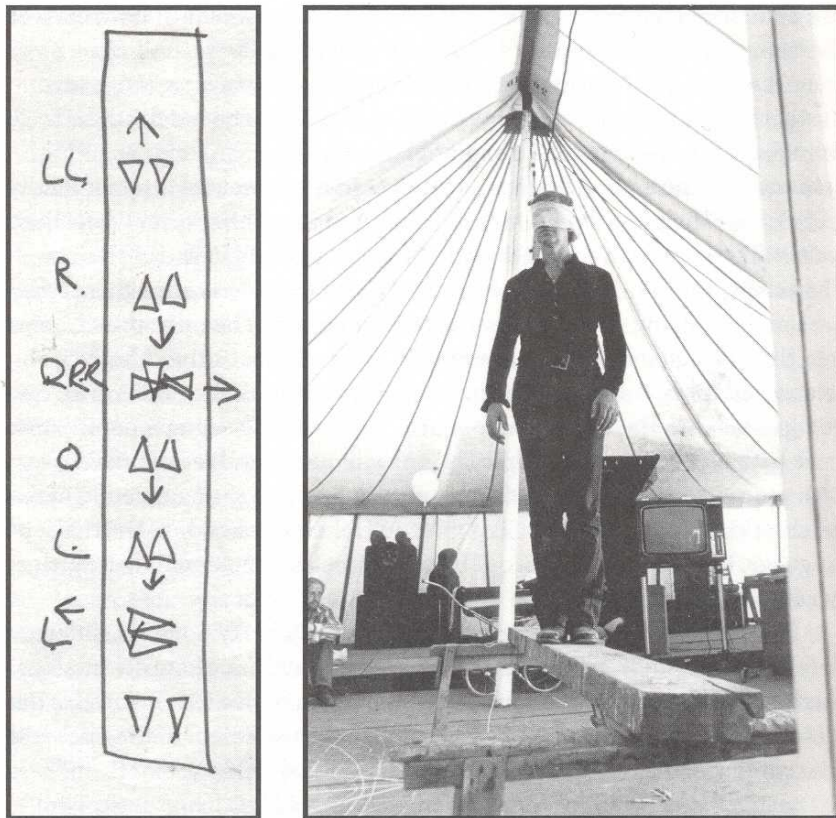
In *Vowel Grid* as in the Structural Plays, O'Doherty does not differentiate the performers as individuals. There is no drama, rhetoric, or story; there is only the symbolic acting out of the series of five Celtic vowels. The blinders keep the performers focused strictly on the colors of the lines and the counting of the cells as they walk; "nothing else should exist for them," says O'Doherty<sup>13</sup>, since it is not they but language that is "the living entity here."

In line with the Minimalist/structuralist ethic that loosely underlies it, the performance is non-climactic, a continuum. Nothing happens, but something is actualized: the code unwraps itself. It takes about 15 minutes to traverse the board. It is like a 15 minute piece of serial music.

Along with the gameboard theme and the Ogham script, a third explicitly Celtic reference is the grid's suggestion of the labyrinthine patterning familiar from Celtic art and design. In 1967 (a major year in the history of O'Doherty's oeuvre, as of many others') O'Doherty presented a labyrinth inspired by the St. Brigid's cross. The labyrinth in turn, in Old Irish tradition, seems to have functioned at times as a board for a game—what Robert Graves calls the "maze dance."<sup>14</sup> That there was some connection of such games with megalithic architecture such as New Grange—and perhaps with Grianan Aileach, the old Stone Fort—is widely accepted.

Though O'Doherty does not talk about them this way, these works also relate to the mythos of the chess game as an activity of supernatural beings





BRIAN O'DOHERTY/PATRICK IRELAND, *Labyrinth Is A Straight Line*, 1967/68.  
Performance at Oisteddfod, Wrexham, Wales,  
with hand-drawn key to labyrinth, date uncertain.

whose moves on the board activate the space of the world in some intended but indecipherable way. He has noted that “if you trace the movements of, say, knight and bishop through a game, they look arbitrary and meaningful”<sup>15</sup> at the same time—“which is a nice look if you can get it,” he adds. That “nice look”—simultaneously arbitrary and meaningful—is in *Vowel Grid*. There is something mysterious and impenetrable that contributes a revelatory quality to the labyrinth or ritual space. “After passing through [a labyrinth],” O’Doherty says, “you have the illusion you understand something.” Participants in a *Vowel Grid*, he recalls, “came to perceive it not so much as an art work, but as a *place* that happened *through* them.”<sup>16</sup> In another text, he uses very similar language in referring to “the old bishop of

Cloyne, Berkeley himself,” whom he calls “my philosopher.”<sup>17</sup> Berkeley, he says, portrayed “reality out there as no more than a mirage through which we move to give it substance.”<sup>18</sup> The performers of the Structural Plays, or of *Vowel Grid*, weaving the warp and woof of language, north-south and east-west, were giving a specific reality to empty space by walking through it with prescribed utterances.

A piece that predated the first performance of *Vowel Grid* shows the issues in a more existential light. In *Labyrinth Is A Straight Line* (1967-68) a single performer (originally O’Doherty himself) acts out something like the semiotic-mimetic principle of the Structural Plays and *Vowel Grid*—the predicament of being “determined within certain modalities of order.”<sup>19</sup> The adventure of the predicament is heightened by blindfolding the performer and placing him on a raised plank. Starting at one end he acts out a pre-memorized set of steps each of which involves a 90 degree turn. If each step is properly made he manages to stay on the board and knows when to stop. Reaching the end, he stops, turns 180 degrees, and re-enacts the same series of steps back to the beginning. His behavior is determined, as he advances through this arbitrary order, by memory, the seeming warranty of the self; if it fails him, he strays from the modality of order and falls. Labyrinth is a straight line, but with many turnings—as life is a straight line, as time is a straight line.

“I Am Here Now.”

1. In *Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language, Pyramids, and Related Acts* (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1993), p. 25.

2. Works from before 1972 will be referred to as O’Doherty’s, works after as Ireland’s, works that overlap both periods, as O’Doherty/Ireland’s.

3. In conversation with the author.

4. Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland, “Vowel Grid and the Structural Plays,” in exh. cat., *Language Performed/Matters of Identity* (Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1998), p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

10. At the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati in 1978; at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge,

Massachusetts in 1981; at Wrexham in Wales; and in the old Stone Fort known as Grianan Aileach in Donegal, in connection with the exhibition at the Orchard Gallery, Derry, in 1998.

11. *Patrick Ireland: Language Performed/Matters of Identity*, p. 22.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

14. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1959), pp. 108-109.

15. In *Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language*, p. 11.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Patrick Ireland: Language Performed/Matters of Identity*, p. 26.



## Marina Abramovic

### *Speaking Silences / Carrying Water*

FOR TWELVE TWENTY-FOUR HOUR DAYS IN 2002 MARINA Abramovic lived on a kind of stage-set at the Sean Kelly gallery. The structure was attached to the rear wall of the main gallery space like three adjacent balconies of a hotel overlooking the seaside. (The piece was called *Room with an Ocean View*.) The balconies were partly open on the sides and separated from one another by about 18 inches, so one could step from one to the next, but it was a slightly long step. The balcony on the left (from the viewer's standpoint) was a bathroom, with a shower, a bar of soap, a towel, a toilet, a bucket used to flush the toilet, and a roll of tissue paper—none of which was curtained off from the audience's gaze. The balcony in the middle was a living room, with a table, a chair, and a water glass. To the right was a bedroom, with a bed with no mattress, over which a water faucet and a basin hung from the wall. On an inside wall of this balcony there were some shelves on which Abramovic kept her solid-colored outfits (which she changed everyday), a blanket, a sleeping roll which could be spread out as a rather ascetic mattress, and a hairband; these shelves could be seen from the right side of the audience space, but not from elsewhere. In front of the central balcony-room was a ladder leading down to the gallery floor where the viewers stood; but this apparent invitation to the performer to descend into the ordinary world was negated by the fact that the steps of the ladder were large knives with their blades pointing upward. Occasionally Abramovic sat on the edge of that platform with her feet resting lightly on the knife-edge of the blades; but she apparently never ventured farther down.

Here Abramovic stayed for 12 days and nights during which she neither ate, nor spoke, nor performed cognitive transactions such as reading and writing. She remained on the set for 271 continuous hours, of which she was on display to the public for 118 hours (of which I was present for 20). The passage of time was ticked off, at about one beat a second, by a metronome



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MARINA ABRAMOVIC, *Room with an Ocean View*, 2002

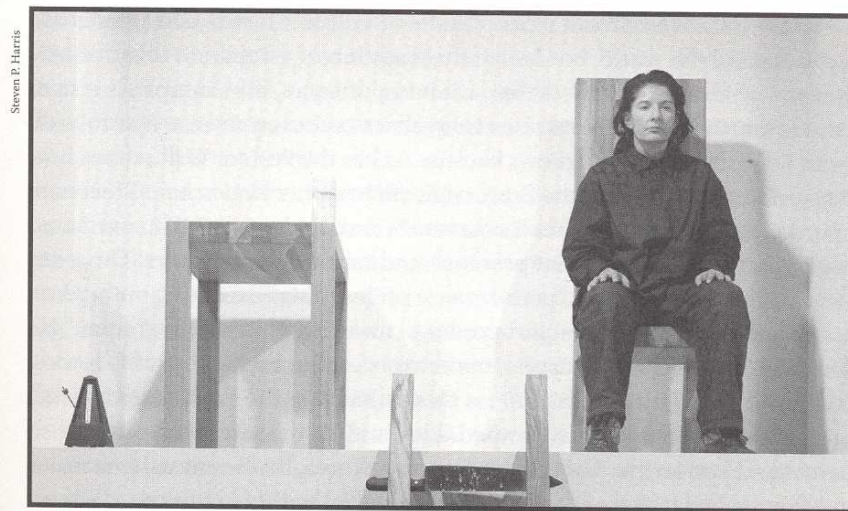


that she occasionally moved from room to room, as if to keep it in the flow of the action.

This was the action: Abramovic would walk, stand, sit, and lie down; draw and drink glasses of mineral water from the faucet installed over her bed, standing in a particular spot and angled in a particular way to the light; blink; urinate and wipe herself with tissue paper; take the hairband from the shelf, walk into the bathroom, put on the hairband, remove her clothes, take a shower standing immobilely, get out of the shower, dry her body with the large white towel, put her clothes back on, remove the hairband, walk back to the bedroom, and replace the hairband on the hidden shelf. If you stayed for three or four hours you'd probably see all this. Other events that happened somewhat less often included: rearranging the furniture in the living room; rewinding the metronome and setting it going; gazing at a particular audience member for a long time or sweeping the whole audience more briefly with her gaze; occasionally smiling slightly; closing her eyes; covering her face with her hands; singing inexplicably in Serbo-Croatian, and, every now and then, crying. That was it.

It would be possible to situate the piece in several genres of Conceptual and Performance Art; the most obvious linkage would locate the piece in the thematic area including the gallery critique and the related art-life project. Both these persistent themes gained ascendancy in the generation of artists who matured after World War II. At the time it seemed to many that the aesthetic dimension of society had been discredited by the horrors of history and that art had to somehow move closer to life—closer to the ethical dimension—in order to be useful in a world characterized by such traumas. Abramovic, who was born in 1946 in Zagreb, to a Serbian general and a Croatian museum director, is a part of that generation. She was 14 years old when the principle was laid down uncompromisingly by the French artist Yves Klein in his remark, “The artist only has to produce one work, himself, constantly.”

Soon after that remark, as the foundations of performance art were laid, artists did in fact begin to present themselves as artworks, living in galleries or museums, or spending ordinary time there, in an attempt to narrow or close the breach between art and life. This was done in various ways, mostly in the 1960s and '70s, by James Lee Byars, Linda Montano, Tom Marioni, Chris Burden, Gerhard Richter, Gilbert and George, Lucas Samaras, Marina Abramovic and Ulay during their collaborative period, and others. It was understood usually, by those who did it and those for whose observation it was done, as an ethical statement. This was the first generation of modern



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(or post-World War II) Performance Art. The artists wanted to make their point by putting themselves, or their wills, or their bodies, on the line rather than simulating or representing something. Body Art, Ordeal Art, and Endurance Art were parts of that moment. Abramovic, who explored that area of performance deeply in her collaborations with Ulay in the '70s and '80s, is almost alone in keeping that moment alive today.

The approach has been described as universal appropriation: the artist asserts that art contains all of life, not just some of it. The theme goes back to the lineage of Duchamp, who, in the *Dialogues with Pierre Cabanne*, remarked that one could designate one's every breath as an artwork.<sup>1</sup> After World War II the theme recurred with a hidden ethical request, that somehow absorbing life into art, or merging the two, might restore the sanity that Modernism was seen at that time as having lost.

Behind Duchamp this theme has earlier precedents which are ethically more ambiguous in intent, such as the generally European tradition of the Dandy. Benjamin Disraeli defined the Dandy as the prince of an imaginary kingdom.<sup>2</sup> In the Romantic era the role of Dandy drifted into the realm of art and that was when it acquired a special ethical dimension. The German poet Schiller, in the nineteenth century, said the artist innately lives, and deserves to live, by different rules from others, because he is a kind of perfected being.<sup>3</sup> This princely claim applies to some of the artists who have worked on the art-life project, especially Klein and Byars.

Before the Romantic era, the tradition of infusing life with the rules of



art opens into even broader panoramas of cultural history. Examples are found around the world, but less in the tradition of art than in those of religion and philosophy. In the Shinto tradition of Japan, for example, it is said, there is a certain priest who rises from strict seclusion once a year to walk about 60 yards before his fellows because he has the Perfect Walk; this is how they can learn.<sup>4</sup> Several of the Presocratic philosophers in ancient Greece are recorded as having had elaborate costumes and mannerisms that amounted to designating their personal presence and manner as artworks. Diogenes was what has been called a “performance philosopher,” executing outrageous and shocking gestures in public in order to make his philosophical point.<sup>5</sup> He also lived in public, in the streets, under constant inspection by his fellows—as Abramovic was in *Room with an Ocean View*. In the Presocratic period, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Empedocles and others adopted outlandish personas. Even farther back, behind such gestures, lie the animal imitations and shamanic performances of Neolithic and Paleolithic cultures.

It would seem that this is a difficult tradition to insert oneself into. There is, after all, a lot of tension and self-doubt involved in presenting oneself as a model for behavior. But Abramovic carried it off with a modest dignity. Rather than presenting herself as a model she seemed to be collaborating with her audience at seeing and confronting the shared problems of consciousness and time.

But there was something else going on in *Room with an Ocean View* too,



something that doesn't involve the tradition of the Dandy. In a sense what was actually on display was a quality of mind, or a state of concentration, that is associated with certain types of meditation retreats that Abramovic has done from time to time over the years and has repeatedly incorporated into her performance work. *Room with an Ocean View* could be described as a meditation retreat made public. Specifically, it seems to have been based on what in the Pali tradition of Theravadin Buddhism is called a *vipassana* retreat. These retreats (which are given here and there around the country and the world) usually last 10 or 12 days (Abramovic chose 12) with no talking, reading, or writing, and very limited eating; one can fast, as Abramovic chose to do, or eat one meal about noon every day. The rules she posted at the entrance to the performance space seem based on this tradition.

In the *Mahasatthipattana Sutta*, where this oldest known form of meditation is described, the Buddha says that a primary point is to remain carefully aware of four postures: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. Abramovic's posted rules repeat this formula. Within this framework the central *vipassana* practice involves trying to keep your mind focused on the present moment constantly. The present moment is defined primarily by sense impressions, conceptual overlays on them being regarded as coming after, so not exactly a part of the immediacy of experience. So *vipassana* involves a constant moment-to-moment attention to one's sensory experience, no matter how trivial or ordinary it might be—like an itch, or a passing-car sound or, especially, the natural sensations of one's uncontrolled breathing, which is the most continuous and accessible and hence easiest object to keep centered on. The practice, according to an ancient text, is like carrying a bowl of water, full to the brim, and trying not to spill a drop.

In addition to the *vipassana* practice other factors may have been involved in Abramovic's public retreat. In *pranayama*, for example, a Hindu yogic practice, the subject controls the breath in ways that might be counted by a metronome. Abramovic had the metronome turned on most of the time. Occasionally after it wound down (which took about two hours) she would leave it off for a while. It was usually a relief when she rewound it and started it again; it was hard to imagine enduring the long empty times without the resonant tick-tocking which echoed slightly off the hollow wooden boxes of the balcony floors. Rather than the simple attention of *vipassana*, *pranayama* involves counting and controlling; the breath is a useful device for restoring one's concentration when the water has begun to spill from the bowl. In *trataka*, another Hindu practice, one gazes resolutely at a point and, as the concentration gathers at that point, the surround fades and a visible



aura pops out of the object. This was the feeling conveyed when frequently Abramovic would engage a specific viewer (always someone who seemed to be asking for it) in a prolonged stare-down.

The one activity that Abramovic introduced from outside the tradition of these retreats was gazing at the viewers. In a *vipassana* retreat one is not supposed to have eye contact with anyone. By introducing this subversive element Abramovic broke the performance out of the ashram and made it a social sculpture.

Abramovic is from the generation of artists who matured in the 1970s—the artists who thought they didn't want to sell anything. They had a contempt for the market which many of them, now saddled with mortgages and dependents, have come to regret. But Abramovic has pretty much stuck with the immaterialist values of that idealistic age. Some years ago she said to me that she wanted to do a kind of performance that didn't involve any mediation;<sup>6</sup> there would be no objects, such as artworks or props, nor anything else, such as words or ideologies or a scenario, to get in between her and her "viewers." Instead, the viewers would be invited to enter into an "energy relationship" with her which would have no external visual component. I asked her how this might transpire. What would you do, without sets or scenarios, when you walked into the performance space and there was the audience? She referred to a dinner with a prominent guru in India where everyone roundabout felt a strong auratic or vibrational or tangibly ethical presence. She wanted to seduce an audience in this way. At that moment it seemed to me an old fashioned and unlikely Blavatsky-ite dream. Yet here I think I saw Abramovic significantly accomplish her goal. It is true she used a few props, but they were just survival equipment, not really symbolic or evocative in themselves. It did in fact seem that a relationship had developed about halfway through; the audience was, like the performer, respectful and dignified. Not, it seemed, naively cultish, they nevertheless respected the earnest and well-designed efforts of the artist. Abramovic was meticulous, and her audience was meticulously appreciative of it. Only on the eighth day of the twelve (a Friday), when the gallery stayed open till midnight, did things get a little ugly during the last half hour or so, as seemingly drunken people entered the room and neglected to take it seriously.

