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Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE
WAKE OF CONCEPTUALISM

ISSUE/01 2007



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WAKE OF CONCEPTUALISM

ISSUE/01 **2007**

*Edited by Christina Barton,
Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard*

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On Kawara
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Contents

- .04 Foreword
.05 Marylyn Mayo and Mavis Mason
- AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE WAKE OF CONCEPTUALISM**
- .06 Introduction
.08 Autobiography: Does it have a Future? Ron Silliman’s
“The Alphabet” and On Kawara’s “Today Series”
Wystan Curnow
.26 Is an Artist? Art, Autobiographies and Humanity’s Disappearance
Charles Reeve
.40 Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder
Postscript. Mieke Bal in Conversation
Mieke Bal
.60 Art in the Face of Fame: Ricky Swallow’s Reflection of Reputation
Anthony Gardner
.80 Who is Billy Apple? The Artist after the Death of the Subject
Christina Barton
.97 *the undecieved are mistaken...*
Mike Parr
.113 “Admit One”: Presenting Adrian Reginald Hall, Auckland, 1971
Marcus Moore
.126 Personal Experience and Impersonal Aesthetics: The Video Work of
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982)
Susan Best
.140 Marcel Duchamp: Creativity is a Form of Onanism
Andrew McNamara
- ARCHIVE**
- .161 The Artists’ Files
Jennifer French
.171 Jim Allen’s “O-AR Part I”
Serena Bentley
.175 I’ll Still Be Here When You’re Gone:
The Archival Strategy of Malcolm Ross
Matt Plummer
- .181 Staff Research, Presentations and Publications: 2006
.183 Contributors

Foreword

Welcome to *Reading Room*, an annual refereed journal of art and culture from the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki's E. H. McCormick Research Library. *Reading Room* is a new forum for art writing centred on contemporary scholarship, intended to both stimulate new writing and provide an outlet for current research.

Peter Tomory's establishment of the Research Library in 1956 was an important step in the development of the Auckland Art Gallery as a centre for research. Some 50 years later, the library has built a reputation as one of the best art research facilities in the region. From 1956 to 1978 the Gallery published, through its library, the first serious research journal from a public art gallery in New Zealand. Known as the *Quarterly*, it highlighted the Gallery's new acquisitions and exhibitions, and drew mostly upon staff for its contributions. The launch of *Reading Room*, then, represents the Gallery's return to publishing a journal through its library while simultaneously taking us into new territory: *Reading Room* has an open call for papers, is peer-reviewed, and seeks to attract writers from New Zealand, Australia and beyond.

The success of a refereed journal hinges on the support of the academic community. We are fortunate to have gained that support from a highly skilled editorial board and a number of issue-specific peer-reviewers, all of whom have generously given of their time and expertise. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the editors of *Reading Room*: Robert Leonard – who proposed the idea of publishing a refereed journal when he was the Gallery's Curator of Contemporary Art – and Wystan Curnow and Christina Barton, who both also contributed essays.

A number of staff have also been instrumental in the production of *Reading Room*: principal among them Catherine Hammond, Research Librarian; Caroline McBride, E. H. McCormick Assistant Librarian; John McIver and Jennifer French, Gallery photographers; Louise Pether, Manager Art & Access Programmes; and Natasha Conland, Curator of Contemporary Art.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest thanks to Dr John Mayo who has so generously endowed the establishment of *Reading Room* in memory of his wife, Marylyn Mayo and her mother Mavis Mason. Without the singular support of the Mayo Foundation this new journal would simply have remained a good idea.

Chris Saines
Director

Marylyn Mayo and Mavis Mason



The Marylyn Mayo Foundation was established by Dr John Mayo to benefit a number of causes, including the advancement and wider appreciation of the visual arts. The Foundation's support has enabled the Auckland Art Gallery to establish two major new initiatives: the Marylyn Mayo Internships and Reading Room. The journal differs from other Foundation projects in that its establishment is in memory of both Marylyn Mayo and her mother, Mavis Mason, in recognition of their shared interest in the visual arts.

Born and raised in New Zealand, Marylyn Eve Mayo had a lifelong interest in education, law and the visual arts. Her academic career established her as a legal pioneer in Australasia. Marylyn was one of fewer than two dozen women law graduates when she completed her degree at the University of Auckland in 1960. Her legacy is honoured at its Law School with the Marylyn Eve Mayo Endowment Scholarship and the Marylyn Mayo Rare Book Room. Marylyn's parents, Mavis and Sydney Mason, moved with her to Auckland when she began her university studies. Mavis Mason had always been an artist and the move to Auckland enabled her to develop this talent: in the 1960s she studied painting with one of New Zealand's most celebrated artists, Colin McCahon. Mavis's interest in art was imparted to Marylyn who enjoyed visiting art galleries and, from the time she was a recent graduate, began collecting works by contemporary New Zealand artists including Colin McCahon, Don Binney and Richard Killeen.

In 1969, Marylyn moved to Australia to teach law at the University of Queensland's campus in Townsville, soon to be known as James Cook University. It was here that she met and married John Mayo in 1970. In 1974, Mavis joined Marylyn and John in Townsville, remaining in Australia for the rest of her life. Marylyn's vision to establish a separate Faculty of Law at James Cook University was realized in 1989 when she became the Foundation Head of its newly established Law School. She retired in 1996 but her links with the University remained with the establishment of the Marylyn Mayo Medal and the Law Students' Society's annual Mayo Lecture.

Catherine Hammond
Managing editor

Introduction

Robert Leonard, for the editors

We decided to make autobiography the focus of our first issue after hearing Ikon Gallery director Jonathan Watkins lecture on On Kawara at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2005.