Something about Abramovic's performance reminded me of Alice Neel's paintings of herself naked. Neel famously attained a degree of objectivity that forestalled the persistent prurience of the male gaze. Similarly we watched this stately woman dress and undress, shower, and pee, without lascivious overtones in the room. Her simple human—or animal—decency forestalled

any such reaction. One watched with sympathy as she strove to maintain her bodily rightness.

Kant said that ethics and aesthetics were irredeemably separate. Each had its own imperatives, and neither could comment meaningfully on the other. As the Romantic era wore on, this became one of the dogmas of the Enlightenment that was deeply compromised. At the culmination of the Romantic period the view was that ethics and aesthetics are the same thing; this attitude survived into the time of, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>7</sup> Belief in the artist as a higher being (as in the works of Schiller referred to above) grew to the point where it was no longer possible to believe that the artist was not somehow essentially (regardless of the appearance of things) good. The long connection of art with religion fomented this belief. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," said John Keats—meaning that Kant's distinction between cognition and aesthetics was rejected. The aesthetic grew to a dominant position and more or less absorbed the ethical and the cognitive.

That view is not in the forefront of the art discourse anymore, but many cling silently to it. Abramovic is one of those for whom the practice of art would not hold any attraction if it didn't seem to have a strong ethical dimension. The same could be said of many artists whose works have been socially directed, from Joseph Beuys to Hans Haacke, though the location of the ethical for them might be different than the interiorized view that Abramovic acted out.

When Abramovic descended from her stage-set at the end, by means of an aluminum ladder without knife blades, the room was full; perhaps 150 people were there. She spoke, for the first time in 12 days, briefly and with a becoming modesty (dedicating the piece to "the people of New York City"), then went into a back room to have some carrot juice.

1. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, English translation by Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), p. 72.

2. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beer-bohm* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 101.

3. See, for example, Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 600-602.

4. James Lee Byars, who lived in Japan off and on for a decade or so and was much influenced by Shintoism, told me this bit of lore. I have no other source for it.

5. See Thomas McEvelley, "Diogenes of Sinope, Selected Performance Pieces," *Artforum* (March, 1983), pp. 58-59 (reprinted at the beginning of this book), and *Diogenes, Defictions* (Berkeley: Peter Koch, Printer, 1994).

6. See Thomas McEvelley, "Stadien der Energie: Performance-kunst am Nullpunkt?" in *Marina Abramovic, Artist Body* (Milan: Charta, 1998), pp. 14-27.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. English translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 6.421, p. 71.



## Performance Exemplified

JOSEPH BEUYS

*At Capodimante, Naples, 1986*

CONTEMPORARY ART IS NOT TRADITIONALLY SHOWN IN THE Museo di Capodimonte. Its splendid, even imperial setting high above the city of Naples, as well as the opulence of its permanent exhibition halls, an environment of gilded sedan chairs and Rococo mirrors that houses a magnificent collection of Trecento and Late Renaissance paintings, is fitting for the last show—the death show, in effect—of Joseph Beuys. Beuys was an artist whose conceptual reach extended into realms of political reality and royal fantasy or parodies of same. He claimed and to an extent received mythological status in his own lifetime, offering himself as a figure for communal identification, his whole life a kind of extended performance.

This, Beuys's last exhibition, can be approached as a conscious emblem of his death. When an artist dies, there is always a temptation to see in the last work(s) a foreshadowing of the imminent death. Occasionally, as in the case of Mark Rothko, the claim seems vaguely true—but with few exceptions, a foreknowledge of one's death is not usually made so explicit. Beuys, it seems, who had suffered for some time from both cancer and heart disease, did consciously intend this installation as a summing up and testament, and spoke of it so. He died of a heart attack in January, 1987, shortly after the installation was completed.

Climbing the grand stairs of the Capodimonte, one walks unexpectedly into what is now Beuys's ceremonial tomb. Called *Palazzo Regale* (*Royal Palace*), this installation extends beyond Beuys's death the romanticization and royalization of the artist's role that made him at once so charismatic and so controversial, creating ambiguities between fact and fiction in his work and his life. It is like a testament, a passing on of his sense of the transcendent seriousness of the artist's role, not to a specific recipient but to the world.

On the right wall of the ornate high-ceilinged room are four gilded copper rectangles, each about 6 by 3 feet, each displayed vertically in a gilded



copper frame. On the back wall hangs another of these solemn golden panels, and on the left wall, two more. This is contemporary tomb gold. It speaks of death and eternity as did the gold in King Tut's tomb. In context, these human-sized panels are now like the false doors on Egyptian mastabas, through which the spirit of the dead, freed from the limitations of the body, could escape, while earthly robbers could not get in. Something oddly like that is happening here, where Beuys has submerged himself in the image of gold, in a final apotropaic gesture to keep off robbers from the domain of the artist.

In the midst of this grand and melancholy surround stand two large gilded vitrines, one more or less centered in the space, the other against the left wall near the rear of the gallery. In the latter, various familiar Beuysian items are arrayed in the shape of a disjointed figure: two rolls of fat tied with twine, a leather roll tied with twine, a slab of fat, a bronze cane centered in a roll of felt, a second bronze cane, a long bronze crutch with two big electrical clamps attached to it, a knapsack with some quasi-electrical wiring, a wedge of felt. This vitrine seems to represent the artist's past life, the old plane, as it were, of his existence. Its familiar iconography of survival—life-giving fat, life-warming felt, ingeniously made electrical batteries—reaches back in meaning to Beuys's feelings of rebirth following his legendary plane crash in the Crimea in World War II. This story of the near-death experience would resonate through his work for the next 40 years. From the escape-sleds equipped with fat and felt and flashlights in *The Pack*, 1969; to the *Bog Action* of 1971, in which Beuys ran across and then sank into a peat bog of the type that has preserved bodies for millennia; to *Coyote*, 1974, in which he lived for one week with a coyote in a gallery, his work embodied the art of survival in the midst of raw nature. At the same time, Beuys, through his work, sought or demanded more than mere survival. Many pieces inquired after transcendence and rebirth. In the performance *Titus/Iphigenie*, 1969, while voices amplified by loudspeakers repeated "Death" and "Die," a gleaming white stallion paced the rear of the stage as Beuys clashed brazen cymbals. Even then he seemed to be acting out a summons for doors to another world to open, the white stallion, as in the *Book of Revelation*, waiting to carry him through. Throughout his work there were suggestions of Socrates' remark that philosophy is practicing death. Here, in *Palazzo Regale*, the rehearsals have come to an end.

The central vitrine, the focal point of this installation, is an invocation of death, transcendence, and rebirth. Coffinlike in shape and size, this golden vitrine holds the hareskin coat that Beuys often wore in his performance pieces. Like the rolls of fat and felt in many works, it signified warmth and the sustaining of life in the animal kingdom. Yet, unlike the empty felt suits,

the fur coat was never merely a prop; its frayed blue-silk lining testifies to its years of wear. Here, the coat, as much an emblem of Beuys himself as his crumpled hat, is laid out lengthwise on its back in the vitrine, like a corpse in a coffin, its life-sustaining function over, abandoned, no longer needed. Above the neck of the coat, where the wearer's head would be, a cinder-black iron head lolls to one side, its mouth open as if screaming in a violent death. Where the wearer's right foot would be is a conch shell, a Paleolithic symbol of returning to the source. Approximately where the wearer's hands would be rest the cymbals that Beuys used in *Titus/Iphigenie*. The objects in this vitrine are like the traces—the relics—of a final performance in which the absent figure clashed the cymbals to announce its own demise or disappearance; then, amid the golden wall panels, resonating still to the silent clashing of the cymbals, the figure vanished, leaving behind its empty coat as it sank into the darkness of the bog.

#### ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

*At Houghton Gallery, Cooper Union, New York. 1984*

THIS DOCUMENTARY EXHIBITION OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S contributions to performance works of various types included sets, costumes, audiotapes, photodocumentation and written descriptions of works from the period 1954-83. His time with the Judson Dance Theater (1963-67), when he created nine performance pieces of his own, was the central focus of the show. For those years in the '60s he was an important later carrier of the venerable Performance tradition—Futurist, Constructivist, Dadaist, Surrealist—that more or less did it all before 1920, then fell into desuetude for 30 years or more. Rauschenberg's major pieces of this type were represented richly, both by photographs and by objects redolent with the reality of their use and still fresh in their presence. In *Spring Training*, 1965, 30 turtles moved about the stage with flashlights attached to their backs while women dressed in bridal veils and short white dresses passed out saltines among the audience. Rauschenberg wheeled a shopping cart of ticking clocks through the aisles while his son tore out the pages of a New York phone book rigged for sound to amplify the tearing noise. Steve Paxton moved around with a large tin can attached to his knee and finally Rauschenberg, master of ceremonies in white dinner jacket, dropped dry ice into a bucket of water slung round his waist on a window-washer's harness till all disappeared into a sorcerer's mist while hula music played. Comments on forced audience participation, introduction of random elements, anti-aesthetic gesture, and other classical themes of the '20s avant-garde are unnecessary. The visitors



to Cooper Union saw the can from Paxton's knee, tore pages from a similarly amplified phone book, and fingered the bridal veils, while wondering where the saltines had gone and where, for that matter, the turtles. The shopping cart filled with ticking clocks could be wheeled around as much as one liked. And so it went. One saw the anklets with Coke cans that were filled with steaming dry ice while Rauschenberg, flashlights attached to his knees, walked about mysteriously in *Map Room I*, 1965; the word cards held up by four blindfolded men in tuxedos in *Map Room II*, 1965, forming sentences like "Myrna Loy is bearded hands" (the first man held up mostly proper nouns, the second verbs, the third adjectives, the fourth common nouns); part, not all, of Deborah Hay's costume for *Map Room II* (it had live doves inside it once); the shoes embedded in Plexiglas made for Rauschenberg by Arman and echoed some years later by Laurie Anderson's skates in ice, as well as the neon tube (like her bow) that he carried about while wearing them; and the amplified bedsprings that Trisha Brown rolled around on and that Paxton and Alex Hay rolled right over on automobile-tire shoes. From *Linoleum*, 1966, the last of the great pieces, one saw the ten-foot-long wheeled chicken coop in which Paxton, lying on his belly among live chickens, wheeled himself around the stage while Simone Forti, in an antique wedding dress and sitting on a throne, threw cooked spaghetti about. As absurdist Happenings, Rauschenberg's work during these years often surpassed that of more famous masters, eclipsed historically though it was by his artworks to be hung on walls. In the late '60s the pieces distinctly lost vitality, becoming celebrity lists including everyone from Frank Stella to Brice Marden to Mel Bochner. Then, after a long hiatus (1967-77) during which Rauschenberg was occupied with other things, came the supposed collaborations of recent years, for example those with the Trisha Brown Company, which on the whole might better not have happened.

#### HERMANN NITSCH

*At David Nolan, New York. 1988*

IN 1959, WHEN HE WAS 21, NITSCH SAW AN EXHIBITION CURATED by Alfred Barr, "The New American Painting," which was then traveling through Europe and which contained works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Sam Francis, and others. Around that time he also saw Hans Namuth's influential films and photographs of Pollock at work. The Action Painters came as a revelation to him, for they appeared to have discovered a channel into the unconscious that was more direct and went deeper than the Surrealist channel. Both the performative element of Action Painting

and its somewhat self-sacrificial spirituality—its sense of the artist almost disemboweling himself upon the canvas—seemed to express the unconscious, or the self's Dionysian aspect, which involves the loss of the self into the whole through ecstatic activity.

In America, Action Painting is said to have foreshadowed the early Happenings, many of which involved the on-the-spot making of a paint-splattered environment; in Europe, it had a similar but deeper and more lasting effect on Nitsch's work. By the time Nitsch discovered Action Painting, he had already been thinking about staging elaborate, carefully organized events as the basis of a new kind of theater, which he called *Orgien Mysterien Theater*. The first of these group performance events, or *Aktionen*, took place in 1960, and there have been more than 80 since then. From these "actions," which involve the pouring of blood from ritually slaughtered animals over naked or nearly naked performers, Nitsch developed his *Malaktionen*, or "painting actions," in which in addition to blood he uses paint, brushing, pouring, and splattering both substances over large stretched canvases standing against the walls or draped across the floor.

In these performances, by acting out a ritual of initiation into ancient communal and sacrificial cults, he has taken Action Painting into three dimensions and invested it with the vast unconsciousness of nature. Nitsch's first *Malaktion* was also in 1960; since then, he has done 19 more, some of them autonomous and others in conjunction with the O.M. Theater's performances. Each *Malaktion* takes place in an entire room, which Nitsch prepares by covering the floor with paper (to protect it) and then arranging the canvases around him. He goes into "a Dionysiac painting frenzy" (or a "painting orgy," as he has also called it), pushing the blood and paint about with push brooms, smearing it with his hands, throwing it on blindfolded, lying in it and squirming around; he is helped by assistants, who do not go into full frenzy. In the process, blood, paint, handprints, and footprints cover the paper in an even more random or "Dionysiac" pattern than they do on the stretched canvases. The papers are later removed, and the more "attractive" parts are cut out for exhibition, while other parts are reworked until they too are deemed ready for exhibition.

The 11 mixed-media paintings shown here are from Nitsch's largest *Malaktion*, performed last year in the Wiener Secession building in Vienna. The only colors are the brown of the blood and the red of the oil paint; and, except for a cross in one work, the only recognizable images are the foot- and handprints of Nitsch and his assistants. The white smocks that Nitsch wears while painting are also sometimes exhibited (though they were not in this



show), spread-armed as if in crucifixion, a symbol of the role of the artist as self-sacrificial priest and victim at once. Nitsch describes the performances with their combination of theater, painting, music, and choreography as aiming at the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a reference not only to Wagner's music dramas but to the Greek tragedies from which Wagner derived the idea. One theory has those ancient dramas originating in rites acting out human or animal sacrifice, with a later substitution of the tragic hero for the sacrificial victim. Nitsch's work links this structure with the existentialist martyrdom of the self-immolating Romantic artist. In his performances and paintings, Nitsch powerfully unites the Dionysiac idea of self-loss in Greek tragedy with the Modernist idea of the artist acting out self-loss through an orgiastic relationship to the materials of his art.

#### STELARC

*At Mo David, New York. 1984*

STELARC BEGAN A SERIES OF PERFORMANCE PIECES IN 1970 BASED on the themes of levitation and the obsolescence of the physical body. These involved suspending himself by ropes and harnesses from wooden frameworks and helium balloons. Dissatisfied with these works because his body was supported by external structures, he found his true metier in 1976, when he began the series called "Stretched Skin Suspensions." He has performed these pieces about twenty times, mostly in Japan, where he lives, and where his work attracts little attention and thus little intervention.

A "Stretched Skin Suspension" lasts about an hour to an hour and a half. Naked, Stelarc lies, sits, or stands on some platform in the position in which the suspension will take place. Metal hooks two or three inches long, like fishhooks without barbs, are inserted through his skin in symmetrical arrays, one on each shoulder, one above each nipple, two on each side, three pairs in the back, one on each thigh and calf, and so on. The number of hooks varies from 14 to 18, and new holes are made at each performance. When the hooks are all inserted the supporting platform is removed, or, alternately, "the body" (as Stelarc calls himself) is raised from the floor by pulleys. In one case Stelarc raised himself by pulling a rope; in another, rocks serving as counterweights raised "the body" and hung in midair around it. "The body" hangs suspended usually for 10 to 20 minutes. Sometimes the sound of its heartbeat is electronically amplified. During the process Stelarc directs every move with a cool technical demeanor. After the suspension period, either the platform is reintroduced beneath him or he is lowered to the floor. The hooks are removed, with very little blood, and "the body" dons a bathrobe,

looking like a welterweight boxer after a bout.

Stelarc denies that the work has any religious or mystical intention, though he acknowledges influence from the literature of religious asceticism. He prefers to formulate his intentions in terms of science, but the distinction in this case is really one of connotation only. The idea that science may free humans from their bodies and allow them to travel freely through space is not so much a scientific prediction as a religious myth in which science is presented as a millennial force that will restore the state of Eden. (This myth inspired Yves Klein, too.) Stelarc speaks of technology as an evolutionary strategy to create a hybrid human with Lamarckian speed. He describes the "Stretched Skin Suspensions" as experiments toward redesigning the human body through transcending pain. In any case, the events themselves are extraordinarily powerful both in presence and in the photodocumentation that was exhibited here. The most remarkable photographs were of the site suspensions, one in an elevator shaft, one over the ocean, one from a tree, and so on.

#### TEHCHING HSIEH / LINDA MONTANO

*New York. 1984*

FROM 6 PM ON JULY 4, 1983, UNTIL 6 PM ON JULY 4, 1984, TEHCHING Hsieh and Linda Montano were tied together continuously with an eight-foot rope which passed loosely around their waists and was sealed at each end. Their intention was not to touch each other except accidentally—about 60 brush-bys and one brief hug by Montano occurred during the year. They slept in separate beds a few feet apart. When one used the bathroom, the other waited outside the door, but aside from this they were never in separate rooms. Both remained celibate for the duration. The piece, entitled *Art/Life One Year Performance*, was an extreme example of Vow Art or Endurance Art, and grew naturally out of the past work of each artist.

Hsieh has specialized in year-long vow works—a year in a cell, a year punching a time clock every hour, a year out of doors in Manhattan. The present piece was conceived by Hsieh, but nevertheless was as intimately related to Montano's earlier work as to his. In 1973, for example, Montano and Tom Marioni were handcuffed together for three days, and for ten minutes each day made a video document of the event; in *Art/Life*, similarly, Hsieh and Montano made one photograph of themselves or of their situation every day. They also recorded all their conversations. In a sense the success of the piece is shown by the fact that one has to go outside the usual art-reviewing vocabulary to reveal its workings.

Montano and Hsieh met several months before the beginning of the



piece. The apparent similarities between their sensibilities as artists were deep. At one point, in fact, their relationship was physical, and in this connection the piece, with its rule against touching, might be seen as a direct act of aggression against the natural expressiveness of their lives. A part of the nightmare that ensued (Montano estimates that they fought 80 percent of the time) lay in their discovery, after being tied together, that they had very different views of what the piece meant and why it was important—views in fact devastatingly polarized. For Montano, to designate something as art is to give it a special quality of alert but nonaggressive appreciation. A related piece she did in 1979 was called *Learning to Pay Attention*, a classical Zen kind of title. For Hsieh the process is more abstract, a kind of impersonal embodiment of will as an absolute that overrides questions of individual attitude. While she thought of meditation retreats, he thought in terms of his three years in the Taiwanese army. (“One-year performance,” he said Confucianly, “not long compared to three years in army.”) To Montano again, the work was a matter of coping sanely with a relationship under unusually focused circumstances; for Hsieh the absolutist gesture was pure, and human incident was irrelevant to it. “This kind of work deny emotion,” he says.

As time passed the two found that they had very different ideas about how to approach the art/life proposition. The characteristic year-long duration of Hsieh’s work is a strategy to overcome the distinction between art and life. “To do piece for one week,” he says, “is to separate my art and my life, is to feel myself perform.” Montano, on the other hand, did a piece with Pauline Oliveros in 1975, called *Living Art*, in which the two lived together for four days and “called that time art.” Hsieh denounced her past work on the grounds that the art/life separation was too great in it. Yet this was a question to which Montano had devoted much thought and action (she has published a book on her own work called *Art in Everyday Life*), and to her his Stoic imperturbability, his belief that “artist life is different than human life,” seemed a rejection of that everyday life. The artists’ mutual loss of respect for each other’s work was a renunciation of the collaboration while it was going on. In effect, two different pieces were in process, and by the time they realized this they had made a trap and sprung it on themselves. The life aspect had taken over.

At the moment of this realization, the piece became extraordinarily real and important. Demanding fulfillment on its own terms, it began to reveal its previously hidden will. It was no longer under the artists’ control, and that was its great reality. From being its creators they became its creatures. In addition to deep and constant disagreement about what they were in

fact doing, the strain on Montano and Hsieh of a complete lack of privacy was intense. They found, for example, that normal social hypocrisy, like being different to different friends on the telephone, was ruled out by the constant presence of each other’s worst critic. Perhaps the worst stress was the constant dependence on each other’s approval to fulfill their moment-to-moment needs and impulses. For one person to go to the bathroom, to get a drink of water, to look out the window, both had to walk. The arrangement presupposed a certain good will on both sides. At times the artists fought physically, each yanking his or her end of the rope. “We were becoming more animal-like,” says Montano. The period of yanking was followed by a period of refusing to speak to each other. “Somewhat like monkeys,” says Montano, “we began pointing with sounds and groans and moans. We stopped talking almost completely.” Also, each could veto any action suggested by the other. Their rule, as that of the Roman constitution, was that a negative vote prevails over a positive. On some days the vetoes became retaliatory and accumulated till the two were immobilized for hours in sullen hatred of one another. Montano has remarked that if it hadn’t been for the rule not to touch she would have killed Hsieh a thousand times. Twice he threw pieces of furniture to the floor very near her. Neither struck the other.

When the piece began, whatever the two artists’ expectations, they were waiting for it to reveal itself; what it turned out to be is in no sense a sign that it failed, quite the contrary. That it embodied the raw power of life in all its danger lends dignity and integrity to the art/life commitment. If Hsieh and Montano had spent an easy year it would have proved little. But to execute the piece with formalist rigor and self-restraint, though they were in its power and sometimes in a living hell, shows how serious is the idea that art like science or philosophy has the strength to frame anything in life, not just the pretty stuff.

#### FIONA TEMPLETON

*At Performing Garage, New York. 1983*

IN FIONA TEMPLETON’S THREE PROGRAMS THE PROSCENIUM ARCH was tightly in place, the audience secure in its space and its role. *Thought/Death*, 1980, the oldest of the pieces, was still the most gripping and explosive, a rare example of minimalism infused with dramatic presence. In the “Thought” section of the work Templeton stood in front of the audience for perhaps ten minutes trying to think of something to say and never managing to do so (the only word, repeated several times, was “It’s”). The slenderness and abortive suspension of this moment led into “Death”; as the lights were



brought up and down with a slow, strobeflike pulse, changing every two or three seconds, Templeton “died” perhaps thirty times in different situations. Each time the lights came up she was discovered in a new position, either dead or dying, often falling. The obsessive minimalist repetitiveness of the schema was brought to glowing life by the authority and skill of the performer’s presence.

Templeton often works with semi-mechanical schemata offset by organic aberrations through which the human element at times glows like a trapped spirit, at times recedes invisibly into the net of the mechanical form. *There Was Absent Achilles* showed Templeton and Glenys Johnson at work in an office, dealing in apparently mindless, repetitive ways with scores of familiar objects (such as telephones and file folders) which more or less take the place of their personalities. The piece points to the fact that in so much of what we do “we” are not really present as sources of will or action but are merely dealing with objects in the ways that objects require: the personalities of the performers were eclipsed behind the processes of taking up, putting down, transporting, ordering, and so on.

The interpenetration of mechanical schemata with human attitudes was presented most fully in *The New Three Act Piece*. In the first act the four performers, all female, executed an amusing series of speeches and actions with moderate support from costumes and props. (The most audience-stressing moment was when a goldfish’s life appeared threatened by its use as an object.) In the second act the same series of speeches and actions was replayed, with changes in order: for three actresses the second act was a reverse sequence of the first; for the fourth, the same elements recurred but in irrationally shifted orders. The partial reversal played interestingly with the mind’s processes of memory and expectation, and led to a sense of completeness as what had unfolded in act one was (with qualifications) folded back up again in the second. The third act reversed sequences again in various ways, without ever fully restoring the original situation.

*Under Paper Spells*, 1982, was a different type of affair. Here it was not a grid of orderly patterning that the players were confronted with, but a materiality, a substance. Templeton and collaborator Miranda Payne appeared naked and interacted with one another in various mostly aggressive ways, dueling with large rolls of paper, dressing in them, disappearing in them, exchanging messages with them, and so forth. Though often amusing, this piece struck me as the least interesting. The quirky and personal response to intellectual rigidity that informs the other pieces seems an important part of Templeton’s offering.

All the pieces were tiny and rugged. Two were performed by Templeton alone; none involved complex or expensive sets, props, costumes, lighting, or sound. Templeton is still attempting to use Modernism directly for nourishment. The approach raises questions at this most ambiguous moment. Is the solo performance along structuralist or phenomenological lines simply a sterile repetition of old experiments, as Richard Schechner has said? Or are there still significant areas to explore?

#### PINA BAUSCH

*At Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York. 1984*

WHILE PINA BAUSCH’S WORK IS CONSISTENTLY SURPRISING, IT IS not altogether unpredictable. The four works seen here in their New York premieres—*The Rite of Spring*, 1975, *Cafe Muller*, 1976, *Bluebeard*, 1977, and 1980, 1980—deal with the ancient motif of “Death and the maiden,” or the Persephone myth. In addition, all exhibit a Wagnerian leisure in making their points, and making them again and again, till all meaning the artist has access to has been wrung out of them; meanwhile, the intensity of concentration rises in an almost demonic arc. Still, in other ways the four works are entirely different.

I am here describing 1980, a work that revives the Dada performance vocabulary and brings it to life with astonishing vigor. Except for a low platform, the stage is stripped bare back to the rear wall of the theater and covered with sod and grass. The light is dim. A youth enters, sits on the platform and begins slowly, catatonically eating. Couples enter as a Beethoven adagio is heard. Slow, droopy ballroom dancing begins. The dancers parade through the audience and back. One woman is separated from the others, who say goodbye to her, though all remain on stage. The magician Death enters to show his trick of making threads longer or cutting them short, as the Fates do in Greek mythology. A woman undresses a man and gives him a hotfoot. A woman kisses a man till his face is red with lipstick. Two or three things are going on at once now, and then suddenly it’s ten: people are eating, dressing, undressing, exchanging places, cutting things on plates, moving in every direction. A nearly naked girl is hiding demurely behind this person or that. Mae West is imitated. The stage becomes the medium. It gathers its energies into a center which breaks into two centers, then three, then diffuses into a loose all-over texture, suddenly empties, is still, is cut slowly by one movement, then two, five, ten. It fills, empties, fills, empties. Children’s games are played. There is more slow, droopy ballroom dancing. Characters emerge and speak to the audience. “My granny is in the sky. Do you know



how she got there?" "The other day our parrot did something that made me wild!" Regressions into childhood spread through the cast. Slapstick laughter shakes the hall. "The boy stood on the burning deck" is recited, while a comedienne in a raincoat flashes the audience. Work of different kinds is going on in different parts of the stage. People run in and out on various errands. They strip, change clothes, moon the audience, circulate, disappear. Women handle men like babies, dressing and undressing them. The center roams everywhere. "Hi kids," a man says, "O boy, I'm rarin' to go!" Jokes flow around as aesthetic elements. A man repeatedly interrupts a woman with formulaically stylized gestures, while actions everywhere stutter and repeat. "When I came in," a woman declares, "everything had already happened." Judy Garland's voice, at high volume, sings "Over the Rainbow" as a man, alone on stage, lies down and covers himself completely except for his bare ass. He is sunbathing. Others enter and do the same. A woman in Arab garb sunbathes with only her eyes exposed and sunglasses on. All over the stage people lie and sit in odd mute postures, taking the sun of the land beyond the rainbow as the music rides heavily over them. Persephone enters and says, "I want to go home." The men throw a woman in the air over and over. Repeatedly she looks at the audience from 20 feet up, her hair flying around her intense gaze. Other women are thrown about by men in various fashions. The stage is darkening. Dead girls are scattered around the grass. The house lights come up. It is intermission.

Part 2 is at first more openly comedic; it becomes Monty Python. This is the weakest part of the work, but it passes. The players parade again through the audience while a gymnast silently works out on parallel bars at the distant rear of the stage. An actor sneaks through the audience teasing selected persons. The magician appears and again displays his inexplicable cuttings and reparations. A girl dances with a sprinkler. Women wrap corpses. A woman shakes Jell-O on a plate, then shakes her breasts. A shot gunman staggers around a grave. Another girl juggles green and red Jell-O. A girl strips, a boy eats, a Chinese girl is buried. A butler serves tea through the audience till called on stage to pour. Gazing across the proscenium he says, "Would anyone else like tea?" He returns to serve the audience. An actor tries to disgust the front row by playing naughtily with his food. The Chinese girl is buried again. The staggering gunman sits down at last at a table by the grave. Lights flash and a frenzied jitterbugging takes possession of everyone. They jiggle insanelly, then slow flawlessly into the droopy, tragical ballroom dancing again. Persephone reappears and the others gather slowly into a group and stare at her. The lights go down.

Some negative criticism of 1980 has come from dance critics who feel, rightly I think, that it is not dance but theater. Once the point is granted, one might begin to criticize the very quality of the work that has earned it such popularity, namely that it is so easy to like, that it has gone so far in the direction of the popular entertainment. But such a criticism, I think, is rendered irrelevant by the quality of the wit and stagecraft, which constantly embody insight even in their appeal to the familiar vocabulary of Dada performance and avant-garde theater. In a sense 1980 is a post-Modern recapitulation of 20th-century avant-garde theater. But the audience did not for the most part experience it that way. It felt like a new work, or like one that has showed us something anew and restored interest and confidence in areas of our aesthetic that had seemed dull from familiarity.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN  
*At Emily Harvey, New York. 2000*

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN'S WORK HAS REMAINED CONSISTENTLY committed to the facts of women's cultural reality as recorded in history. Some artists of her generation who made a similar commitment and kept it found themselves ghettoized as one-issue artists producing work not only about women but for them. Nothing necessarily wrong with that—still, Schneemann's work has seemed too big to fit that ghetto. In a smoothly articulated inner contradiction she overleapt the limits of a subject matter while at the same time affirming them, or accepting them, in her work. Some of her famous early works attained archetypal stature in the realm where performance art is almost an aspect of the history of religion (a realm which includes Body Art as well as Ritual Art). Works such as *Eye Body*, 1963, *More than Meat Joy*, 1964, and *Interior Scroll*, 1967, were forthright products of the first generation of the Women's Movement, frankly based on essentialism and the need (not just desire) to posit a prehistoric matriarchy. The scholarship of Maria Gimbutas might roughly locate this tradition in the dark depths of Neolithic Old Europe. But at the same time these works acted upon the history of religion, they also acted on the history of art, as self-conscious ripostes to the Body Art that "the boys" were heroizing themselves with.

*Vespers Pool* (2000) occupies related areas of the feminist aesthetic. Autobiographical and intensely personal, it yet invokes another archetypal realm of women's history—the witch with her feline familiar. Vesper, Schneemann's cat, who had been a collaborator in her recent works, died on July 19, 1999—a small matter, seemingly, but still, to regard it as less than monumental would be, again, to ignore the long history of religion. Akkadian



Ishtar was represented by a lioness; the Great Goddess of Catal Huyuk by leopards; André Leroi-Gourhan has suggested that the association of the female with the carnivorous feline may go back to the Magdalenian caves.

Entering the installation one first saw, in a vertical vitrine, the blood-stained nightgown which caught Vesper's hemorrhaging of July 15. It hangs there almost like a priestly garment, seeming to refer to the bloodstained white cassocks of Hermann Nitsch's own incursions into the realms of ancient religions. But Schneemann has characteristically skewed the material into another riposte to the overweening scale of men's ambitions; the nightgown is clearly feminine and has to do with intimacy in bed rather than with temple ceremonial. In terms of the longstanding anti-feminism of male clergies, it seems to commemorate a sacrilege, while in terms of the reality of women's cultural history it has the accumulated dignity of millennia of child-bearing, corpse laying-out, lamentation, and rending of garments. The priestesses of Ishtar lamented so the annual death of Tammuz.

One walked on among a laying out of moments in a series of glass-fronted niches, like the card-by-card appearance of a Tarot hand. The death of the small incubus is recorded as a staged transition from healthy moments of great flying leaps between buildings to the tragic sopping outflow of life-force-as-bodily fluid. The July 15 hemorrhage is followed by fragments of the tree split by lightning behind Vesper's photograph on August 10, through other momentary intersections of the tangled web to the dove (of Aphrodite) that fell dead in her hands while invoking Vesper by the pond on September 27, the deer (of Artemis) found dead in the pond on October 5. The corridor led to a darkened space that was at once theatrical and outdoor-like; on walls and floor various projections of Vesper-in-nature moved in orchestrated ways on six video projectors while various sounds—trains on tracks, coffee percolating, a cat purring, a veil of insects murmuring, bells ringing cacophonously—interwove and seeped into one another. The artist's archaic quality of experiencing psychic affiliation with her materials is offset by forcing it through cool hightech means.

Here, as in some earlier works, Schneemann insists that one function of art objects is to be fetishistic channels into the death place. In *Mortal Coils*, 1994, an interaction of oneiromancy and mediumism was embodied in multiple projections among slowly twisting ropes as if something were dimly viewed while transpiring underwater or in a netherworld. *Vespers Pool* further develops both the theme and the mood, into a mini-gesamtkunstwerk combining sculpture, film, projective environment, performance, and sound sculpture. Finally, while the various strands of history weave through

the work and on their way, the six large Iris prints, commemorating earlier moments in stasis, will remain as a funereal monument.

#### MARSHALL WEBER

*At The Angel Orensanz Foundation, New York, 2000*

FOR FOUR DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS, STARTING ON THE WINTER solstice (Dec. 21) at 6 AM, performance artist Marshall Weber read the Bible aloud from the pulpit of the Shul of New York synagogue on Norfolk Street. He started at the beginning of the *Old Testament* and ended, with the conclusion of the *New Testament*, at about 6 PM on Christmas Eve. This was Weber's fourth in a series of public readings that fall within the category of Ordeal or Endurance Art, a Performance genre derived from Body Art. He read Joyce's *Ulysses* in 33 hours (a record, he says) in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1994. Two years later, it was Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 24 hours in Cleveland. In 1998, swathed in blankets in a freezing refrigerator trailer in the already icy tundra of Alberta, Canada, Weber read, for 22 hours, William Vollman's account of the 1847 Franklin Expedition, which saw 129 sailors perish in a doomed attempt to discover the Northwest Passage.

Weber thought of his Bible reading as a farewell to the millennium, a kissing-off of the book that he believes, more than any other, made that millennium—as well as the one before it—a miserable, murderous ordeal. Weber had forsworn shaving and haircuts for one year in order to look as hirsute as an Old Testament prophet, and he dressed in vaguely Middle Eastern robes. His voice quickly grew weak and, after a sonorous beginning, the reading alternated between a hushed whisper and a rapid murmur.

In the late nights at the Neo-Gothic building (the only Gothic synagogue in the world, says director Al Orensanz), with perhaps two or three people on the chairs and couch facing the lectern, the event seemed both friendly and ancient. The elegantly run-down synagogue evoked an archaic or abandoned temple from a nearly forgotten age. (It is a heartening gesture that this noble space is being used today for contemporary art exhibitions and off-beat performances, like Weber's, that often arise from eccentric inner urges.) The tiny audience seemed to be silently contemplating a recurring nightmare that had characterized the departing year/century/millennium.

On the third night, without any premonitory slowing or halting of reading, Weber suddenly fell asleep between words, his forehead crashing onto the book. The members of the audience sat quietly. Snow fell silently beyond the windows. Yahweh's rage against the Amorites was stilled. The world could rest, for a moment, it seemed, while the reader nodded.



## The Triumph of Anti-Art?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SPEAK OF THE “TRIUMPH OF ANTI-ART”? In the foregoing chapters what is meant by “anti-art” has come pretty clear; but the question what is meant by “triumph” remains. Is the idea of triumph really appropriate to a movement which was founded on a determinedly outsider stance from which it drew a sense of moral superiority? Clearly if a movement that started as oppositional succeeds in overthrowing the previously hegemonic establishment and replacing it, it may be said to have triumphed; but at the same time it may have lost the claim to virtue that its outsider status had been felt to confer. Has it simply become a new hegemon? Does its success mean it has been coopted by the culture industry? By its triumph has it lost the higher moral ground?

The question involves a series of assumptions: that there is a higher moral ground, that the anti-art tradition has laid claim to it, and that it should be judged by whether it has fulfilled or failed that claim. As a critical approach this is a classical case—almost a parody—of the Intentional Fallacy in which the so-called New Critics in the 1950s argued that it is a fallacy to judge a work by consulting its (or its maker’s) intentions and assessing whether or not they have been fulfilled. Instead, a work should be considered in terms of what it actually did in the world, regardless of what it had been intended to do.

These questions had not seemed so urgent until recently, when the hegemony of anti-art has been solidly in place for some time. The discourse about it has gradually solidified, putting its claim to be of an essentially questioning nature into question. Though the discussion has been mostly cast in terms of Conceptual Art, Performance Art is tacitly subsumed into it. The term Conceptual Art has assumed an expanded slang-like usage as the general term for the anti-art of the last generation.