Kawara's work was part of a sea change in the 1960s, as new forms of art challenged the prevailing expressive-romantic conception of art associated with abstract expressionism. Pop art downplayed the idea of a personal language in favour of the common coin of mass-media culture, casting the artist as receiver and processor rather than originator. Minimalism emphasized the viewer's phenomenological engagement with real material, in real space and real time, making the artist's background seem beside-the-point. It preferred impersonal everyday geometries, industrial surfaces and outsourced fabrication to "the hand of the artist".

Conceptual artists were interested in autobiography, but in a new way. They tended to be less concerned with *expressing* the inner life than with *measuring* aspects of the outer life. Kawara's *Today* paintings, which he started making in 1966, have become *the* textbook example of this kind of work. Recording the day of their making, they reduce the painting to the signature gesture of dating the canvas. Kawara also mapped his daily travels and listed people he met, and sent telegrams and postcards to let people know when he'd gotten up and that he was still alive. These works were autobiographical, but not in the old way: explicit references to psychology or personality were deliberately left out of the picture.

Given this, Watkins' lecture took a perverse tack, filling us in on what Kawara was at pains to leave out. He told endearing anecdotes that challenged the assumption that Kawara's practice was rigorous and systematic, lacking what the media calls "human interest". He reassured us that the work was not produced in a monk-like meditative state, and that Kawara had a sly sense of humour. He showed slides of Kawara's little-known early *The Bathroom* drawings (1953-4), picturing dismembered bodies in a morgue-like room (the Japanese artist was 13 when the bomb fell on Hiroshima). While Kawara rejected this angsty surrealist sensibility in his mature work, Watkins suggested we might still read the "I Am Still Alive" telegrams as missives from a bomb-survivor.

Watkins answered questions the work deliberately left hanging, humanizing the work, reconnecting it with the artist's inner life, bridging the gap Kawara seemed keen to construct. Was he just softening the hard-line view of Kawara or totally wrong? Surely the thing about the *Today* paintings is not only that

they don't yield up that kind of information, but that they make a point of it. But Watkins did clarify something: that Kawara does not really dispense with a conception of the inner self, but relies on it as something to resonate or kick against.

While the new art of the 1960s delivered a blow to the prominence of expressionism, expressive autobiographical work, of course, persists – contemporary art is a broad church. But in the wake of conceptual art, it exists within an expanded idea of the forms that autobiography can take. It continues to exert particular influence in three overlapping areas.

First, in “the art of Others”, where artists representing culturally marginalized positions speak from the heart, tell their stories. We see this in some identity art: in feminist art, in gay/queer art, in post-colonial art and outsider art. It has to do with the artists' desires, but also with the desires of the culture into which their work is pitched. Take for example the rhetoric surrounding the fantasy-autobiographical work of outsider artist Henry Darger, who satisfies *our* desire for an “original” “authentic” artist at a time when we are generally sceptical of such terms. Our desire for an art of the inner life, repressed in the main, returns on the margins.

Second, in work informed by psychoanalysis. In the late 1970s and 1980s psychoanalysis was smuggled into art discourse with a wave of Theory generally hostile to old-school expressive art. It provided an alibi for inner life art in the mainstream. In the early 1980s Louise Bourgeois famously reframed her work as autobiographical, tied to childhood trauma and abuse. Ever since it has accumulated psychoanalytic readings, sophisticated and simplistic, conspiring to make her one of our most celebrated artists. But the work is essentially old wine (primitivism, biomorphic abstraction and surrealism) in new bottles (a sculptural language informed by conceptualism and minimalism). It's old inner life art, inoculated with what followed.

Third, in art history, where details of artists' biographies are still considered to hold secret keys to the meaning of their art. This is even true of new revisionist approaches, particularly those aligned with the art of Others. Revisionist art historians have made perversely biographical readings of pop artists (attributing arcane autobiographical and gay subtexts to Robert Rauschenberg's work) and minimalists (Carl Andre's granddad was a bricklayer!). Is such interpretation a critical corrective or simply conservative, recuperating challenging work for the older paradigm? Perhaps here the ends meet, and professional art history holds hands with the pop-hagiography of in-flight magazine art-journalism.

In art today, autobiography is conflicted. Between Watkins humanizing Kawara (imposing an inner life reading on work which repels it) and Mieke Bal's anti-biographical reading of Louise Bourgeois in this issue (rescuing her from the inner life reading she demands), autobiography re-emerges as a field of guilty pleasures.

Fig. 1 On Kawara
 Apr. 5, 1990 1990
 Liquitex on canvas,
 cardboard box, newspaper
 20.5 x 33 cm
 From the *Today Series*,
 1966 -
 Courtesy of David Zwirner,
 New York



Autobiography: Does it have a Future? Ron Silliman's *The Alphabet* and On Kawara's *Today Series*

Wystan Curnow

1.

I have reasons of my own for wondering what is going on in autobiography. Fay Weldon's memoir *Auto Da Fay*, includes the following passage: "I wheeled little Wystan Curnow, now a literary agent in Sydney, about in his pram for pocket money. The Curnows were an advanced family. It was said the parents went around the house wearing no clothes. When Rita Angus painted a portrait of Jean Curnow with what my mother considered to be a disagreeable expression on her face she was moved to ask why. Rita said she didn't approve of the way Jean brought up Wystan and thought the portrait should reflect her subject's inner soul, not what was visible on the face. She could be very self-righteous, as only the childless can be. I don't know what became of Jean's portrait. Jane's and mine, in our check dresses was to become quite famous. My mother, as I have said, despised it – it broke every rule in the Slade's book..."¹ I am informed by the *Literary Encyclopedia* that "The autobiographers of the twentieth century tend to accept the proposition that an essential constituent of the truth in a life is fiction; they no longer believe that the autobiographer is capable of offering a faithful reconstruction of a verifiable historical past. On the contrary, it is understood that the materials of the past are remodeled by memory and imagination in order to meet the demands of the present state of consciousness."² Well, that's all very well for them. For myself I take strong objection to having *my* past remodelled to suit the present, demonstrably dire, state of Fay Weldon's consciousness. Weldon, I should say, here relies not just on her own faulty memory, but that of her aged mother as well. Margaret, she tells us, "kept company with poets and experimental writers, and those involved with the *Caxton Press*, one of those small magazines that did so well during the Thirties and Forties, with wood engravings on quality paper." Most informed New Zealand readers will know The Caxton Press was a publisher not a literary magazine, that I have never been a literary agent in Sydney (even if my younger brother Tim has and is); some of you will know that my mother's name is not Jean, and that Rita Angus'

portrait of her is more or less permanently on display at the Auckland Art Gallery and that it is in fact far more famous than that of Fay and her sister Jane Birkenshaw.