History illustrates the situation in various ways, including the record of publications. Ursula Meyer's book *Conceptual Art* was published in 1972, while the movement was still fresh. In the next year Gregory Battcock's collection *Idea Art* and Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* appeared.<sup>1</sup> For almost twenty-five years those were the only books in English on Conceptual Art. In time, they went out of print and were not reissued. For a while there were literally no books on Conceptual Art available in the English language. In a sense this could be taken as indicating it had failed. But because of its questioning oppositional nature the value of either success or failure is ambiguous, even at times seeming to be inverted. British conceptualist Ian Burn, a member of Art and Language, opined in 1981 that "perhaps the most significant thing that can be said to the credit of Conceptual art is that it failed."<sup>2</sup> But that was said in 1981, during the drought of discourse about Conceptual Art. Recently the situation has changed. Almost at the very end of the millennium, the floodgates opened. New books on Conceptual Art are coming out every year now, especially in the brief period since 1998. At last and suddenly, art history, it seems, has acknowledged both the presence and the legitimacy of Conceptual Art.<sup>3</sup>

A similar situation has held for Performance Art. For decades English-readers have depended on RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, first published in 1978, and Gregory Battcock's collection (completed after his death by Robert Nickas) *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, 1984.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps because of Performance's seeming similarity to theater the neglect of it was not as meticulous as that of Conceptual Art.<sup>5</sup> Still, as one author noted in 1990, "performance art has remained...largely absent from the official histories of modern art."<sup>6</sup> There wasn't much around at booklength until the late '90s, when similarly a floodgate opened, especially among women scholars focussing on Body Art.<sup>7</sup>

After a prolonged desert of discourse it is a relief to have new voices in the discussion. But there are also some uneasy feelings about it. One is the question of whether a movement that freezes has the same value as when it was taking form. "Once people know what to expect," one author notes, the subject "is ready for its footnotes"<sup>8</sup>—meaning that it is dead—the freshness that made Meyer's book so intensely engaging in 1972 is over. The implication that both Conceptual Art and Performance Art are "ready for their footnotes" means that they have lived out their moment. They have said what they had to say; now they have become academies. One might as well say "ready for its obituaries"—which is what all those recent books (and perhaps this one, too) may turn out to be.

Another uneasy feeling does not focus on the idea that these art forms are over, but rather on the fact that they have become, since Burn declared in 1981 that Conceptual Art had failed, not only successful but predominant in art practice. One reads that "conceptualism has become all-pervasive if not dominant in the art world."<sup>9</sup> But dominant as what?

First Dada, then later Conceptual Art and Performance Art, presented themselves as modes of critique and protest. That, you might say, was basic or essential to their intention. It is this claim which has come under special attack from the Marxist side of the discussion. The case of Situationism is the clearest instance. Situationism is the one case of a utopian movement that expelled artists on the ground that their metier was innately conservative or protective of the status quo—that art was inherently counter-revolutionary. The schism occurred in 1961-62. Gruppe SPUR, "a Munich-based group of expressive painters, was 'officially' excluded from the Situationist International in 1961,"<sup>10</sup> along with a group of Scandinavian members and others who went on to found splinter groups like the Swedish "situationist Bauhaus" and the publication *Situationist Times*. The rift was over "the compatibility of individual artistic creation with the situationist demand for a unified and uncompromising struggle."<sup>11</sup> The expulsions represented the insistence by Guy Debord, the Neo-Marxist Situationist theorist, "that the SI should remain as uncontaminated as possible by any involvement in the spectacle of alienated production and consumption."<sup>12</sup>

The expulsion of artists was a grand symbolic coup for Situationism, and will remain one of its special laurels in radical history. Still, the reputation of that famous schism is somewhat exaggerated. It was specifically expressionist painters who were expelled, at the moment when painterly expressionism was especially associated with the Abstract Expressionist exhibitions circulated in Europe by the American State Department starting in 1959. While the expressionist painters were expelled, artists who were dedicated to the anti-art position, such as Asger Jorn, remained active members, and anti-artistic types of intervention, with traces of Dada influence, remained a part of Situationist tactics. It was not, in other words, anti-art that was expelled from Situationism: it was art. Far from being a denunciation of Dada the act showed Situationism's Dada credentials. In 1919, as Dada was in the process of breaking up, John Heartfield and Georg Grosz wrote, "The name of artist is an insult."<sup>13</sup> A half a century later Debord echoed the sentiment: "Art can no longer be justified..." he wrote, "as an activity...to which anyone could honorably devote oneself."<sup>14</sup>

Debord's personal position on these matters was more ferocious than



that of Situationism in general. Though the famous expulsion was not aimed at the Dada tradition, this tradition too received his stringent criticism. Dada's "historic role," he said, "is to have delivered a mortal blow to the traditional conception of culture."<sup>15</sup> Still, his respect for Dada was based on the fact that it had disbanded, like Burn's later praise of Conceptual Art for its failure. Dada had realized the contradictions of the process the Situationists called recuperation, whereby the culture industry "recovers" rebellious gestures by doing whatever is necessary to assimilate them, then proceeds to make them commodities. Realizing this, the original Dadaists had taken the honorable way out.

The main problem with Dada from Debord's point of view—the factor that caused its disbanding—is that it operated within the society it wished to abolish; it was part of that society and thus in position to be easily co-opted by it. The process was simple. The society roundabout accepted Dada as a part of itself and recuperated it or brought it into the mainstream. "Dada was...unable," says one author, "...to confront or step outside of the culture it despised."<sup>16</sup> The closest thing to a triumph that can be credited to it is that, "doomed to find a place within the existing system of values, all it could do was ensure that its reception was made as difficult as possible." But in time the existing system of values was able to assimilate it with little adjustment; Dada morphed into Monte Python. If it is true that "any participation inevitably enters into a relation of support with the system of values and economic relations it seeks to undermine,"<sup>17</sup> then what did Conceptual Art become as it "triumphed"? Debord felt that it simply accepted the traits of the bourgeois society around it and became a way of preventing social insight and reform rather than promoting them.

On this view, there was never any possibility that art, by sidestepping into anti-art, could become a true site of contestation. That ambition was never anything but absurd. As Debord argued in *The Society of Spectacle*, "everything arising in the spectacle assumes its characteristics: interventions will always be forced to assume the equivalence and vacuity of the commodity."<sup>18</sup> It is impossible for art to disturb the order of society, for that is its own order.<sup>19</sup> From this point of view Dada's greatest triumph was seeing that, for the sake of its own principles, it had to disband. Dada enacted as a group the same drama that Duchamp had enacted in his retirement from art.

The reluctant condemnation Debord accorded to Dada has been far less reluctantly accorded to Conceptual and Performance Art. The issue is not about aesthetic values but about an art form's ability to effect social change. Both Conceptual Art and Performance Art have been regarded as

too limited to manage this, as they involve only artistic practice, whereas CoBrA, for example, involved "painters, poets, architects, ethnologists and theorists;"<sup>20</sup> the hope was that in such a mix art-as-entertainment value was less likely to become dominant; its whorish nature might be held in check by less seductive professions.

The idea of political groups expelling art was itself soon enough recuperated as an artistic gesture. The response was a refusal to make art. The idea that art could be used to fight the bourgeoisie on the cultural front had been falsified by the problem of recuperation. The lesson was widely taken as meaning that making different kinds of paintings and sculptures, and calling them anti-paintings and anti-sculptures, is simply another way of playing into the hands of the culture industry. The only affront the culture industry could not turn to its own use was an absolute refusal to make more art of any kind. Out of such thinking grew the idea of the art strike—a variant of the idea of retiring (or going underground). Inspired in part by Dada calls for the downfall and end of art ("Art is dead! Long live Dada!"), the request for a temporary cessation of art activities throughout society for a preset period arose in Paris in 1968 in response to the events of May.<sup>21</sup> Almost twenty years later Gustave Metzger, founder of the Destruction in Art Symposium, called for a three-year strike from 1987-90 but attracted little support; a similar proposal by Goren Dordevic in 1979 and a revival of the plan ten years later met similar fates.<sup>22</sup> The experience of the problem of anti-art—the tragedy of recuperation—can provoke despair, from Dada's disbanding to Duchamp's retirement to the Art Strike fever and finally to Debord's 1994 suicide, which was enshrined by Philippe Sollers in *Liberation* (6 Dec. 1994) as "the purest critique of the 'spectacle'."

The idea that neither art nor anti-art ever was or ever will be any good as a tool of protest against bourgeois society is an extreme position alongside other more forgiving ones. A slightly more forgiving stance holds that Dada itself was legitimate but not neo-Dada—meaning primarily Conceptual and Performance Art. In fact, through a long history of shifting positions, Dada has emerged with its reputation for integrity fairly intact. It seems vindicated by its venerable place in art history, an ironic outcome since that argumentum ad auctoritatem is against Dada principles. The recent neo-avant-garde, on the other hand, still seems vulnerable to being discredited on the grounds that it has not yet been sufficiently legitimized by art history.

Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1975: "To the degree that modernity has a meaning, it is this: it carries within itself, from the beginning, a radical negation—Dada, this event which took place in a Zurich cafe."<sup>23</sup> Does the



recent more establishmentarian and commodified activity of Conceptual and Performance Art still provide such a radical negation? Or is it the decaying corpse of “this event which took place in a Zurich cafe”?

In shaping this position—that Dada was legitimate and the post-World War II wave of Neo-Dadaisms was not—both Marxist and formalist critics have argued that an avant-garde can only happen once; a Neo-avant-garde is a contradiction in terms.<sup>24</sup> Marxists see the second anti-art period as the culture industry’s tactic to recuperate, or render assimilable, the first; formalists insist on stylistic innovation, so the second time around on some art historical statement does not count. The two attitudes merge in the Marxist-formalist lineage that goes from Clement Greenberg to the *October* critics.

This lineage still reflects the Hegelian view that history, when properly on course, always moves forward. On these grounds one formalist critic refers to Neo-Dada as “pseudo-Dada,”<sup>25</sup> implying that market forces deliberately contrived it as a way to recuperate and make profit from the heritage of Dada. Greenberg himself calls Neo-Dada a “counter-avant-garde,” and declares that it was actually academic as soon as it began and only pretended to be an avant-garde as a marketing device.<sup>26</sup> “The avant-garde,” one critic concludes, “is turned into its own negation.”<sup>27</sup> Since the avant-garde is essentially innovative, the idea of a neo-avant-garde is necessarily counter-avant-garde.

As Conceptual Art has reflected upon itself and its circumstances, this problem has become part of its subject matter. It is a major challenge of self-knowledge for this supposedly most cognitive and self-referential of art media. Several works of the neo-avant garde have pointed to the mechanism by which the culture industry recuperates its symbols of resistance. An example was Sherrie Levine’s exhibition, in 1993 at the Mary Boone Gallery, of what appeared to be cast-gold replicas of Duchamp’s *Ready-made, Fountain*.

Marx’s famous bon mot from *The 18th Brumaire* clings round such moments: that the occurrence of Dada was a tragedy, the occurrence of neo-Dada a farce. The tragedy of Dada is the tragedy of recuperation—the tragic impasse of the idea that individual creative force can be reclaimed for any purpose whatever by the defensive equipment of class structure. The farce of Neo-Dada can be formulated variously. It is the inherent falseness of having originated as a commodity in order to pretend to lead a campaign against commodification. It is the inherent contradiction of being “art which is not art,” as Alan Kaprow put it, or “art/not-art.”<sup>28</sup> It was the false consciousness of believing in it while not believing it.

The one-time-only idea sounds like what older people traditionally say

about younger. Life was only good when I was young, roses were only red... Richard Huelsenbeck wrote in 1955: “[In New York,] Janco, Hans Richter, Duchamp and I often discussed the possibility of starting a kind of neodada, but America, the only possible soil, is at the same time the land least suited for such a project. And so we sit together in New York and recall the good old days. We’ve grown old and we can’t evoke our youthful ardor or the miracle of working together spontaneously. The explosive energy of dada, such as we experienced in Zurich, could happen only once.”<sup>29</sup>

The idea that something can only happen once involves the concept of the miracle, a thing that is outside of ordinary causality. To see Dada in this way is to remove it from historical relevance. To see anti-art as a part of history, in contrast, is to see it as called up by certain causes which can repeat themselves, and did so, in a general way, in the two cases at hand. In both Dada and neo-Dada the ambient situation involved the dominance of the aesthetic theory in a spiritual form, the overpowering presence of World War, and the advancing shadow of the End of History.

The Dadaists seem to have felt that they were working with something that had social power. They were attempting to introduce deep change into society from the cultural superstructure down, rather than from the economic base up. This is the bourgeois, rather than the Marxist approach. According to orthodox Marxism social and cultural change originate in the economic base and percolate upward from it, sometimes reaching the upper reaches of the superstructure, where art resides, only after generations. The bourgeois approach, on the contrary, holds that changes effected in the cultural superstructure, even in the “floating” upper levels, can percolate downward and, again perhaps after generations, affect the economic base. Tzara hoped that by attacking the falseness of the superstructure one could set up a tremor that would pass through the whole society. Debord is usually strict on this point, but at times he softens the rigor of his position and seems to affirm the viability of the strategy of approaching change through the superstructure. When, for example, he says Dada was brought into existence by a “repetition of rotten superstructures,”<sup>30</sup> he implies that trying to effect change through the superstructure could, as Tzara suggested, sweep out the cultural space. Debord, like many confronted with the ambition of anti-art to be a force for social change, seems torn on the issue of whether significant change—such as change in the class structure—can be introduced from above as well as from below. He seems ambiguous again when he laments that “the dominant culture has been able to recuperate a sort of Dadaist art.”<sup>31</sup> The diction seems to imply a little slack in the situation.



Are there other “sorts” of Dadaist art that have not proved recuperable? This question would seem to be at the root of Levine’s appropriation (or “detournement”) of Duchamp’s *Fountain*.

It is arguable that Debord has overemphasized, or misrepresented, the Marxist doctrine of the relations between the economic base and the cultural superstructure. Marxist theory has been somewhat ambivalent on this issue. On the one hand Marx said, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

*The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.*<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, Friedrich Engels, in a letter of 1890, observes that:

*The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure...also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form.*<sup>33</sup>

As Eagleton says, “Elements of the superstructure constantly react back upon and influence the economic base.”<sup>34</sup>

Understanding the base-superstructure relationship in this way one can see conflating it with a bourgeois position like that of John Dewey, who argued that the primary means of social change was education. Social change, in other words, could be expected to take a generation or more. It could be influenced, if slowly, by the impetus of changes in art and literature, which would be absorbed into the educational system.

In the era when the rallying cry was revolution, there were three ways to go about it. Either strike directly at the economic base—whether by bombing the Bank of America or by infiltrating labor unions; or practice social activism—marching in the streets like Bertrand Russell; or become an activist artist, not pursuing social change directly, but indirectly through the mediation of art objects with hidden agendas. The idea was that if you could effect a revolution in art objects this would somehow help or presage a revolution in society. This was the basis of Greenberg’s Marxist formalism: he had switched loyalty from the dictatorship of the proletariat to the dictatorship of abstract painting. Art was used as an analogue to social activism, in hope of promoting engagement through a kind of sympathetic magic. Artists who called themselves cultural workers felt they were promoting a situation in which class consciousness might be more likely to arise, but to traditional radical movements it seemed that Conceptual Art had diluted

and distanced utopian ambitions by attempting to produce change through magical indirection rather than by directly taking it on. “We want people to make art with a gun in their hand,” Huelsenbeck had declared. The suspicion arose that anti-art was not really anti, just a cleverly disguised new form of the same old thing.

The next, still more forgiving position holds that, not only was Dada authentic in some way, but neo-Dada also started out well, but then degenerated quickly as it was almost immediately—within a decade or so—taken over by market forces. So-called “strong” Conceptualism, on this view, made an effective move by being (like Dada in its time) difficult to commodify. But more easily commodifiable forms of “weak” or “hybrid” Conceptualism (neo-conceptual sculpture, for example) can be seen as the culture industry’s way of turning the legacy of anti-art around so it would negate its own alleged principles and become just another way for entrepreneurs to make money.

Duchamp, who had the special vantage point of one who lived through and participated in both eras of anti-art, offered another evaluation of what was happening around him in New York in the 1960s. Despite the conversations Huelsenbeck recalled in which they reminisced about the good old days and affirmed the impossibility of an American neo-Dada, Duchamp was appreciative of neo-Dada and the early development of Conceptual and Performance Art out of it (he only witnessed the early years of this stage). When asked in an interview in 1963 why Dada had come back he said, “Dada never received its due. It was just a brushfire, soon forgotten.”<sup>35</sup> Anti-art had not, in other words, finished its project the first time; it needed to be revived and pushed further. This position removes the criticism that an avant-garde could only happen once; it implies that neo-Dada was not a replay of Dada—it was rather a revival and continuation of it. When Duchamp further remarked that he had been born fifty years too soon, he seems to regard the anti-art that was emerging in the ‘60s as legitimate enough to associate himself with. He implies that he thought that anti-art, first in Dada and then resuscitated and extended in neo-Dada, somehow benefitted society, as if jostling it a little closer to sanity; this kind of slow incremental—rather than revolutionary—approach to superstructural effect on social change is typical of bourgeois thought. When Dewey, for example, said that education was the principal avenue to social change he tacitly implied that the idea that society could be changed in the wink of an eye through revolution was childishly unrealistic to begin with. Change happens through the superstructure, by long and patient work on it through education.



But in the '60s, when Duchamp seemed to approve of the reappearance of the avant-garde, so-called weak or hybrid Conceptual Art (such as Levine's remakes of *Fountain*) had not come to dominate the field yet. Now forty years have passed, and Conceptual Art has indeed fanned the brushfire of Dada to a world-wide conflagration. If Duchamp saw his Readymades cast in the symbolic metal of capital and offered for sale at high prices in a blue-chip gallery, would he still feel that the resurrection of anti-art for one more go-round was legitimate? Having said forty years ago that we needed more anti-art, would he now say we have had enough?

By the time of his remark about the brushfire needing to be revived, before the Levine piece, Duchamp himself had become complicit in the commodification of his Readymades, by his sales of the *Boite en Valise* through Arturo Schwartz. In terms of Debord's values, he became one of the enemy. An advocate of Levine's work would no doubt say (and perhaps Duchamp would agree) that a part of the critical function of anti-art was to create a negative awareness of the market, and one way for it to accomplish this was to embody recuperation in its own person by inviting and acting out cooption by market forces, to deliberately place a question mark over the anti-art situation and leave it as a challenge for art to come—which has not answered it yet.

As more forgiving positions emerge, they become increasingly involved with postmodernism, a point of view that has been somewhat conflicted about art. On the one hand it doubts and demystifies Modernism's idea of the redemptive quality of the aesthetic experience. On the other hand, it heralds the usefulness of art for purposes infused with social awareness. So art still has a more or less messianic role, only secularized or disguised. Its faithful still believe that it has a power to improve human life though they back away from the spiritualism of the Modernist conception as embodied in, say, Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*. There redemption was seen as coming straight from the hands of artists to the rest of mankind, as Kandinsky preserved the basic Hegelian idea that art was a visual appearance of the absolute. The general post-Modern perception is that one should follow the example of Duchamp and his implication that art can accomplish something useful for society, even if that just means shifting some bourgeois attitudes.