Not that I wish to pursue the matter, but there are other more troubling indications in Weldon's autobiography of a consciousness infected by the imagination besides these faithless and imperialist memories of her Christchurch past.³ Like her mother, who had a mystical experience in Hagley Park, Fay has had many encounters with the supernatural – evil presences, ghosts, telepathic communications, that sort of thing – encounters which, strangely, she insists were verified, by friends, family, and her dog. Nor do I wish to make a play for your sympathy. Despite the march of autobiography from the periphery to near the centres of literary production, not everyone need feel they have a stake in the present condition of autobiography. However, none of us is free from the changing constructions of subjectivity, and all of us are to one degree or another at the mercy of the confessionalism that now holds so much of mass culture in its clammy thrall.

2.

Juliana Spahr notes that despite the fact that Philippe Lejeune's 1975 characterization of autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his (sic) own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" has been under considerable pressure to accommodate more complex ideas of identity than it seems to allow, there has been a continuing reliance on the basic, and very limiting, precepts of his definition: "retrospective", "prose narrative", and "individual".⁴ She says that the "critical discourse that surrounds autobiography has been caught between a desire to bring forward life writing by marginalized subjects and an unwillingness to abandon much of its generic conventions and an emphasis on individualism."⁵

Two years ago, the American poet Ron Silliman published *Under Albany*. Although its last sentence is: "it is not possible to 'describe a life'" and although the title page doesn't say so, in his bibliography Silliman refers to it as autobiography.⁶ It is really a hybrid work in which conventionally autobiographical paragraphs are introduced between the sentences – there are exactly 100, and they are nonsequentially ordered – of a poem called "Albany" published over twenty years earlier. *Albany* is in fact the first part of *The Alphabet*, a multi-volume poem that has occupied Silliman for much of the intervening time. I am going to call that long poem autobiographical, but one that successfully escapes the genre's conventions and more significantly its emphasis on individualism. Although the added paragraphs encourage us to read *Under Albany* as a memoir their formal reliance on *Albany* disturbs any retrospective continuity; it remains a generic hybrid and an elaboration rather than a subversion of the dominant mode of *The Alphabet*.

This sentence from *Albany*: “**Yet the sight of people making love is deeply moving**” is followed by this “annotation”:

Making my rounds of the Tenderloin (which I do, on average, twice a day during the five years I work at Hospitality House), I step into one of the darkest and most rancid of the little porn theatres that crowd around lower Eddy. The room inside is small and for the most part empty. On the screen, 20 feet high, is Kathy Acker. She stands naked against a kitchen counter as a young man, also naked, literally flogs her with a head of cabbage. She turns, raising herself onto the counter, facing him, so that he can enter her.⁷

In what sense, if any, does it “locate” or contextualize the sentence? Deeply moving? it seems to ask. Maybe, in some circumstances, but hardly after being flogged with a cabbage, for example. Making love? Instead of drawing poem and memoir together, it drives them apart, so that you wonder whether the sentence was in fact a quotation, whether the voice of *Albany* is always Silliman’s.

Elsewhere Silliman has remarked on what a strong influence Kathy Acker was on the San Francisco writing scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “With her crewcut and her dedication to a completely different model of writing, she was riveting as a presence on the scene, and people were still trying to figure out what she was doing, long before it was evident that the formula was plagiarism plus porn equals autobiography.”

Interestingly, Ron Silliman appears as a character in chapter two of Acker’s 1978 fictional biography *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*. Giannina, the central female character, is talking to her friend Vincent Van Gogh who has accompanied her from Paris to San Francisco because she has fallen in love with Ron. She describes for Vincent their first sexual encounter.

“I want hot violent passionate sex. That way the intensity of my physical feelings will make me forget not to have to deal with the person I’m with, the total confusion I’m feeling.”

“Ron’s so gentle with me. I can’t handle it. He wants to kiss my lips. I’m wondering if I’m good in bed. I keep licking nibbling at, squeezing, sucking, rubbing his cock so I don’t have to look at his face.”

“As soon as I can, I’m running out of his house, into the San Francisco night, and home.”

“Giannina, do you even know this guy?” Vincent asks.

“I love Ron mainly because I love his work. I always fall in love that way. Ron’s a great poet. His varied sensuous language reflects and questions itself. What emerges, finally, is a restless deeply-perceiving consciousness. A consciousness, finally, I don’t understand. I adore him.”⁸



Fig. 2 On Kawara
Jan. 4 1966 1966
Liquitex on canvas
20,5 x 25,5 cm
From the *Today Series*
1966 –
Courtesy of David Zwirner,
New York

What impresses me is the way the shift in tone from *Albany's* sentence to *Under Albany's* paragraph is echoed in comically exaggerated form in Giannina's language, and to the same ends. To cast doubt on the informing presence of a "deeply-perceiving consciousness" and in consequence on the generic integrity of the two genres, fiction and autobiography each text purports to belong to.

3.