A common complaint about Conceptual Art invokes the intentional fallacy in lamenting the failure of "the profoundly utopian (and now unimaginably naive) nature of the claims and the aspirations associated with Conceptual Art at the end of the sixties..."<sup>36</sup> The aspirations of Conceptual Art in the late '60s that now may be considered naive can be summed up

in the idea that the breach between art and life would be healed. In the second anti-art era, it seems, art still, as in the aesthetic era, had a grandiose self-image, if not outright delusions of grandeur. The idea of healing the breach between art and life masks a messianic ambition to save the world, to transpose it into a heavenly state—in Hegelian terms, to force History to its End at once. In this sense of historical mission the new anti-artists felt themselves to be performing the same redemptive role the old aesthetic heroes had sought to accomplish. Though they thought they were secularizing attitudes toward art and the artist (presenting the artist as a proletarian in his bib overalls), still it seems that, whether acknowledged at the time or not, art was expected—and expected itself—while supposedly abandoning religion, to somehow retain the redeeming transformative function that had been its *raison d'être* in the Romantic period. At least, there seems little doubt that some members of the classical generation of both Conceptual and Performance artists felt called to their art by a mission to save society from itself.

So it seems too much was demanded of anti-art. Of most art movements all that has been demanded is that they acquit themselves respectably in the arenas of art criticism and art history, not that they bring about immediate and fundamental changes in the socio-economic structures around them. But—the critic may reply—most art movements do not boast of their revolutionary intentions. Well, says the defender, that is the intentional fallacy again. In art history in general, it is worth pointing out, the intentional fallacy of this mode is eschewed. In the Middle Ages, for example, there were artists who felt that their works would enable one to see God or go to heaven; when a modern art aficionado regards such works he does not condemn them for failing to live up to such absurd aspirations, but simply regards that aspect of them which is operative within the continuum of art history. Similarly, many exponents of the abstract sublime in the twentieth century expressed extravagant intentions: Yves Klein intended for his work to enable people to fly; Fontana intended for people to contact infinity through the slashes in his canvases; Malevich spoke of ascending the stages of a mystic mountain in viewing one of his paintings. Certainly it is arguable that these and other artists of the abstract sublime failed in such intentions, and that they often said these were their primary intentions. But that fact does not often enter into discussions of their value within the limited framework of art history. Why should only Conceptual and Performance artists be invalidated by the fact that they expressed extravagant extra-artistic intentions and failed to live up to them?



Like Conceptual and Performance Art, post-Modernism has been conceived at times as a tabula rasa on which a new utopian vision could be inscribed. The movements seem historically connected. One author notes that “in some accounts...it is to the moment of Conceptual Art that we should look for the initiation of the artistically Postmodern”;<sup>37</sup> another says of Performance Art that “it has...become a marker for the break between modernism and postmodernism.”<sup>38</sup>

Like the new art forms, post-Modernism in general thought it might simply eliminate the old definitions and inscribe its new ones. A part of that grand ambition was that art would henceforth be untrammelled by limiting conceptions of style, historical sequence, and spiritual purpose. Yet the hopes of post-Modernism have been subjected to the same skepticism that has questioned anti-art. The author who declared that Conceptual Art shows the beginning of artistic post-Modernism goes on to complain that post-Modernism “represents the cultural defeat of those critical aspirations by which Conceptual Art was impelled.” The decade or so that in this book is called anti-Modernism, in other words, was the true historical place for anti-art; the more compromised position of post-Modernism, after, say, 1980, would not sustain the necessary level of puritanical ferocity. The shift from anti- to post-Modernism corresponds to the transition between the dominance of the pure and hybrid forms of conceptualism. On this view, the ongoing trajectory of post-Modernism (as it morphs into economic globalization) has domesticated Conceptual Art, making it just another commodity and bringing about a return to artistic business as usual, by the reintroduction of portable art objects such as Conceptual paintings and sculptures. Again it is implied that the advent of weak or hybrid Conceptualism betrayed and negated the project of the strong or undiluted.

This position—that strong Conceptual and Performance Art had a revolutionary potential that was then tamed and commodified by the so-called weak forms—needs a lot of qualifying. In the Dada era the contemporary art market hardly existed, and the issue of commodification was not as relevant as the issue of psychological compliance. But in the post-World War II era of anti-art the mechanism of commodification, oiled by the first run-through and turbo-charged by the advent of the multinational corporation, was much more in the foreground. The early work of the second era of anti-art blossomed during the economic ferment of the market surging into overdrive. If art were to be a force for liberal social development, could it remain linked to the profit motive and retain credibility? In about 1982 auction prices for artworks began going off the scale. After that, socially activist artists who

wanted to strive to hold some degree of attention of the mainstream had to deal with conflicted appearances. When Charles Saatchi began to acquire the works of various activist artists who intended their works as a form of social resistance, the artists went along—what else could they be expected to do?

Still, from about 1965 to 1985, the spiritual mission that anti-art attempted to carry out involved resistance to commodification. In keeping with the long-standing connection of art with religion, the profession of artist, since at least the Romantic era, had been seen as like that of monk or eremite—and it remained so through the 1960s and '70s. The anti-artist, like the anti-worldly monk, would renounce filthy lucre and keep his hands clean for the work of healing society. Many early Conceptual and Performance artists, not wanting to be soiled by the market, consciously sought to make works that could not be sold in galleries, either because of extreme ephemerality, outdoor site specificity, immateriality, or some other of the new “anti-art” traits. Still, the work was recuperated, the gallerists found ways to market it, and the Readymade turned to gold. Today some artists who once rejected market remuneration have become rich, others are trying to catch up. Lucy Lippard expressed disappointment with this second age of anti-art, saying that the “hopes that ‘conceptual art’ would be able to avoid the general commercialization...were for the most part unfounded.”<sup>39</sup> The recuperation of Conceptual Art (in both “strong” and “weak” forms) by the surrounding culture has led to a judgment that “the conventions of this anti-art legacy have themselves now come to constitute an academy of sorts,”<sup>40</sup> and: “Ironically the anti-art aesthetic has become that which the Dadaists sought to destroy.”<sup>41</sup> The conversion of a supposedly non-commodifiable art form to a commodity was attended with a sense of disappointment in the wing of the art world that had originally championed Conceptualism; still, the idea that Conceptual and Performance artists, in order to prove their integrity, would have to fail to make a living seems excessively puritanical.

THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST PERFORMANCE ART IS SIMILAR TO THE still ongoing debate about Conceptualism, though Performance Art's claim to social usefulness is somewhat differently founded. Conceptual Art was supposed to clear the mind of false consciousness to restore it to a primal cognitive purity; Performance Art was supposed to penetrate to foundational levels of emotionality from which spiritual redemption might be born. Clearly both had art and religion mixed up in their intentions. Ritual performance, for example, has been hailed by one author as “a mode of discovery and healing.”<sup>42</sup> This author notes that Performance “has heightened



our awareness of the social role of art and, at times, has served as a vehicle for social change."<sup>43</sup> (She does not list any instances.) The Modernist terminology of redemption can be substituted for that of therapy. The same author asserts that Performance artists have been sustained in part by "a redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life, whether on an individual or collective level."<sup>44</sup> The Romantic artist or poet similarly promised something like redemption in his work. Anti-art might seem to be a secularizing movement intended to counteract this ancient connection with religion, but in fact it seems to have felt that it was bringing art nearer to the realization of its redemptive power.

In any case, the redemptive role was still there, beckoning, when young artists began to catch the fever of anti-art again in the 1960s. Among the writers in the recent outpouring of new books on Performance, this declaration of faith is less dominant, but still heard. (Amelia Jones, for example, specifically denies espousing it, but Christine Styles and Robin Brentano have affirmed it as recently as the early 1990s.)<sup>45</sup>

If social change can in fact be attained by working through the superstructure, then the mission of anti-art is not over. It has been said that social change usually originates from the middle class. In that case, a change in middle class attitudes can be important. Perhaps the long project of anti-art has promoted a saner attitude in general ways such as its stress on cognition, ethics, and secularization. Duchamp's feeling in the 1960s was basically that society is saner with this type of art than with the type it had before. This feeling does not involve a belief that a sudden revolutionary new sanity has dawned but that adjustments have been made that might slowly and gradually contribute to social insight and reform—somewhat in the way that Dewey meant. "The actual work of art," Dewey noted, "is what the product does with and in experience..."<sup>46</sup>

The ancient connection of art with religion brought with it an impulse toward the universal. In the aesthetic or Kantian era this was taken for granted. In the era of anti-art after World War II a similar idea grew somewhat surreptitiously. As strong or purely cognitive Conceptual Art expanded into hybrid Conceptualism, "an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism" gave way to "a broader attitudinal expression that...reimagined the possibilities of art vis-a-vis...social, political, and economic realities..."<sup>47</sup> Hybrid forms, in other words, did not just represent commodification, but also multiculturalism. This is why the negative judgment of the so-called weak forms must be molded. Strong, or formalist Conceptual Art did not tend toward globalism but exerted its revisionist

force within the western tradition itself. Weak or dilute Conceptualism, in contrast, has expressed "the tendency toward globalization,"<sup>48</sup> but "a highly differentiated [form of globalization], in which localities are linked in crucial ways but not subsumed into a homogenized set."<sup>49</sup> Passing into hybrid forms, "Conceptualism began to assume its global role."<sup>50</sup> It entered into local crises around the world, embodying (or hoping to embody) some "radical potential of advanced art as a catalyst for change."<sup>51</sup>

This expansive tendency may look socially beneficial from a bourgeois liberal point of view, because it promotes multiculturalism, while it may seem pernicious from a Marxist point of view because it promotes recuperation. It has been called the synthetic form of Conceptual Art. The terms analytic and synthetic refer respectively to the puristic originative phase, which was analytic, and to the inclusive expanded phase, which was synthetic in the sense that it put disparate genres and cultures together. "Analytic" designates the hardline linguistic Conceptualism of the first generation; "synthetic" points to the inclusive definition that involves Conceptual sculpture, Conceptual painting, installation art, post-colonial iconographic critique, and so on. The terms imply a claim that Conceptualism has been as definitive for its age as Cubism was for a previous one.

The idea of the universality of Conceptual Art was first broached by Kosuth, saying (in the essays "Art after Philosophy, I and II,")<sup>52</sup> that all art is really Conceptualism—seeming to mean that all art has first to be conceived in order then to be brought into existence. The conception then is universal in the sense that it is prior in all instances, not in a metaphysical or metahistorical sense but just in plain fact, or empirically. A similar claim can be made for Performance Art in the sense that anything that has been conceived then needs to be executed or performed. In terms of object art, in other words, the execution, as well as the conception, is prior to the actualized artwork. (But this becomes foggy when one considers immaterial artworks or imaginary [noematic] art works, or parts of nature [say, the sky] designated as artworks.)

During the age of the dominance of hybrid Conceptualism (a development Kosuth's article had hoped to forestall), the medium went through its dilution/expansion and showed that it could function as a tilt toward the cognitive in any medium or culture or subject matter. At that point something like the archaic claims for universality began to be made for it as they once had been made for aesthetic art. One critic writing in the early years of the new millennium observed that "conceptualism has become all-pervasive...in the art world."<sup>53</sup> In this line of thought there is a hidden



suggestion that Conceptual Art is metaphysically higher than physically realized forms of art in the sense that a Platonic Idea is higher than its formal modalities.<sup>54</sup>

With the claim to universality comes another unease. Isn't such a claim, possibly, a death-knell? Isn't the very fact that Conceptual Art has gone from an outsider to an insider position a reversal or betrayal of its original claim to validity, which was premised on being outside and somehow being validated by that?

From the art historical point of view, which since Wincklemann has emphasized the development of art as a kind of organism fulfilling itself, art does not seem necessarily tied to social activism. Its self-fulfilment is formal, aesthetic, even spiritual, but not openly social. Within the limited arena of art history, rather than the global sweep of social history, Conceptual Art seems to have succeeded far beyond any reasonable expectations. "Conceptual art," as one author has noted, "is not just another particular kind of art...but an attempt at a fundamental redefinition of art as such..."<sup>55</sup> Another has noted, "It [Conceptual Art] was not simply a new style or movement, it was the single greatest shift in art since the Renaissance."<sup>56</sup> Despite her disappointment in its grand dream, Lippard seems to agree, averring that it has had an "enduring effect."<sup>57</sup> The scope of this effect is suggested by Meyer's assertion that "traditional esthetics could not quite recuperate from the assault of the Ready-mades."<sup>58</sup> One rarely anymore encounters the view that Conceptual Art and Performance Art will turn out to have been temporary quirks, and the Kantian aesthetic globe will descend over Western sensibility again. With art historical credentials now about forty years long, with representation in Janson's *History of Art* and so on, early works of Conceptual Art and Performance Art are developing a sense of classic iconicity almost comparable to that of Dada. The movement has, in terms of contextualization, made the transition from anti-art to art—as Dada did not. From a Marxist point of view that is its tragedy and its flaw. From a bourgeois point of view that is its triumph. That it actually managed not only to spread, but also to eradicate or severely revise the traditional types of art it encountered in its path, is an amazing triumph at least in the superstructural, art historical sense. Inclusive Conceptual Art and Performance Art have swept all before them and remade the experience and meaning of art.

It is of special importance that the opening up of the Aristotelian-Kantian trichotomy has resulted in a new model of the art object for the first time in at least three hundred years. The previous model, locked into place since the 17th or 18th century, asserted that the artwork should emphasize

the aesthetic aspect to the exclusion of the others. The new (post-Modern, not anti-Modern) model asserts that the artwork should have all three faculties operative in it—as a sign of the hoped-for wholeness of the human being and of human life—though the proportions among them will vary with individual sensibility. At the same time, new critical values have come to appeal to and activate the cognitive and ethical faculties, much as effects of color and shape activate the aesthetic. Surprise, for example, has become a positive value, partly because, as Meyer notes, "the concern with quality and style tends to favor repetition."<sup>59</sup> Surprise, representing apparent inconsistency within the premises of an oeuvre, would have been a negative value in Modernism with its signatures, obsessive repetitions, and universality, which requires consistency. From the new point of view (appreciative of the realism of paradox and inner contradiction) inconsistency within the premises of an oeuvre can function as a material.

In terms of "enduring effect," the central point may be Conceptualism's quick global assimilation—even quicker than Abstract Expressionism's assimilation forty-some years ago. The Hegelian Modernist view of history was predicated on European domination of the rest of the world and on the idea of an end of history whose imminence would be signalled when European domination was complete. The end of Modernism was brought about partly by the loss of credibility in Europe's claim to historic leadership, and partly by the rest of the world increasingly reacting against Europe's domination as the colonial period wore on. Thus, post-Modernism is dominated not only by a skepticism about the real value of European cultural traditions but also by a reaction against cultural hierarchization and the intrusions into foreign cultures it encourages; it also seeks a loosening of the constrictions one's own traditions seek to impose. Engaging easily with these motivations, Conceptual Art in its diluted or expanded mode has assumed a global role as an expression of cultural protest.

Finally it seems clear that anti-art cannot be said to have succeeded unambiguously in its grand utopian aspirations—though it may have improved the situation of intercultural communication world-wide a bit. But if seen in terms of art history (rather than Sacred History), the wave of anti-art that led into Conceptual and Performance Art has been more successful than any artistic movement since the Renaissance. The World War I wave of anti-art went out (the brushfire), but the World War II wave endured, spread, and diffused itself throughout the body of art.

Three ways of assessing its triumph offer themselves. Has anti-art triumphed in that it produced major social changes? The answer seems to be



no. Second, has anti-art worked effectively through the superstructure to produce some shift toward greater sanity in the bourgeois mind that might someday with good luck contribute to significant social improvements? The jury's out. Third, has anti-art triumphed in that it attained for the time being more or less complete dominance in the art world? Yes indeed, the jury is no longer out on that, since the recent flood of footnoted books.

1. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Dutton, 1972); Gregory Battcock, *Idea Art* (New York: Dutton, 1973); Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

2. Quoted by Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), p. 54.

3. The sudden surge of belated academic interest began with a French catalogue, *l'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musee d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris, 1989). Then, almost at the end of the millennium, the floodgates opened. Some important titles are: Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998), a textbook that covers everything in the manner of textbooks; Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), which reconsiders things from the point of view of cultural studies; Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), an important scholarly resource; Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), which argues that the tradition of Conceptual Art's special connection to New York is illusory, that the mode originated in many places at about the same time.

4. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, rev. ed. (New York: Abrams, 1988; first published 1978 as *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*); Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, eds., *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1984).

5. Some publications that use the term performance are directed at the theater rather than art context. For a useful bibliographical note on them see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 247, n. 2.

6. Kristine Stiles, "Performance and Its Objects," *Arts Magazine* 65 (November, 1990), number 3.

7. Sally Banes' *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993) was rather specialized, and *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object: A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA Since 1950* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), with essays by Robin Brentano and Olivia Georgia, preceded the opening of the floodgates by a few years. More recently, feminist authors have expressed a burst of attention to Body Art—a genre once associated primarily with the male: Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*; Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) all make significant contributions in the mode of psychoanalytic interpretations colored with post-structuralist insights and terminology.

8. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 36.

9. Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, p. 10.

10. Michael Kelly, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), s.v. Situationist aesthetics, vol. 4, p. 292.

11. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 84.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Quoted by Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 48.

14. Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Detournement," in Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), p. 8.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 18

16. Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

18. Paraphrased *ibid.*, p. 182.

19. This argument of Baudrillard is quoted *ibid.*, p. 180.

20. Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling, Scotland: AK Press, 1991), p. 10.

21. It came up in Alain Jouffroy's "What's to Be Done about Art?" in *Art and Confrontation* (New York: The New York Graphics Society, 1968).

22. Gustave Metzger in *Art into Society/Society into Art*, exh. cat. (London: ICA, 1974). For the revival of the art strike call in the 1980s see Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, pp. 178-180.

23. Quoted by Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, p. 24.

24. Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, English translation by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 58.

25. William Rubin, "Reflexions on Duchamp," in Joseph Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975).

26. Clement Greenberg, "Counter-Avant Garde," in Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, p. 122. This essay is Greenberg's major attack on the post-World War II anti-art movement. He refers to the procedure of designation

as art "by fiat" (p. 130) and repeatedly insists on Kantian principles: "Art and the aesthetic don't just overlap, they coincide" (p. 129); "the issue remains quality" (p. 130), and so on. His position is strongly argued on the whole, but two crucial pages near the end (pp. 130-131 in Masheck) seem to acknowledge Duchamp's view that the faculty of taste is merely habit.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

28. Alan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 222.

29. Richard Huelsenbeck, "The Dada Drummer," in *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, ed., Hans J. Kleinschmidt, English translation by Joachim Neugroschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 12.