On Kawara began his *Today Series* or date paintings on 4 January 1966 and has been adding to it for almost forty years (Figs. 1 and 2). Each painting is of its time, in the literal sense that it records the date on which it was painted, but in other respects the date paintings have varied hardly at all. They dominate his oeuvre, charting as they occupy the time of the life of their maker. The new autobiographical mode of Ron Silliman's long poem *The Alphabet*, and On Kawara's painting project, the *Today Series*, is the subject of this essay. For all that my introduction suggests otherwise, its origin lies not in a critique of the genre as such. For one thing, art history recognizes no such genre. Rather it emerges as a byproduct of larger changes in literature and the visual arts that occurred between 1965 and 1975. These larger changes go by the names of language writing and conceptual art.

On Kawara can be grouped with a number of other conceptual artists who, around the same time, made similar, life-changing decisions about the future direction of their art. Instead of working within the terms laid down by the standard genres, media or art forms of their times, they changed the terms. Each gave themselves a set of instructions or procedures to carry out, or a score to perform, which determined ahead of time the character of the work thus generated. That was the concept. This turn to the performative was accompanied by a turn toward language: the score and/or the documentation of performance

took the form of words, numbers, or codes, which by extension in time gave rise to an *oeuvre* that was necessarily autobiographical and although neither retrospective, narrative nor focused on the individual.

In 1965 the French artist, Daniel Buren, abandoned painting, and decided to only exhibit works comprising alternating white and coloured strips 8.7cms wide, inside or outside galleries and museums. That same year Polish painter Roman Opalka embarked on a life-long series of works in which counting and painting become a single activity. The first of these canvases began with the number one, painted top left and ended with the number 36327 bottom right. After which he would have his photo taken. The next canvas began with 36328, top left and so on. In 1969, the American artist Lawrence Weiner declared that henceforth his works need not be made, nor need they be made by him; they would in the first instance be verbal instructions made visible in print, or painted on walls indoors or out. That same year, the Englishman, Hamish Fulton decided to make art in the landscape, not in the studio, by undertaking walks of predetermined length, time, and location, which he would then document as verbal statements or by a single photograph or by a map. Since then he has walked the world over, compiling a unique and extraordinary atlas in the process.

While these changes involved abandoning or diminishing the traditional conventions, genres and media that modernism and its attendant culture had seemingly exhausted, they also involved promoting previously overlooked or prohibited media, and appropriating other extant or newly emerging media or art forms, such as photography, video and installation. On Kawara's paintings, taken individually, may represent a relative impoverishment, but they are otherwise richly invested with the meanings of the specific procedures that have generated them, of their collective context, and of the family of various other series involving postcards, telegrams, books, installations and performances that make up his growing oeuvre. As with Silliman's poetry, Kawara's art gives rise to a kind of autobiography that empties the space of conventional autobiography only to refill it with contents that previously had been barred from it, and to radically extend its boundaries. The self, or the subject as we will prefer to call it, takes shape from without rather than within. Instead of applying closure at those points where the identity of the subject is at issue their art opens it up to connection. The subject in fact becomes the instrument of connection, rather than of self-discovery, its activity constituting and constructing the scene of its particular engagement. What it lacks in depth it more than makes up for in breadth. Comprising an endless flow of detailed and highly specific close-quarter observations of the circumstances of daily life, Ron Silliman's scene approaches an extraordinary plenitude. On Kawara, by his invention of and remarkable persistence with procedures for taking the measure of the givens of his temporal existence, realm of engagement is assuming a comparable magnitude. As different as they are, taken together the works of Silliman and

Kawara stake out a large territory within which a new autobiographical mode might be thought to flourish.

4.

The procedural rules of Kawara's *Today Series* are well known. Each painting names and must be completed by the end of the day on which it was painted. Kawara does not produce them every day – usually there's only one, but sometimes two or three. Since 1966 he has produced over 2000. They are not painted in the same place, for he travels widely. The language and conventions for naming the dates follow those of the country in which the painting was made. In 1992 the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam exhibited 89 works which had been painted in different cities. Lynne Cooke gives the best account of their actual making:

Every painting in the *Today Series* conforms to one of eight predetermined sizes, all horizontal in orientation, ranging from eight by ten inches to sixty-one by eighty-nine inches. And for every painting the artist mixes the color afresh, so that the chroma of each is unique. Colors and tonalities in the brown-gray and blue-black areas of the spectrum have become prevalent in recent years; earlier cerulean blues and clear reds were more frequently employed. Four or five coats of acrylic are evenly applied to the surface of the canvas, on the side as well as the frontal plane and each layer is sanded down before the next is added, creating a dense matt surface. The whole is self-evidently an object, a three-dimensional entity. Letters, numbers, and punctuation marks are then meticulously built up across the center of the monochrome field. Eschewing stencils in favour of hand-drawn characters, Kawara skillfully renders the script, initially an elongated version of Gill Sans, later in a quintessentially modernist Futura. Whatever slight variations and adjustments in the letters may be discerned over the years, they are no more significant than the often minute differences of hue. Nor is the choice of color more expressive or connotative than the measurements that determine the size of an individual work.⁹

The ongoing *Today Series* stands at the centre of Kawara's oeuvre. A constellation of accompanying projects and series of shorter duration, variously connected to it, works against its sameness and serves as an index of the changing meaning of the date paintings and of the oeuvre as a whole. All of the series involve the daily recording of activities: there is a journal which began at the same time as the paintings whose entries were initially considered subtitles for them, and as such offered discrete contexts for their interpretation. This role was also played by the newspaper clippings for the corresponding day which, for some years were attached to the inside of the boxes in which the date paintings were stored. In 1972 the journal entries were reduced to statements of the day of the week on which the painting was made. This seems to be because by then Kawara had started several new series which consolidated certain themes of the journal:

I Met consisting of lists of people he met each day; *I Went*, a series of city maps on which were marked whatever journeys he had undertaken that day; *I Got Up*, as series of postcards – two a day – with this message and his name rubber-stamped on the back; and *I am Still Alive*, a series of telegrams announcing this fact, both sent to a range of friends and professional acquaintances around the world.