30. In Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 19.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

32. Quoted in Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 4.

33. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 9.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

35. Otoo Hahn, "Marcel Duchamp Interviewed," *L'Express* (Paris) no. 684 (July 1964), pp. 22-23.

36. Benjamin H.D. Buclouh, "From the Aesthetics of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962-1969)," in *l'art conceptuelle, une perspective*, 1989, p. 52.

37. Charles Harrison, "Art Object and artwork," in *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, p. 61.

38. Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p. 209, n. 30.

39. Lucy Lippard, cited by Gabriel Quercio in *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, p. 75.

40. Hilton Kramer, *The New Criterion* on line, October, 1995.

41. Michael Pearce, online, artsReformation.com.

42. Brentano, *Outside the Frame*, p. 34.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

44. *Ibid.*



45. Amelia Jones rejects it (*Body Art: Performing the Subject*, p. 13, and see p. 246, n. 31); Brentano accepts it (*Outside the Frame*, p. 31); Stiles goes halfway (Kristine Stiles, "Performance and Its Objects," *Arts* [Nov. 1990], p. 47).
46. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), p. 3.
47. Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism*, p. viii.
48. Stephen Bann, *ibid.*, p. 6.
49. Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss, *ibid.*, p. vii.
50. Bann, *ibid.*, p. 4.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
52. First published in *Studio International*, October and November 1969; now available in Battcock's *Idea Art*, pp. 70-101.
53. Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, p. 10.
54. This is also assumed in Arthur Danto's version of the idea of "the end of art." See appendix 3.
55. Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," in Newman and Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, p. 48.
56. Peter Wollen, *Global Conceptualism*, p. 81.
57. Quoted by Guercio, *l'art conceptuel, une perspective*, p. 75.
58. Meyer, *Conceptual Art*, p. 9.
59. *Ibid.*, p. xv.

## Origin of the Term 'Anti-Art'

PHILOLOGICAL ANALYSIS SUGGESTS TRISTAN TZARA AS INVENTOR of the term anti-art. In the first place, in terms of stylometrics, he is the Dada author most given to the use of the prefix anti-. In fact, he is the only Dada author who uses it as an expressive element. It is a characteristic motif of his chaotic, exuberant style which features contradictions and inversions. In the *Zurich Chronicle* he summed up his position in the phrase, "Antithesis, thesis, antiphilosophy."<sup>1</sup> He rearranges the order of the limbs of the Hegelian syllogism to put the antithesis first, thereby creating an anti-philosophy in which, it seems, he wanted to represent the antithesis in any dialectical triad. In Tzara's writings of that period one finds: anti-dogmatism, anti-objective, anti-human, anti-philosophy, anti-philosopher, anti-Dadaism, anti-men, anti-"nuance," anti-painting, and anti-art. The development of the specific term anti-art may be dimly sketched out in a series of three of his locutions. It seems to have arisen out of the contact between Tzara and Picabia.

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, in his "History of Dada," (1931), describes Picabia's arrival in Zurich in (probably December of) 1918 thus: "He made the acquaintance of Tzara and his friends, joined Dada and was saluted as the anti-painter."<sup>2</sup> Ribemont-Dessaignes does not explicitly say that Picabia was saluted as anti-painter by Tzara himself—but there is reason to suspect as much. First, he mentions only Tzara by name and refers to the others as Tzara's "friends," as if Tzara (in Ball's absence?) was acting as the leader of Dada, the individual who might take it on himself to christen the new member. In addition, Tzara preserves his own record of the meeting in his *Zurich Chronicle* for December, 1918: "Long live Picabia, the anti-painter who just arrived from New York..."<sup>3</sup>

In the next year, 1919, in another short text on Picabia, Tzara uses the term "anti-artistic."<sup>4</sup> Assuming that it was Tzara who dubbed Picabia "the



anti-painter” in 1918, his use of “anti-artistic” in discussing him in 1919 suggests he is developing his terminology, looking for just the right word. Later in 1919 (October) Tzara used the noun form “anti-art,” as if he had been working his way toward it and had found it.<sup>5</sup> In this case it is not applied directly to Picabia, but he is mentioned twice right before it.

In this, the only passage in which he uses the term anti-art, Tzara doesn't use it in a clear way, as if it had an accepted definition, but as a kind of tachistic gesture invoking neither the “opposed to” nor the “in place of” senses given by the *OED*. Here is the passage:

*Inaugurate different colors for the joy of transchromatic disequilibrium and the portable circus velodrome of camouflaged sensations knitting anti-art the piss of complete courage diverting diversities under the latest cosmopolitan vibration.*

The paragraph occurs in Tzara's *Zurich Chronicle* for May of 1919 following a paragraph (with the two mentions of Picabia) that ends with Walter Serner “serving the cablegram Art is dead.” “Serving” a cablegram rather than delivering it makes it official, like a summons or a decree, and the summons is then followed by the cry to “inaugurate different colors” and so on. (In punctuating for the voice one might put commas after anti-art and diversities.) Basically, in terms of the “story” Tzara is dimly evincing, the announcement that art is dead arrives by cablegram, then “different” (new?) colors are inaugurated, then “camouflaged sensations knit[...] anti-art.” Does he mean: sensations that had previously, in the age of art, been camouflaged, were now let out into the light where, perhaps in conjunction with the “new” colors, they knit together into anti-art?

This is the only occurrence I have seen of the use of the term anti-art by a Dadaist in the original Dada period. Other Dada authors—Huelsenbeck, Ball, Walter Mehring, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Serner, Hans Arp—not only do not use the term anti-art, they do not use the prefix anti- in anything like Tzara's expressive manner; they use it just because it happens to be part of a word that normal diction would select for the occasion. The expressive manner with anti- seems to be a stylistic tic of Tzara's, expressing his tendency toward oppositional stances, his desire to be the antithesis of any dialectic.

In Motherwell's anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets*, in the comparatively brief selections from Tzara, one finds: anti-dogmatism, anti-objective, anti-human, anti-philosophy, anti-philosopher (twice), anti-Dadaism, anti-men, anti-“nuance”, and anti-art.<sup>6</sup> There are in addition a few words not from Tzara that use the anti- prefix (not, however, anti-art). Of the texts in

that book, Tzara has the prefix anti- twelve times and Georges Hugnet nine (no one else is close). Hugnet's text, “The Dada Spirit in Painting,” is from 1932-34, well after Dada, and can have nothing directly to do with reconstructing Dada uses. Really it is irrelevant to the origin of the term anti-art. All Hugnet's uses of the prefix anti- are normal discursive syntax and diction (no “camouflaged sensations knitting anti-art...”): “conceived according to an anti-static pictorial law...”; “...apothegms of an aesthetic and anti-aesthetic nature...”; “Dada made clear...its anti-religious drive;” “The *Bulletin Dada* declared itself anti-pictorial and anti-literary;” “at this moment an anti-Dada paper, *Non*, edited by Rene Edme and Andre du Bief, was handed round;” “Breton [was] opposed to demonstrations of this type, emanating from an anti-artistic and anti-literary group;” “...Picabia, the anti-Dada Dadaist...”<sup>7</sup> One additional occurrence is from 1949 and has nothing to do with the question at hand: “[Duchamp] did work on certain strange objects or machines, strictly useless and anti-aesthetic...”<sup>8</sup> A final occurrence in that anthology from the actual Dada period seems to be a conscious reference to Tzara; Kurt Schwitters, in “Merz,” 1921, in describing the cover design of his poetry book *Anna Blume*, says, “In order to avoid misunderstandings I have inscribed ‘Antidada’ on the outside of my Cathedral.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally it is plausible to suppose that Tzara may have invented the term in 1919 and that it was first applied to Picabia (in fact to no other individual in the Dada texts reviewed).<sup>10</sup>

The history of the term is spotty for the next forty years. In 1930 Breton used the term anti-art in his “Second Surrealist Manifesto,” in a passage he repeated in the 1934 essay “What Is Surrealism?” Like Tzara, he may still be using the term without a clear definition in mind; he tosses it into the text in an offhand way, perhaps to distance himself from Tzara, who by then was his enemy: “...surrealism is not at all interested in taking into account what passes alongside it under the guise of art or even antiart, of philosophy or anti-philosophy...” These dichotomies are in the style of Tzara, and Breton may have adopted them from his great enemy of the Paris Dada schism.

In the long run the term anti-art became more closely associated with Duchamp than either Tzara or Picabia. In 1945 Harriet and Sidney Jannis placed it in the title of their article, “Marcel Duchamp, Anti-Artist.”<sup>11</sup> The Jannises seem to have been the first to use the term as a conscious mixture of “against” and “in place of,” as would become established.

Starting around 1963 the term became common. Dada authors, who seem for the most part to have been unfamiliar with the term in the Dada period, began using it retrospectively in the 1960s. Duchamp refers to “Dada



anti-art” in 1963, and Huelsenbeck, also writing in the '60s, referred to Dada as “an antiart movement.”<sup>12</sup>

The point is that the term anti-art, though frequently applied to Dada since 1960, seems not generally to have been applied to it in its day, nor did the original Dadaists think of themselves as anti-artists. They referred to themselves as artists who were at work on “the New Art” or on “living art.” Huelsenbeck, for example, wrote in 1920, “The energies and ambitions of those who participated in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich were from the start purely artistic. We wanted to make the Cabaret Voltaire a focal point of the ‘newest art’...”<sup>13</sup> “The Cabaret Voltaire group were all artists.”<sup>14</sup> The other Dada authors did not disagree with him. The later Conceptual and Performance artists, however, attained maturity in the era when the term was in use and accepted it as relevant to their work. George Maciunas, for example, in his “Manifesto” of 1963, exhorted Fluxists to “promote living art, anti-art.”<sup>15</sup> A 1969 poster designed by Ben Vautier announced, “Festival/Non-Art, Anti-Art.”<sup>16</sup> There is, then, some cogency to the idea that the more recent era may be regarded as the primary denotation of the term.

1. In Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, English edition by Malcolm Green and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998), p. 28.

2. Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, second edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 108.

3. In Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, p. 28.

4. Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, English translation by Barbara Wright (London: Calder Publications, 1977), p. 81.

5. Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, p. 34.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 85, 92, 94, 216, 242.

7. Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, pp. 140, 148, 162, 171, 176, 183, 191.

8. Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, “Some Memories of Pre-Dada: Picabia and Duchamp,” in Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 260.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

10. Which are: the Motherwell anthology, Huelsenbeck’s *Dada Almanac* and “The Dada Drummer” (in Hans J. Kleinschmidt, ed., *Mem-*

*oirs of a Dada Drummer*, English translation by Joachim Neugroschel [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991]); Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, and Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time* (John Elderfield, ed., *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996]). I have not checked the French and German originals.

11. Harriet and Sidney Jannis, “Marcel Duchamp, Anti-Artist,” in Joseph Masheck, ed., *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1975), pp. 30–40.

12. Huelsenbeck, “The Dada Drummer,” p. 63.

13. Huelsenbeck, “En Avant Dada: A History of Dada (1920),” in Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 23.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

15. In Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Etc.: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, exh. cat. (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan: The Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1981), p. 7.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

## Zen, Dada, Duchamp, and Cage

IN MAPPING HIS CULTURAL POSITION IN THE LATE 1940S AND early '50s, John Cage combined three influences—Duchamp, Zen, and Dada—into a single three-threaded cord of anti-art. He felt that these three not only overlapped in content but had been historically intertwined also, at least through the posterity of texts and their complex stemmata of mutual influences. He thought that he had discovered this important cultural linkage, that he embodied it in his own person, and through his works he proclaimed it to the world.

The main problem was fitting Zen into the pattern of influences, since neither the Dadaists nor Duchamp seem to have known much about it or to have been influenced directly by it. Cage tells, famously, of how he inquired of Duchamp about the influence of Zen and Duchamp said he had experienced none. Cage couldn’t believe it. “I think,” he later said, “that even if he were involved consciously with Eastern philosophy, his answer would have been that he had no connection.”<sup>1</sup> It seemed to Cage that Duchamp had been envincing Zen attitudes in his emphasis on indifference, relativism, skepticism, and submission to chance. What Cage didn’t see is that there was a missing link in his chain of influences: Duchamp’s Pyrrhonism. It has often been remarked by scholars of the history of religion and philosophy that Pyrrhonism runs parallel to Zen—though the latter came half a millennium later. Zen was derived from the school of Indian Buddhism (the Madhyamika) which in turn had been much influenced by the Pyrrhonist or some related Hellenistic-Roman dialectical tradition.<sup>2</sup> It was Pyrrhonism which influenced Duchamp at developing the qualities of indifference, relativism, skepticism and submission to chance, during his time in the Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève in Paris; Pyrrhonism left the same kind of impress that Zen influence might have left, Zen being in a sense a later carrier of Pyrrhonist attitudes.



Dada also shared the traits of indifference, relativism, and so forth, and probably would have involved them with or without Duchamp's presence on the scene. Huelsenbeck suggests this many times, saying, for example, "Dada is the great parallel to the relativistic philosophies of our time."<sup>3</sup>

Huelsenbeck was more right than he knew. Dada was in fact very parallel to relativistic philosophies in general, not just those of his time—including the massive prototype of them all, Pyrrhonism, with its emphasis on indifference, non-judgment, unknowability, acceptance of chance, refusal to take a position, and so on. Huelsenbeck adds, amusingly, that "Dada is the American aspect of Buddhism,"<sup>4</sup> suggesting that it is a young, boisterous, perhaps vulgar carrier of the message. Speaking like a Pyrrhonist he says, "Dada...opposes every kind of ideology... Dada...cannot grasp people's attachment to anything, be it money or an idea... Human beings are simply ideologues if they fall for the swindle perpetrated by their own intellects: that an idea...has any absolute reality..."<sup>5</sup> Countless passages paralleling those attitudes could be drawn from both Pyrrhonist and Zen texts. Huelsenbeck goes on with a specially revealing doctrine, also found in both: "Whoever turns 'freedom' or 'relativity,' including the insight that the contours of everything shift, that nothing is stable, into a 'firm creed' is just another ideologue, like the nihilists who are almost always the most incredible, narrow-minded dogmatists."<sup>6</sup> If one reifies or fetishizes relativism, it becomes just another claimed certainty, and one becomes just another dogmatist. In the Buddhist tradition this is known as *sunyata sunyata*, the emptiness of the emptiness doctrine: the emptiness doctrine, which accepts nothing as true, cannot itself be accepted as true—that would be the very mistake it is designed to correct. In the Greek skeptical tradition Metrodorus's one-liner goes to the same effect: "I know nothing not even whether I know nothing."

The skeptical spirit shared by Zen and Dada is illustrated by an echo which may or may not be accidental. When the Chinese emperor Wu asked the Indian missionary Bodhidharma who he was, Bodhidharma replied, "Don't know."<sup>7</sup> Ribemont-Dessaignes, in his 1931 "History of Dada," has this: "What is beautiful, what is ugly? ...Don't know. What is myself? Don't know, don't know, don't know, don't know."<sup>8</sup> The modern Zen master Seung Sahn calls the Zen attitude "Don't know mind." "Always keep don't know mind," is his advice; "the moment you open your mouth you are wrong."<sup>9</sup>

Cage was right, in other words, to synthesize the influences of Zen, Dada, and Duchamp, or even to regard them as three embodiments of the same stance—though he had reconstructed the lineage a little quickly. A similar intuition of this lineage is indicated by Tristan Tzara's observation that

"Dschouang-Dsi [the Taoist author Chuang-tsu] [was] the first dadaist."<sup>10</sup> (Taoism was historically another component of Zen, alongside Pyrrhonism.) And a Berlin Dada tract from 1920 says, "Tao and Brahma are dada."<sup>11</sup>

1. Quoted in Jacquelynne Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Influences on Western Art from Monet to the Present* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, forthcoming), n.p.n.

2. See Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), especially chapters 17 and 18; also, Thomas McEvelley, "Non mi occorre un piano; ho la 6th Avenue: John Cage e la tradizione Zen," in exh. cat. *La Biennale di Venezia: XLV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte: Punti cardinali dell' arte*, 2 vols. (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1993), vol. 2, pp. 789-796.

3. Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, English edition by Malcolm Green (London: Atlas Press, 1993), p.10.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 11.

6. Ibid.

7. This is a common story in the Zen tradition; it is for example the first case of the twelfth century Koan collection *Hekiganroku* or *Blue Cliff Record* (Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, translators, *The Blue Cliff Record* [Boston: Shambala, 1992], p. 1).

8. In Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 203.

9. Stephen Mitchell, ed., *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teachings of Master Seung Sahn* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), pp. 12, 13, etc.

10. In Huelsenbeck, ed., *The Dada Almanac*, p. 28.

11. Ibid., p. 86.



## APPENDIX THREE

## The End of Art

**I**N THE 1820S HEGEL WROTE AND LECTURED ABOUT THE END OF art. It was not a new idea but in fact was known to the ancients—it occurs, for example, in Pliny's *Natural History*—but it had not been involved in the discourse in the intervening nearly two millennia. It does not mean that after the end of art there will be no more art. Rather, it means that the developmental history of art is at an end, and artworks that are made thereafter will be more or less ahistorical—as when, at the end of a novel, the story may end but it is understood that the characters live on. The story of art, in other words, is over, but art itself may live on in some unpredictable way.

In various contexts, for the last generation or so, the idea of the end of art (sometimes the “death” of art) has come back. It is basically a different idea than the idea of anti-art, though there is some superficial similarity between them. On the one hand, some authors who have spoken about the end of art have phrased it as a passionate call for such an end—a call against art, or a call for the end of art. Richard Huelsenbeck, for example, wrote, “How many times have we cried ‘Down with Art, long live Dada.’” Similarly Ben Vautier, about 50 years later, made a miniature word-painting that simply said, “No More Art.” The sentiment was embodied in many other artworks of the twentieth century. This is the anti-art approach, expressing a desire for the end of art, not the same as a judgment that it is an accomplished historical fact.

On the other hand there are discussions of the end of art that do not involve a passionate cry for it but a didactic pointing to it or noting of it. In this case the author assumes that art has in fact ended; not that such an end is desirable or undesirable, but simply that it is a fact. This is more the nature of Arthur Danto's various writings on the topic.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Huelsenbeck and Vautier, Danto wasn't passionately calling for the end of art, he was dispassionately acknowledging it or pointing it out. Furthermore, he wasn't

warranting it himself by saying that either his passion or his insight had constrained him to call it out; rather, he was essentially writing an historical footnote, or scholium, to Hegel—saying to the rest of us, I have noticed this parallelism between some remarks of Hegel's and some developments in recent art: and here it is. This was not an ethical request, as the words of Huelsenbeck and Vautier were.