While these accompanying series extend the range of autobiographical reference in Kawara's work they do not deepen it. Or rather the particulars of the artist's life are not meant to have a value outside of their serving as signs of his existence in time and space, his human ontology. And if we think of them in relation to two other key works, *One Million Years (Past)* and *One Million Years (Future)* which list the million years that preceded 1969 and will follow 1981, it might seem the artist makes too much of them, not too little. On Kawara's desire for anonymity stems from a modesty about his place in this scheme of things. That is why he rejects the expressivity of colour and brush marks in his painting and why he refuses interviews, and why his catalogues include no photographs of himself and no biography apart from the number of days of his existence. And why when approached about a new book devoted to autobiography in contemporary art he refused to participate, rejecting the claim that his work was autobiographical.

5.

On 18 September 1979 when the stamping kit Kawara carried with him for the *I Got Up* series was stolen, instead of buying a new one, he stopped not only that series but *I Went* and *I Met* as well. The decision was only apparently arbitrary, for Kawara here seems to have recognized certain challenges implicit in the procedures on which his practice is based, and the necessity of somehow incorporating his unexpected loss into his system. In this way he could signal both a vulnerability to circumstances which persisting with his procedure might increasingly appear to deny, and a fear of over-determination, such that a self, an individual, might appear to emerge from it. The fact is that the meaning of the date paintings change over time, merely by staying the same, and that the integrity of Kawara's project requires it not only to absorb that change but in doing so to renew and extend its existential and ontological purposes. The *Today Series* changes not only because the times around them change, but because there comes a point at which the sheer numbers of works begins to affect the meaning of each one, especially each new one and through that the meaning of the series as a whole. The same applies to Fulton's walks and Buren's stripes. Or, to put this another way, a point is reached when the diaristic procedure gives rise to a history, where the distinction between the diaristic and the autobiographic fails and the inherent retrospective potential of the procedure has to be acknowledged and incorporated. A history of such changes is somewhat equivalent to the narrative in conventional autobiography. Wolfgang Max Faust writes of being "repeatedly attracted to 'the moment of deciding,' the decision behind them [the *Today Series*] that becomes visible,



Fig. 3 On Kawara
May 16, 1985 1985
Liquitex on canvas
From the *Today Series*
1966-
Installation, "Conscience",
Le Consortium, Dijon, 1990

the decision to persevere with a particular concept for producing art as a life's work." The "moment of decision" has remained attractive for him, he says, because it "always changed against the background of the current method of art production."¹⁰ The artist Dan Graham commented: "On's first works in the *Today Series* have a deadpan, almost stupid, sense of humour, relating to existentialist 'gallows' humour like that of the work of Samuel Beckett."¹¹ He also implies that the later works don't; not only are the *Today Series* of their times, but they change with them. *Consciousness* was a 1990 exhibition which combined 24 date paintings (one per year from 1966 to 1989) with five sculptures by Alberto Giacometti (works from 1948 through to 1959-60) (Fig. 3). Like Beckett's plays and novels, Giacometti's sculptures were very much to the taste of the time, they were in fact still often compared in the early 1960s, just before the times into which the date paintings quietly emerged. It was a project On Kawara evidently collaborated on as though he was echoing Graham's observation or even Silliman's act of retrospection in *Under Albany*. While the *Today Series* and supporting series like *I Got Up* begin in and insist upon the present and its daily demise, as time has gone on, curated acts of memory like *Consciousness* have shifted the emphasis to include more of the past.¹²

Dan Graham remembers the times of Beckett, and On Kawara remembers those of Giacometti. Claiming he preferred France in war-time to his native Ireland in peace, Beckett worked for the Resistance, joining, with his Jewish friend Alfred Peron, a cell led by the daughter of Francis Picabia. When they were betrayed to the Nazis, and Peron sent to the death camps, Beckett fled to the French countryside where he linked up with paramilitary resistance groups. In the six years from 1945 to 1950, he wrote three novels and *Waiting for Godot*, the play on which his subsequent reputation largely rests. On Kawara was 13 at the time of the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and it has been said that the event had a traumatic effect on his growing up. He began his art career early, in poverty-stricken, war-ravaged Tokyo, and his works of the time are full of horrific images of dismemberment, incarceration, and terror.¹³ Giacometti's giant burnt matchstick figures bring to, and bring out of Kawara's black and white sequence an insistence on the grim actuality of history, and to *Consciousness* the memory of two holocausts.

Waiting for Godot (1953) is said to be a play in which nothing happens, twice. A play in which the passage of time is barely marked. Here we have the makings of the convergence Graham is drawn to. Time is marked by the conversation of two aged, all but senile, derelicts, Vladimir and Estragon, who think they have an appointment with a Mr. Godot. Early in the first act, the following exchange takes place:

E. You are sure it was this evening?

V. What?

E. That we were to wait?

V. He said Saturday (pause) I think.

E. You think.

V. I must have made a note of it.

E. (very insidious) But what Saturday? And is it Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (pause) Or Monday (pause) Or Friday?

V. (looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape) It's not possible!

E. Or Thursday?

V. What'll we do?

E. If he came yesterday and we weren't here you may be sure he won't come again today.

V. But you say we were here yesterday.

E. I may be mistaken.

The convergence is this: Kawara's seemingly pointless, meticulous and compulsive naming of the endlessly passing day and Beckett's characters' comical bumbling and pathetic inability to know what day it is, to find its name, proceed from a comparable need for a measure, any measure, of existential security in face of extreme metaphysical uncertainty.



Fig. 4 On Kawara
Pure Consciousness 1998 –
Installation of Date
Paintings from 1997
The Reykjavik School of Art
(Children's Department),
1999

The exhibitions of thematically organized selections of date paintings have involved the normal collaborative partnership between artist and institution, but those that belong to the *Pure Consciousness* series are more like works in their own right: they follow rules. In 1998 a set of date paintings for the first seven days of the previous year was shown as a sequence on the wall of a kindergarten classroom in Sydney, Australia; since then they have been exhibited in kindergartens in Iceland, Ivory Coast, China, Columbia, Turkey, and Sweden (Fig. 4). “The sole function of the works is to merge with the space around and they are not to be used with any educational purpose in mind but blend into the children’s everyday existence.”¹⁴ Like his 2002 retrospective, *On Kawara, Consciousness. Meditation, Watcher on the Hills*, currently touring the world, *clockwise*, this series aims to connect the *Today Series* to the globe; but more interestingly, perhaps, to make them available to children just now coming to consciousness of the codes and measures of existence with which they deal. By contrast with *Consciousness* in which Kawara sought the company of the generation that preceded him – Giacometti died a week after Kawara produced the first date painting – *Pure Consciousness* seeks a connection with the generation that will succeed him. Unwilling to confess his age in years, while freely declaring instead the number of days – some 27,000 – he has been alive; he leaves it to us to do the reckoning, to consider that as *Pure Consciousness* continues to travel around the globe, and as On Kawara ages, from his early to mid-seventies, the poignancy of its autobiographical meaning will gradually intensify.

6.

Asked about procedure-based writing Ron Silliman replied:

At first such structures were something I resorted to out of necessity. The problem which confronts any writer, once they have broken with the received

tradition of a writing that presumes and imposes a stable “voice” is how literally to proceed without persona, narrative or argument (however implicit or associational), what motivates the next line, the next sentence the next paragraph or stanza. Yet all poetry is procedure. The tangible rule-governed behaviour of the sonnet is no more constructed than the work whose devices efface such governance in the name of a “voice” or of “realism”. For me, the question of procedure is not one of seeking a “correct”, or valorized device but of taking a stance towards language, the activity of composition, and reality, which will call forth strategies and structures that are both generative and unconcealing of their constructedness. In practice this places the decision over any given procedure in advance of the “actual writing”.¹⁵

Instead of working within the terms laid down by the standard literary genres of the time, language writers changed them. All poetry, indeed all writing, is rule-governed but whose rules are they, and whose ends do they serve? Starting out during the Vietnam war, language writers had every reason to want to interrogate and unmask the constructed, not to say corrupted nature of the public language of the time. “Poetry,” wrote Lyn Hejinian, “provided the means for reopening the question of language; it was through poetry that a series of reinventions could be initiated.”¹⁶ The writing that embodies those reinventions is frequently generically and formally unfamiliar, new works following new procedures. Often it is hybrid; poetry may turn to prose, critical theory to poetry or satire, and without warning. Language writing’s best known book is Hejinian’s *My Life* (1980) and, true to title, it is an autobiography, but one that reinvents the genre. Written in 1978, when she was thirty-seven years of age; it has thirty-seven paragraphs (or chapters) each composed of thirty-seven sentences, and was followed by a second edition in 1987, with forty-five paragraphs each of forty-five sentences.¹⁷ It promises to be a life-long project. In 1993 when Hejinian visited Auckland, she had added a further six sentences, but then in 2000 she changed the rules: *My Life in the Nineties* contained only the new sentences and sported a now ambiguous title. What the new rules are is less important than the implicit recognition that, as we have seen, this kind of autobiography must change to stay alive.

My Life appears to be a prose narrative; it begins with a first memory:

A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple – though moments are no longer so coloured.

But it is a sentence typical of Hejinian in its torquing of the temporal, in its bringing together of her own memories, and those of others – she was too young herself to remember her father’s leaving for the war – and the present time of recollection in the frame of a single sentence. Although the book does

follow her growing up, it is in good part retrospective, any chronological narrative progression is all but lost in chapters that are relentlessly paratactic in their structure. No one sentence follows the last other than literally.

The waves rolled over our stomachs, like spring rain over an orchard slope. Rubber bumpers on rubber cars. The resistance on sleeping to being asleep. In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats, to match an inisolable portrait in the clouds to a din in the air. But the constant noise is not an omen of music to come.¹⁸

My Life's sentences do not consistently or continuously refer to the past, each seems to command equal attention so that the "presentness" of the work constantly competes with the past of the life. They certainly do not add up in the usual way to a history or explanation of the way their author got to be who she is today.

There seems to me an obvious truth to Hejinian's approach: one's memories do take place in the present, *are* largely fragments, and the narratives that link them in most biographies are questionable fictions and rationalizations which commonly have little use for what is most alive to us from our past. But that may be because I am what Galen Strawson calls an Episodic not a Diachronic type. He argues I am pleased to say, that the dominant view that all human beings are naturally narrative, or Diachronic, and that narrativity is crucial to the good life, is regrettable and a fallacy of our age.¹⁹ Certainly Hejinian has in mind a model of consciousness that more faithfully represents our experience of experience. In addition she wishes, in Juliana Spahr's words, "to show how even the most narcissistic of genres, the most self-privileging, has possibilities for outward connection."

By holding our attention throughout at the level of the sentence, each particular observation is more likely to spark recollections of our own; "I had claimed the radio nights for my own" recalls for me the crystal set beside my bed, and the nightly headphone episodes of *Dossier on Demetrius*. Involvement leads to participation. More interestingly, Hejinian's paragraphs are not numbered but headed by an italicized sentence or phrase that after a while we realise has been repeated, somewhat permuted, in the body of a later chapter. For example, the first of these, "A pause, a rose, something on paper," recurs, variously added to, some eighteen times through the book. By the time we get to the fourth paragraph, "Like plump birds along the shore", we are looking out for remembered phrases, and find four. By the sixteenth chapter, seven of its forty-five sentences are repeats. Thus *My Life* is remarkable to the degree it foregrounds the processes of recollection in the activity of reading, processes ordinarily suppressed in conventional autobiography, and it is unique in the ways that it impels the reader to collaborate with the writer in the processes of recollection. But *My Life* connects with us at another level. "The book," writes Hejinian,

“is about the formative impact of language and at the same time is a critique of that – suggesting that one can construct alternative views.”²⁰ These repeated permutations represent that constructive process in action; they recall how through the continuing exhibition of selections of date paintings On Kawara is able to change and extend their meanings.