Several texts echoing Hegel's phrase appeared at the same moment of dawning post-Modern awareness in the milieu of the arts. Danto's “The End of Art” was published in 1984 in an anthology of essays edited by Beryl Lang titled *The Death of Art*. In the very same year Hans Belting's *The End of Art History?* appeared;<sup>2</sup> two years later appeared Victor Burgin's *The End of Art Theory*.<sup>3</sup>

Danto's version of the argument focuses on the appearance of Conceptual Art. He observes that Conceptual Art in its self-reflexive, analytic mode, if viewed from the standpoint of Hegelian ideas about history and its end, could be regarded as the end of art. There are at least two ways to derive this idea from Hegel's vast system. One way (which both Danto and Belting invoke) is to draw a connection with Hegel's trinitarian view of history, which held that an age in which spirit operated primarily through religion would be followed by an age when it operated primarily through art, and finally by an age when it worked through philosophy. Even though Hegel at times said the three faculties were equally channels to the absolute, still he seems to posit a temporal hierarchy in which the cognitive faculty emerges as the highest. Danto observed that hard-line or reflexive Conceptual Art, a movement in which art can be said to have become a mode of philosophy, could be seen as the end of the age of art as it passed into the age of philosophy.

According to the myth of history purveyed by Hegel (which actually occurs in several variations in different times and places both East and West), the Original Condition of Being, before history began, was that of a self-knowing mind, unaware of anything outside itself as there was nothing outside itself. History began when this universal mind somehow got distracted in the midst of its self-knowing and mistakenly thought it was involved in the knowing of an other. This could be compared to the situation of a dreamer. The mind-born other, or dream or illusion, that temporarily gripped the formerly self-knowing mind, now seemed to it like a world out there, and indeed that's what it became—it became our world, founded on an inexplicable delusion or neurosis in the primal mind.

Gradually, as Mind (or Spirit—*Geist* is Hegel's word) sought to become self-knowing and go back to its original state, it developed new strategies



of self-knowing through which it hoped to perform therapy on itself. These were especially the three big channels of religion, art, and philosophy which would dominate successive ages in Hegel's trinitarian version of the myth (as in Joachim of Fiore's idea that the age of the father would be followed by ages of the son and the holy ghost).

In this outline one sees elements from Aristotle, such as the idea from book Lambda of the *Metaphysics* that the central engine of the universe is the Thought That Thinks Itself, or the Self-Knowing Mind, and the idea in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the three primary aspects of activity with which to deal with the situation are the ethical, the aesthetic, and the cognitive—that is, religion, art, and philosophy. Kant enshrined this distinction in his three *Critiques*, and Hegel elaborated it further in his historicist approach. The end of Hegel's myth—that Mind or Spirit should someday resume its pure uninterrupted self-knowing, and that that would be the end of history—is primarily neo-Platonic or Plotinian in background, though at that time it seemed a cyclical process, not a one-time-only event.

Other elements of the outline—the artist's transcendent vision and the drama of the end of history coordinated with developments in cognition—are already present in Plato, in, for example, the *Phaedrus* and the *Politicus*. Even before Plato it seems that these ideas existed in the Pythagorean school.

At root of this myth of Spirit's forgetfulness is the Orphic doctrine that Plato followed in the *Phaedrus*, that the soul before it was born knew all the gods, then during the confusion of being born forgot them, or couldn't recognize them anymore, and through the threefold travails of religion, art and philosophy would rediscover them, whereupon everything would be returned to the first primal vision again. That whole idea system came to Hegel from sources about two thousand years old, which illustrates the suspicion that whereas Hegel is commonly thought of as the beginning of modern philosophy, it might be more accurate to see him as the end of ancient philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this doctrine asks to be traced back to even earlier sources that Hegel could hardly have known, to the bronze age Ancient Near East, especially Sumer and Egypt. It is probably from ancient Sumer that the myth of the end of history derives, and in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, as in the later Orphic myth, the soul primally knows everything, then forgets, and has to remember. This archaic archetype is the basis of Plato's doctrine of recollection and also Hegel's myth of History with a capital H.

Danto refers to the philosophization of art in the last generation or so—again an idea with ancient antecedents. Plato produced various theories of art, but even before Plato Democritus of Abdera wrote a book *On Paint-*

*ing*, and even before Democritus the Pythagoreans were involved with music theory and geometrical abstraction. For some reason these ancient philosophers felt that an essential part of philosophy was to investigate art and analyze it theoretically, and that conviction about the duties of a philosopher has remained active till our time. One author has paraphrased Hegel's idea, saying "that art is to be considered as dead when true philosophy is born"<sup>5</sup>; art itself was an illusory philosophy, a false form of philosophy along the way to the true one, and when it arrives there its narrative is at an end.

Ancient philosophers too had perceived that the idea that history is a story means that it must have an ending. Aristotle observed in the *Poetics* that any narrative must have a beginning, a middle, and an end; this is perhaps especially true in the story of history as progress. Danto mentions the fact that both Hegel and Vasari spoke of the end of the narrative of progress in art. Art had reached its perfection and when that passed, its narrative of development came to an end. That idea too is part of the archaic archetype. Pliny, in books 34 and 35, envisions Greek painting and sculpture as having undergone a gradual evolution, or progressive development, toward a stage of perfection which was reached late in the fourth century BC in the works of Lysippus for sculpture and Apelles for painting. Insofar as the narrative of art involved the idea of history as progress, its narrative had ended at that point. The ahistorical condition that sets in after the "end" of history, or of art history, tends to involve remakings, or quotations of past works or events. In Pliny's day what survived after the end of art (as a developmental story) was a kind of industry of remaking classical works for (primarily Roman) buyers. The recent era of appropriation or quotationalism is markedly parallel.

TO REVIEW THE DRAMA BRIEFLY. AFTER THE MIND'S PRIMAL FORGETFULNESS (the beginning of the narrative), the conflicts and perturbations of history are the effects of the mind's error and its struggle to overcome its error (the middle). What in the Hegelian tradition has been called progress is the record of the stages of Mind's reintegration. When its self-knowing is complete again, these conflicts will be over and history will be at an end. The story will be over. The end of history does not mean the physical end of the world, but the end of inner cross-currents, as, in the Marxist variant of the theory, it means the end of class-struggle.

Applying this scenario to art history, one sees that art was first concerned with imitation of the outside world (beginning), then, in the era of abstraction, with imitating the world of ideas, the inside world (middle), and finally, in the era of (strong) Conceptualism, it was simply inspecting



itself, its own knowing mechanism (end). One author says of Kosuth's *First Investigations*, "Their content is the signifying process,"<sup>6</sup> that is, they signify the signifying process; nothing but mind is involved. It is the thought that thinks itself. Much the same could be said of other early strong Conceptualist work, such as Robert Barry's or Bernar Venet's.<sup>7</sup>

Another author asserts the same of Performance Art, saying that Body artists seek "to expose not the originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimental layers of signification itself."<sup>8</sup> What the work signified, in other words, was the process of signification. It was a mirror reflecting a mirror. Art was now, in the genre of strong Conceptualism, reflecting only on itself. It had reached, for art, the goal of direct, unmediated self-awareness that Hegel had spoken of as the reintegration of Spirit and the End of the Story. Thus the dawning of self-reflexive Conceptualism in the 1960s indicated that the purpose of art had been fulfilled and its course was over. Art was acting as the forward edge of history, implying that all of history was about to go over the top. And it was Conceptual Art that was at the forward edge of art at the forward edge of history, leading the way to the End of History.

So in a sense the idea that Conceptual Art marks the End of Art, or of the age of art, or of the developmental narrative of art, is a footnote to Hegel. But it's not *just* a footnote to Hegel. It points to something that was really going on in the minds of artists of the generation that matured in the 1960s. The moment when Conceptual Art emerged was fraught with intense feelings. In the period of Late Modernism—in New York City, say, 1965-75—or what also has been called anti-Modernism, there was a sense of realization that the Hegelian paradigm of history had lost credibility—that the sense of history in which it had a capital H, as a universal History, was over.

One can picture different views of history as different configurations of a line on a page. In pre-Modern cultures this was usually a circular line indicating a cyclical process; it could be seen as a single circle endlessly going round, as in the Stoic view, in which after a certain number of years the whole of history repeats itself exactly down to the tiniest detail, or it can involve some degree of multiplicity as in a coil which while it goes round and round still moves in a certain direction across the page; this version of the myth of cycling time appears in Plato's *Politicus*, and in the Hindu view in the *Manavadharmasastra*, where, in each cycle there is a general repetition—the first age in a cycle is, for example, always a golden age—but the repetition compulsion does not extend to details, which shift from cycle to cycle. Then there is the Modernist view, which arose with the Greeks though we think of it as Hegel's or at least as European, where history is a straight

line moving across the page from one point to another; there is a beginning, a progression, an end, and that is all; it never happens again and for the most part is a straight or linear progress. At the end of Modernism the idea of history as a single continuous line or surge of development broke up, and the post-Modern view that followed it, coming to the fore especially in the 1980s, is of a bunch of line fragments flung randomly or chaotically down on a page—with no overall directionality or conformation that could as yet be pounced upon as giving meaning to it all. This is what is meant by saying that the change that has happened with post-Modernism is that History has ended but histories continue.

And yet what many of the artists who were formative on classical conceptual art felt at the moment in question—the '60s—was not yet post-Modern. They had been born into and had grown up in the Hegelian view of Modernism. They felt themselves to be crucial carriers of it—in effect, World Historical Individuals, much as the Abstract Expressionists had felt themselves to be. They felt as if their individual decisions and actions were directly influencing Universal History. The momentous turn that cultural events were taking in that decade seemed to indicate that history was about to go over the top, as it had once seemed in 1848 and at other moments. Many of the artists in question, not to name names, felt that they had been anointed as the crucial Messengers who would carry history over the top into the complete restitution of ontological and and psychological wholeness. Again Conceptual Art acts as the End (of a certain story).

The post-Modern realization of the End of History did not overtake the spirit of high culture, in America anyway, till the 1980s. By that time the birth of Conceptual and Performance art was felt as historically involved in a developmental series of which it might mark the culmination and end—much as Danto would see it. As radically new forms of art were appearing, the radicality of the transition seemed to indicate to many that some really unusual and historic culmination was about to dawn, something beyond the linked problem-and-solution approach to art history that had obtained for at least two hundred years. The artists who were in the forefront of the transition felt that they were going through a breakthrough that would culminate in something like the end of art history, or the transition to a wholly new developmental phase. They slowly underwent the realization that history was over and with it the meaningful direction of everyone's work. The artist now lived in the post-historical situation that Danto described with the sentence, "History is dead, and everything is permitted."<sup>9</sup> New lines of work appeared that had no inherent parameters or sense of meaning, that could



go anywhere at anytime, and pointed again and again to the shattering of the myth of the wholeness of art and culture and even civilization.

From a Hegelian point of view this story is a story of Spirit's cosmic reintegration, of which culture was an aspect. To others it seems that this outcome did not arise from internal changes in the developmental narrative of art, but that it encroached into the art domain, as into many others, from the surrounding geopolitical world. Specifically it seems that the end of colonialism contributed to the gradual abandonment of the Modernist or Hegelian view of history. Decolonization left 150 new nations (three quarters of the UN) that didn't want to subscribe any longer to the Eurocentric view of history, and that includes art history. So those massive totalizing narratives were broken up into many parts (the line segments) as countless new voices began reshaping the discourse in a postcolonial vein. In other words, we are not looking at the end of art in and by itself, but at the end of colonialism and the serious adjustments in thinking that have had to be made in consequence of it.

The continued development of Conceptual Art shows not that history is over but that Hegel's view of history no longer applies. What's useful about Danto's idea is that it shows the incredible importance attributed to Conceptual Art: that it occurs not simply as another art movement in a sequence, but rather, after the end of art as it had been known, as a wholly new beginning of a new historical sequence. Peter Wollen has observed that Conceptual Art was the "single greatest shift in art since the Renaissance."<sup>10</sup> Art is not over, in other words, but has turned onto a new path on its way toward some meaning and culmination quite other than what had been believed in, say, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Conceptual Art functions in this myth as the messenger which announced the end of art, the leading edge or avant-garde which crossed the finish line first, signalling an end to the race. The end-of-art construction seems to have little to do with Conceptual Art as an ongoing practice, but it does point up the radicality of the Conceptualist project and the specially sinister lustre with which it gleams in the pages of art history books.

Conceptual artists have been notoriously obsessed with history, as have some earlier generations of Modernists. Hegelian Modernism promoted this obsession powerfully; it was at a kind of ultimate height around the time of World War II. Both the Abstract Expressionists, who immediately followed the war, and the Conceptualists who came a few years later felt it strongly. It was the impact of French thought in the early '80s that really brought the change in the situation home to the New York art world. Suddenly you began seeing Derrida's *On Grammatology* in artists' studios. The books which had

had their impact in Europe ten years earlier were now, newly translated into English, impacting powerfully in New York.

The mood that prevailed about these matters varied greatly. As Danto noted<sup>11</sup>, one can see it as a kind of disorder or as a new kind of freedom. Many saw that the end of history could be the beginning of something great. Getting out of a history like that—the history of what Hannah Arendt called “this terrible century”—is like getting out of a prison or a torture chamber. Danto concluded “The End of Art” with the statement, “It has been an immense privilege to have lived in history”—but one could also say it has been an immense affliction.

The idea that now suddenly anything is permitted sounds liberating—but it also means that there are no more guidelines; one is adrift and could go anywhere. It seemed to many, when the realization of the shift from Modernism to post-Modernism—which had happened almost behind our eyes, so close to us that we couldn't see it till it leapt upon us—when this dawned, it seemed to many to be a great relief. What a relief that history was over! What a relief that art history was over! As Perry Anderson said of Belting's *The End of Art History?*, “The result is the opposite of a closure. An unprecedented and welcome openness marks the time.”<sup>12</sup>

In any case, artists in general didn't stop making art, so art was not really at an end; but they did feel that in their artmaking they were no longer directed by history, or art history, or art theory. While at first they may have felt this as a loss, it soon became exhilarating. They found themselves on the loose in a world of art that no longer had definitions in place. It was this sense of liberation that led to the formation of Conceptual Art, Performance Art, Land Art, Body Art, Systems Art, etc., etc. If everything is permitted then pluralism is likely to happen, and it did. History may be over, but histories remain. In the same sense Art may be over, but arts remain. And art histories, in the plural, too, as cultures formerly left out of the supposedly universal sub-Hegelian view of art history constructed by Riegl, Wölfflin, and others, begin to write their own art histories or their own versions of them from their own points of view.

Other authors in addition to Danto, Belting and Burgin who have written compellingly about these matters include Alan Kaprow, in his essay “Art Which Can't Be Art,” 1986—almost the same moment again as those other authors. Kaprow said like some variety of Hegelian, “Developments within modernism itself led to art's dissolution into its life sources.”<sup>13</sup> One may compare the Dadaists' use of the term “living art” to indicate their preference over the art in museums, which by implication is dead.



This art which can't be art is anti-art. Kaprow observed, "This is where the paradox lies: an artist concerned with lifelike art is an artist who does and does not make art."<sup>14</sup> The genre of ordinary life art, or living art, he called "art/not-art"<sup>15</sup> or "experimental art," which he glosses as "an act or thought whose identity as art must always remain in doubt."<sup>16</sup> So art it seems has ended but something called not-art continues. Then, echoing the Duchamp/Venet tactic of retiring from art he concludes, "Once the task of the artist was to make good art; now it is to avoid making art of any kind."<sup>17</sup> Making anti-art is making living art is making art that is not art is making art after the end of art is not making art.

A new stage of the discussion begins when one shifts the philosophical framework from Hegel to Marx. Fredric Jameson, in an essay of 1998 called "End of Art' or 'End of History?'"<sup>18</sup> asserts that Marx completed the Hegelian system, which was stalled on its way to the End of History by the regression of the Prussian state into despotic reaction. This is a somewhat milder statement than Marx's own claim that he had put Hegel "on his feet"—implying that Hegel had been standing on his head. Hegel in other words was basically right about History except he had the values upside down, valuing spirit over matter, and so on.

Unlike Danto and Belting, Jameson does not associate the End of Art with the transition to post-Modernism, but with the High Modernist era. At that time, as he notes, Modernist art more or less rejected the Beautiful and focused on the Sublime. This, for him, is the End of Art—the end of the cult of beauty—and the announcement of the primacy of philosophy, the exclusive concern with the Sublime being like, say, Parmenides' obsession with the One. It's remarkable how separate these discourses are. Jameson does not mention Danto or Belting or their arguments, though he was writing after the publication of their works with more or less the same title. Does he regard them as in a world of discourse (the ancient world of Hegel) that has no common ground with his (the modern world of Marx)?

More recently a third wave of writings has come on the scene. In 2003 Julian Spaulding's *The Eclipse of Art* appeared, and in 2004 Donald Kuspit published a book called, again, *The End of Art*.<sup>19</sup> In the first wave, the books of Danto and Belting of 1984, the approach was basically Hegelian. Burgin, in 1986, started a more Marxist approach to the question, which was carried farther by Jameson in '88. The two more recent books, those of Spaulding and Kuspit, are more or less invectives against post-Modernism. Spaulding feels—to simplify and encapsulate his point of view—that art has lost its channels of connection to the larger public world around it; intellectual

elitism is the problem. In an article in the *New York Times* a few years ago in which various critics were asked what art is today, one on the whole formalist or Modernist critic said, "It's not rocket science, you know." The aesthetic response, in other words, is more or less automatic and does not involve study and argumentation. But with post-Modernism, in which often a work comes ensconced in a thick web of theory, art has become rocket science. This is the point Spaulding dwells on. Kuspit—again to simplify and encapsulate—felt that art had long performed the function of revealing the unconscious of society but now, with the dawning of post-Modernism, has put itself in the service of the conscious mind, as an instrument of social and cultural critique.

A conceptual-performative motif that embodies the theme of the End of Art in another way is the theme of retirement—the act of an artist who conspicuously retires from art as an art statement. The theme is most famously associated with Marcel Duchamp who around 1923 let it be known that he was retiring from art-making to play chess—retiring from the aesthetic faculty to the cognitive, as art would follow in his footsteps in its transition from beauty to philosophy.

Duchamp may have been influenced by the fact that in 1919 Hugo Ball retired conspicuously. Huelsenbeck says that he and other early Dadaists were fascinated by this gesture, which they traced back to Arthur Rimbaud. Huelsenbeck says that in those days they saw Rimbaud's retirement as a seminal gesture preceding Ball's and Duchamp's retirements. He said they used to wonder "What does it mean leave art behind?" He suspected that it might give you a new and larger sense of what art is.<sup>20</sup> The act of retiring from art was a personal way of stating the end of art. So here as elsewhere Duchamp seems to have had an uncannily prescient awareness of the problematic aspect of the art situation as the end of Modernism approached.

This symbolic gesture became a leitmotif in the second or post-World War II period of anti-art. Sometime in the 1960s, when Ben Vautier sent Joseph Beuys the postcard-painting saying simply, "No More Art," Beuys replied with a postcard saying, "I here and now retire from art." In 1968 John Baldessari gave an exhibition of the ashes of his paintings which he had consigned to the flames and for which he put an obituary notice in *The New York Times*. In 1971 Bernard Benet retired from art with his show at the New York Cultural Center. They all seemed to sense that somehow it was the end of art in both the Kantian aesthetic sense and the Hegelian historicist sense. A story at once beautiful and horrifying was over. The thesis for a new dialectical progression—Conceptual Art—had been stated.



1. Especially three essays, "The End of Art," first published in Berel Lang, ed., *The Death of Art* (New York: Haven Publishers, 1984), republished in Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 81-116; "Narratives of the End of Art," in *Encounters and Reflections* (New York: Noonday, 1990), pp. 331-346; and "Three Decades After the End of Art," in *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 21-40.
2. In English translation, Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1986).
4. Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History?'" in *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998), see, for example, p. 81.
5. Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, English translation by Charles Marriott (New York: Dutton, 1964), p. 201.
6. Ann Rorimer, "Siting the Page: Exhibiting Works in Publications—Some Examples of Conceptual Art in the USA," in Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 17.
7. I should say parenthetically that in his preface to *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (where "The End of Art" was republished) Danto seems to refer to Venet's work as one source of this line of thought. This is the first sentence of that book:

*Once in an exhibition of conceptual art held at the New York Cultural Center I saw a work consisting of an ordinary table with some philosophy books on it...*

This could be a recollection of Venet's exhibition in that venue in 1971. Ironically, in light of the line of thought that Danto derived from it, the

premise of the exhibition as Venet announced it was that this would be his last exhibition. With this he would stop making art (rehearsing the decision that Duchamp had made fifty years earlier). In other words, this exhibition was to announce the moment when art would pass over into philosophy. It meant the end of art, as Danto would divine from it.

8. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.
9. Arthur Danto, "Post-Historical Abstract Painting," *Tema Celeste*, autumn, 1991, p. 55.
10. Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," in Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p. 81.
11. Danto, "Narratives of the End of Art," p. 344.
12. Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 99.
13. Alan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 221.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 249
17. *Ibid.*, p. 81
18. Jameson, "'End of Art' or 'End of History?'" p. 79.
19. Julian Spaulding, *The Eclipse of Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2003); Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
20. Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, Edited by Hans J. Kleinschmidt, English translation by Joachim Neugroschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 4.

## New York or Global?

IT IS AT THIS AMBIGUOUS MOMENT—WHEN CONCEPTUALISM HAS been declared either a universal artistic dominant for our time, or a fulfilled and completed historical sequence, or a failed fake avant-garde that has been deeply co-opted by the market—that the secondary discourse about Conceptual Art has gotten finally underway. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the only full-scale books about Conceptual Art available in English were Ursula Meyer's seminal collection of pieces and Gregory Battcock's seminal collection of essays.<sup>1</sup> Both of them have been out of print for some time and the incredible situation was in place for several years that not a single book on the subject was available in English. Then in the 1990s art history finally acknowledged the overwhelming presence of Conceptualism and a series of rich new documents emerged.<sup>2</sup> In the interaction of these texts certain themes or issues have been defined which are likely to remain central to the discussion for the foreseeable future; one of them will be addressed briefly here: the question of Conceptualism's connection (or lack of one) with the United States in general and New York City in particular.

The attack on New York's supposed centrality has become a common part of post-Modernist revisionism in the postcolonial era. Synthetic or hybrid Conceptual Art is the beginning of post-Modernism; but analytic or formalist Conceptualism is in a sense the last bead on the string of Late Modernism (which is much the same as calling it anti-Modernism), and its close connection with Late Modernism imbricates it with colonialism, at least the late American phase in Vietnam. In the late 1950s and the 1960s the United States State Department sent exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism overseas, to both Europe and Asia, as a neo-imperialistic gesture of American cultural hegemony. Now, as Conceptual Art, in its diffuse synthetic form, spreads around the world, it is sometimes suspected of serving a similar neo-imperialistic motive, despite its seductive incorporations of



elements of multiculturalism. This goes along with Serge Guilbaut's idea that "New York stole the idea of Modern art" by insisting on its own priority in the field until everyone else had been convinced or silenced.<sup>3</sup>

Writers in a massive and learned catalogue for the recent exhibition *Global Conceptualism* have thrown down a similar challenge to the tradition that connects Conceptual Art historically with New York city and regards nonwestern Conceptualism as "simply an offspring of a mainstream international art discourse originating in New York."<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this objection to the supposed art historical priority of New York has arisen before, countless times, within the United States itself, where the art establishments in other parts of the country are resentful of it. In terms of Conceptual Art in particular, it first arose sharply in connection with John Baldessari, whom Conceptual Artists in New York seem to have felt they could banish by insisting on his connection with California. Within the American cultural discourse, full cultural and spiritual seriousness could only be generated in New York—partly because of its close contact with Europe; cultural manifestations in California were relegated to the lightweight popular realm or to the hazy distance of Asia.

By now the arena of resentment of New York's domination of history since about mid-twentieth-century has spread to global proportions. The fact that New York historically replaced Paris as the (presumptive) center of the (western) world seemed to associate it with colonialism, as the new center of a colonial empire administered not through soldiers but through dollars. Its claims of cultural priority, then, may be seen as acts of aggression within a fullscale colonialist policy operating culturally as well as economically.

The claim is made, with an array of visual and textual evidences, that in fact Conceptualism was in the air in general in the Cold War era and was beginning at about the same time in some parts of Asia, Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the United States.<sup>5</sup> In that case Conceptual Art's historic connection with New York City would be just another example of the Guilbaut thesis.

This issue could only be settled by a study of the dates of works from (1) New York City, (2) the rest of the western world, and (3) the nonwestern world; this is a worthy topic for a doctoral thesis and cannot be examined exhaustively here. Still, without looking at all possible dates and thinking of all possible problems of interpretation, one can indeed see, upon a review of readily available sources, that there have been works not originating in the United States or western Europe which seem like genuine Conceptualism

(with a capital C, or strong) and which were early enough to compete with various New York-based works for chronological priority in the movement.

In a sense works that existed before the category of Conceptual Art had been isolated in the language cannot be said to belong to that category since it didn't exist yet. But in another sense they can be regarded as expressing the same spirit and designated "proto-Conceptual Art." A fundamental work of this type from which the post-War American chronology of Conceptualism might begin is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased DeKooning Drawing of 1953*. The date is early—fourteen years before the term "conceptual art" had appeared in print—and the question about its legitimacy is whether it is a late echo of Dada or an early intimation of Conceptualism, or could one tell the difference?

Of course Conceptualism derives, at a distance, from Dada along with other things; still, they should be distinguished. The *Erased DeKooning Drawing*, along with some other works of the 1950s, such as Yves Klein's hand-written certificates for *Immaterial Zones of Pictorial Sensibility*, 1959, and Piero Manzoni's canned line of the same year, made basic statements about anti-art, dematerialization, and the art-life project, and seem legitimately part of the Conceptualist tradition. In the early 1960s such works as Stanley Brouwn's *This way brouwn*, 1962—in which he asked passersby to write down on a piece of paper the instructions to get to another part of Amsterdam, and later exhibited the papers—led into the beginning of Conceptual Art proper. In the years just preceding Sol LeWitt's publication of the term "conceptual art" in 1967, yet already displaying a fully classical ("strong," "analytic," or "hard-line") sense of Conceptualism, with emphasis exclusively on cognitive formalism, came Robert Morris's *The Card File*, 1962, and *Statement of Esthetic Withdrawal*, 1963. William Anastasi's *Microphone*, 1963—a tape recorder that has recorded the sound of its own recording mechanism—and Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, 1965 (though this date has been questioned), are perhaps the first works that may be said to reach all the way into the inner sanctum of Conceptual Art—the irreducible kernel of tautology. Some of the spirit is seen in On Kawara's Letraset design of 1963, *Nothing, Something, Everything*, and the same artist's crayon drawings of 1964 stating the latitude and longitude of his location at the moment (both works from his New York period); Ed Ruscha's *Various Small Fires*, with its emphasis on the ordinary cementing the art-life project, was another strong statement of 1964. Daniel Buren's first exhibition of so-called striped paintings—parodying painting, going for the mechanically



reproduced, condemning the gallery environment, moving art out into the street—occurred in 1966, as did Hannah Darboven's *Permutational Drawing* and Anastasi's *Untitled (wall on the wall)*—photo-silkscreens of the gallery walls hung on the same walls. By 1967, when the term finally appeared, the movement was in full swing with works like John Baldessari's *Work with Only One Property*, 1966-67, Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting*, 1967-68, Buren's *Sandwichmen*, 1968, Robert Barry's *One Billion Dots*, 1968, Mel Bochner's *Compass: Orientation*, 1968—the four directions marked out on the gallery floor—, Ian Burn's *Xerox Book*, 1968—a blank sheet of paper copied, then the copy copied, etc., for a hundred generations—and so on.

Elevation of cognition, ignoring the aesthetic, dematerialization, casting mockery on painting, finding secrets in emptiness, seeing tautology as the most basic fact, reconsidering the whole matter of original and copy, rejecting all representation, undermining selfhood, totally neglecting religion, seeing logic as the purest aesthetics—these would be some of the signs of a convincingly Conceptual nature which were already inchoately present in New York in 1953, fully developed there by 1962 or so, and found in western Europe also by 1967-68. Finally, the years 1968 to 1970 (or, in the slightly broader scale that Lucy Lippard used, 1966-72<sup>6</sup>) are the crucial years for classical Conceptualism.

But almost all the convincingly Conceptual works in the catalogue of *Global Conceptualism* from outside the North Atlantic area date from 1970 or later. Perhaps the only exception is Argentinian Liliana Porter's *Wrinkle*, 1968—ten photographs of a piece of paper in increasing stages of wrinkledness, from smooth to balled up<sup>7</sup>—but she moved permanently to New York in 1964 and an historian might regard the work as New York Conceptualism. The abundance of really convincing works—such as Cildo Meireles's—are from 1970 and after.

Without a truly exhaustive search one can tentatively say that the developments outside of New York seem to have come about five or ten years later than developments there. New Zealander Barrie Bates's work (shown under the pseudonym Billie Apple) qualifies by 1961-62, but it was made in London for exhibition in London and New York. Events in Taiwan from the mid-60s, such as the "Language Beyond Painting" movement, founded in 1967, were directly seeded from the United States and, in Taiwan as in New York, followed on the heels of Abstract Expressionism.

Finally it seems that the premise of *Global Conceptualism*—that Conceptualism originated at various unconnected points around the world at about the same time—needs more research chronologically.

The single great exception is Japan. Virtually all the Asian works in *Global Conceptualism* are from the 1980s and '90s, but Japan had "proto-Conceptual" works about as early as New York—in the mid-1950s—and has fully Conceptualist works around 1965, also about as early as New York. There were partial forerunners to Conceptualist types of work in Japan's traditional art—such as the tradition of conjoining picture and calligraphy or the performative ritualism of Shinto or the story that Hokusai dipped a chicken's feet in black ink then induced it to run across the paper. Still, the secular, non-traditional, analytic neutrality of information in the Conceptual practice does not seem likely to have sprouted spontaneously in Japanese culture without some outside input, and the extremely close relationship between Japan and the United States in the immediate post-War period is the obvious—indeed, the only possible—source. After centuries of being an isolated culture, Japan opened up to post-War westernization very quickly, perhaps because, the war being lost, their own tradition seemed, at least momentarily, discredited or obsolete.

Japanese Conceptualism proper does not include the works of the Gutai Group, which were more oriented toward Performance and relate more directly to Action Painting and Happenings.<sup>8</sup> Japanese scholars trace Japanese Conceptualism proper to works of 1958-59 by On Kawara, before he emigrated to the United States and became a part of the New York Conceptual lineage. These were "printed paintings," not to be considered finished till they were in reproduction, involving three basic Conceptualist themes: critique of art as an institution, avoidance of the gallery or museum, denying the idea of the unique original. Granted these intentions on the artist's part it would be hard not to acknowledge the work as Conceptualism. After the War, it seems, Japanese artists were as prepared to bail out on their classical artistic tradition as western artists were from theirs—though for different reasons—and saw the project in similar terms. This parallels what has gone on in the relationship between Japanese and American manufacturing and technology. Very likely Japanese proto-Conceptualism and Conceptualism will go down in history—at least in western history books—as a track linked to the American one, running along parallel with it, but, because of the fates of war, secondary to it.

Whether such resolution would do justice to the not-yet-clarified facts remains a question. One point still lacking from the argument is the necessity of theory. A work cannot be regarded as authentically Conceptualist unless it was theorized that way in the artist's intentions. He or she must be able to overtly state the theoretical layering and directionality of the



work—the theoretical reasons for it. According to the Conceptualist tradition with its elevation of the cognitive, the theory without the object can be a Conceptual work—but not an object without its theory. The question applies both to proto-Conceptual works and to works outside what is clearly the Conceptual tradition. Could Rauschenberg have stated the theoretical thrusts of his *Erased DeKooning Drawing* in 1953? Is it possible that Bernd and Hilla Becher's *Houses*, 1959-1964, could be just a series of architecturally based photographs later redefined as Conceptual Art?<sup>9</sup> Could early works of Japanese or Brazilian Conceptualism derive from different motives than those that were guiding Joseph Kosuth or John Baldessari? The question can only be answered by consulting publications either earlier than or contemporaneous with the works in question. Again, such a review and analysis of the documentary history of recent art might furnish the substance of a major text. What is clear from a light survey of the field is that in Japan there are Conceptualist texts as early as 1964,<sup>10</sup> in both Argentina and Brazil as early as 1966, and in Taiwan by 1967.<sup>11</sup> These dates compare well with those of early American manifesto-like statements such as Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 1966, Mel Bochner's "The Serial Attitude," 1967, Michael Baldwin's "Remarks on Air-Conditioning," 1967, Adrian Piper's "A Defense of the 'Conceptual' Process in Art," Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's "The Dematerialization of Art," 1968, and other works that culminated in Kosuth's important essay "Art after Philosophy," 1970,<sup>12</sup> and indicate the presence of clearly articulated Conceptualist theory in Japan, Taiwan, Argentina, and Brazil, at about the same time as in New York, with the implementation of their principles in artmaking practice taking a few years to catch up. Obviously, the last word has not been said on this.

1. Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art* (New York, Dutton, 1972); Gregory Battcock, *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1973). Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973) contains a great deal of information about Conceptual Art but also deals with several other genres.

2. The sudden surge of belated academic interest began with a French catalogue, *l'art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1989); Robert Morgan's *Between Modernism and Conceptual Art* (Jef-

erson, North Carolina: McFarland) appeared in 1997. Then almost at the very end of the millennium the floodgates opened; the main titles are: Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998); Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999); Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999); and Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999).

3. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

4. Claude Gintz, in Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism*, p. 31.

5. See *ibid.*, overall.

6. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*.

7. In Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism*, figure 47, p. 64.

8. I follow Reiko Tomii in this statement ("Concerning the Institution of Art: Conceptualism in Japan," in Camnitzer, Farver and Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism*). One might argue for including a few Gutai works as proto-Conceptual, but even so they would all be post-War, parts of the mid-fifties westernization, and a little after *Erased DeKooning Drawing*.

9. In addition to the chronological situation, an important qualification of the premise of *Global Conceptualism* is made by Peter Wollen in the catalogue, hedging the show's Guilbaut-like premise: "[I]t is important to note that conceptualism's global reach is a product of both its multipolar origins and the impetus initially given to it by New York-based conceptual artists. This very small but very vocal and productive phalanx of artists, strategically situated and committed to a typically avant-garde strategy—complete with manifestos, journals, theoretical statements, and an atmosphere of powerful group solidarity riven with contention—set the theoretical parameters that consequently made it possible for conceptual art to transform the landscape of the global art world in an enduring way. North American

conceptual art, then, inevitably came to play a disproportionate role in the emergence of the much broader conceptualist movement." Wollen's argumentation leaves one forced to choose between two unsatisfactory views. First, if the theoretical parameters for Conceptual Art had not yet been set (in New York) when the rest of the world began doing it, then the rest of the world was doing it without definition or framework, not as a coherent separate genre—in a sense, then, not doing it at all. Second, if, on the other hand, the rest of the world was already doing Conceptual Art before New York defined it, then the New York definition was not really necessary to effect a transformation in the art world which was already happening. This "disproportionate role" that Wollen acknowledges for "North American [implicitly New York] conceptual art" is all that has been claimed for it.

10. Argentinian: Eduardo Costa, Raul Escari, Roberto Jacoby, "A Media Art (Manifesto)," 1966, in Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 2-4; Brazilian: Helio Oiticica's "Position and Program," 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 8-10; Oiticica, "General Scheme of the New Objectivity," 1967, *ibid.*, pp. 40-42; the Argentinian manifesto of the group Tucuman Burns, 1968, *ibid.*, pp. 76-79; Brazilian Cildo Meireles's "Insertions in Ideological Circuits," 1970, *ibid.*, pp. 232-234.

11. Guo Chengfeng, "Language Beyond Painting Society: A Language Group, Not a Painting Group," 1969, in *ibid.*, p. 128.

12. All these American documents are republished in Alberro and Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*.

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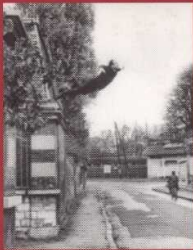
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OF ANTI-ART DRIGINS OF  
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AS BYLLOEIM VYES

MESS-NGER OF THE AGE OF SPACE ANTI-  
ART AS COGNITION WILLIAM ANASTAS  
FRANCOIS MDRELLE BERNAR VENET JOHN

BALDESARI LES LAVINE FRANCIS  
ALYS ANTI-ART AS ETHIC'S ART IN THE  
DARK BEIYS AND WARHOL MARINA



ABRAMOVIC /

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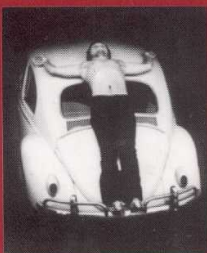
*I will not make any more boring art.  
I will not make any more boring art.  
I will not make any more boring art.  
I will not make any more boring art.  
I will not make any more boring art.*

BRIAN D'DOHERTY  
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ISH LINDA  
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