7.

Ron Silliman’s *The Alphabet* has 26 parts, many of them single volumes. Published between 1979 and 2004, it is Silliman’s major work. As with Kawara, Silliman’s autobiography is diaristic in the first instance, the result of a more-or-less daily writing practice sustained over decades. He, too, may have more than one such project on the go at a time. Each part comprises a collection of sentences whose mainly discontinuous and paratactic order rules out narrative and argument.²¹ “Narrative,” writes Silliman, “is not story, but joining the words into meaning” permitting procedurally-based structures of repeated uniform or expanding units.²² *Xing* (1996), for example, is a book of 52 pages written over a year, one three-line stanza a day, seven stanzas per page. *Lit* (1985), the “L” volume (1985) has a more complex structure; “L” being the twelfth letter of the alphabet, there are 12 parts to the book and some of these are in turn divided in twelve. As he had done in *Tjanting* and in *N/O*, Silliman makes use of Fibonacci number sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...) to structure some of *Lit*’s poems.

Although like Kawara, Silliman indexes the present, unlike him, he has little interest in the past, in time, as such. His engagement is with the present as a place, rather than a time; as Kawara’s art is indicative of the time of painting, so Silliman’s is of the place of writing. *What*, is a 127 page “free verse” poem. While it covers a year – the seasonal cycle linking winter of 1985 through spring, summer and fall of 1986 – in Silliman’s life in San Francisco, one only discovers this chronology by carefully piecing together details of intermittent descriptions of people’s clothing, behaviour and the weather.²³ It is a measure of how far removed *What* is from conventional autobiography that it all but ignores his marriage of that year: it warrants two passing mentions: “Friends ask us why/ we decided to get married,/ friendly puzzlement/ reflecting true affection” and “Again to marry after 21 years – /the idea in mind is completely different.”²⁴ One would not even have known from *What* that he was in a relationship at the time. Silliman’s family, his partners and friends all crop up here and there but they belong to a “back story” that is unimportant to *The Alphabet*.

We discover in *What* that Silliman spends a lot of time getting around the city on foot and by public transport – there are over 50 references to buses. Indeed, this book seems to have been written mostly about and during time (mostly mornings, before and on the way to work) spent in public urban spaces, the spaces of “connection.” And as many of the other volumes of *The Alphabet* show, Silliman is extremely well-travelled in this region, an expert in local knowledge – compared to Kawara, the postcard tourist, he is a stay at home.

Slab of plywood
augmented by cardboard torn
from carton
patches the smashed window.
Banana smell of nail polish.
Rice Christians. Beige
cows in the rain. Why
I'm not a poet. Small
campus bookstore's
large stationery department.
clothes in laudromat's
washer window
in counterclockwise tumble.
No trucks. Someone
on this bus must
have just bought
a pound of fresh ground
coffee beans. You
could tell where the bullet
entered the pit bull's skull.
Moustache half-hides hairlip,
half-curled, chewing gum
squinting into the rain.²⁵

Forty pages on, it's more of the same:

Vowels vibrate: hum
of flesh in throat. I am
is anyone's name. Breath
storms over valley of tongue.
Swollen knuckles of an old man's hands.
Hierarchy in a higher key. Not asleep
On the bus (but her eyes shut (arms
full of groceries)). In the middle of
the intersection, while pedestrians cross and
a red chevy waits patiently
to make its left turn, they kiss.
Smell of fast food chicken
permeates elevator. Seeing it there empty,
Window wide open, he spits his gum
onto the seat of the police car.²⁶

Silliman's achievement is to make this seemingly circumscribed local space so incomprehensibly large that his conclusion: "It is impossible to 'describe a life'" lived there, (or anywhere) is inescapable and attractive. "That the flood of detail itself thwarts reason" is one explanation.²⁷ The endless stream of snapshot observations in the here and now, come so thick, variously and fast and are so obscurely related to one another in time and place that we are at a loss to understand what they contribute to the poem other than to flesh out its plenitudinous present. To persuade us that "Life is detail (steep slope)," that "One lives through detail," that "The world is all that's in your face"²⁸ and to engage it as such.

The scene of the autobiographical present is constituted by reports on it embodied in the activity of writing (and reading). Its meaning as outwardly engaged autobiography is crucially related to that embodiment. "When I say 'I', it's you I mean."²⁹ Or, "The word 'I',/once written, stares back/absurd."³⁰ Silliman points to a literal proximity of observation to writing: "Realism=words in situ."³¹ "Walking in traffic (try to write)."³² And, "Writing in public places as a form of performance, on buses say, or here amid sunbathers, not paid attention to, looking up, myself, to watch the jugglers."³³

As that last sentence shows, when Silliman directs his/our attention from himself/ourselves as performer to himself/ourselves as audience for the jugglers they serve to foreground the connection with the reader, activating his or her engagement. This is a rich and varied pulse Silliman sets in motion, complex in its relation to those apparent "objects" of writing that densely populate his texts. It happens within as well as between sentences. For example: "Do not attempt to speak to the driver/while text is in operation", or "Refocusing on the long grass, I feel syntax," or "Hunker down against a cyclone fence to write words in a sequence concerning the movement of a chair to a room's centre for the purpose of changing a lightbulb."³⁴

"These words are no more in your mouth than in my hand" Silliman writes. Almost all his books begin life as handwritten texts. There are references to notebooks throughout. *Garfield* is named for the image on the cover of the notebook in which that volume was written. There are regular references to pens and ink, *Ink* in fact being the title of another volume. "Ink jink, kink link. Unk junk, kunk lunk."³⁵ The relation of the pen to hand, and hand to arm in writing is also a subject. "The pen rests on the side of the middle finger, held there by forefinger and thumb."³⁶ "A complex joint/we call a wrist/rotates/ letters forming at the finger tips/pen dragged to the right."³⁷

In place of the figure, and commonly the consciousness, embodied in speech, through the distinctive "voice" of the conventional contemporary lyric poet, we have in Hejinián and particularly in Silliman, a poet embodied in writing, and the circumstances of that activity.

8.

“Let’s switch discourses/Continuity requires suppression.”³⁸

When he turned 60, Silliman noted:

I really don’t have a sense of myself as being ‘old’ tho’ my twins may tell you I’m ancient & my knees might agree. I’ve been fortunate to finish the first three stages of my life work – *The Age of Huts*, *Tjanting* and *The Alphabet* – ...*Universe* is getting started nicely, tho’ I can’t quite imagine how I’ll live long enough to finish it – the plan is for 360 book length poems. So I’m building that eventually into a form, or trying to.

This was the entry for August 5, 2006 on *Silliman’s Blog*.³⁹ And now the *Universe*!!? Such is the force of *The Alphabet*, completed in 2004, of its continuity, it is hard to conceive what it suppressed, let alone that it was a universe. Yet we recognize the necessity of Silliman’s imagining it. When On Kawara’s *I Got Up* equipment was stolen, and when Hejinian contemplated how to continue her *My Life* they faced challenges similar in kind, if not size.

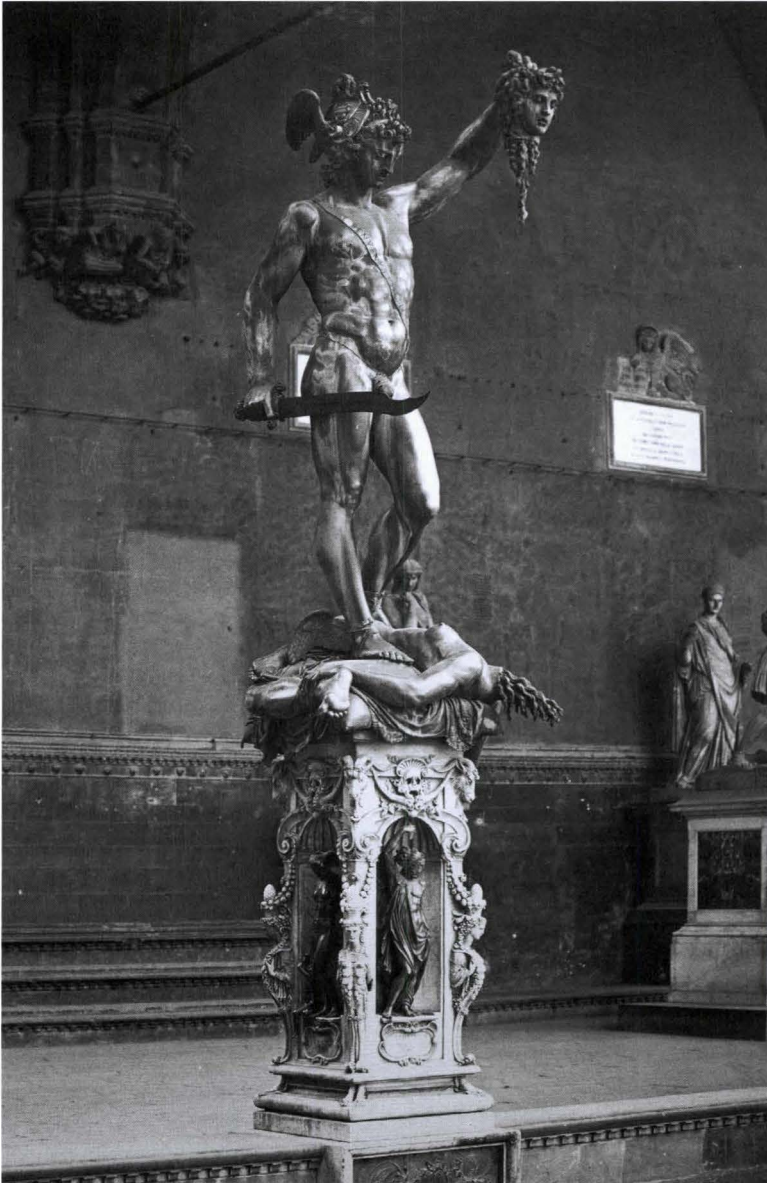
Will *Universe* involve a switch in discourse? Or, could it have been *Silliman’s Weblog* that *The Alphabet* was suppressing? Certainly the coincidence of *The Alphabet’s* impending completion with the sudden and unprecedented efflorescence of the weblog (circa.1999) added an entirely new dimension to the “moment of decision”, one which not only vastly expanded the realm of the diaristic self – apparently there are 20 million plus blogs out there – but also radically changed its economies of production, distribution and exchange. *Silliman’s Weblog* is surely a continuation of the autobiographical project, as well as an incursion into a new discursive space. As an online journal it charts one man’s day to day critical encounter with contemporary poetry and poetics, but it also finds in those changed economies new ways to extend to and intensify connections within the poetry reading and writing community.

Since August 22, 2002, the 850,000 words Silliman has so far put on line must have taken much of his available writing energy, and must already constitute one of the most remarkable critical documents of our time. Each month he reviews between six and 12 new books of poetry by writers at various stages of their careers. He engages in discussions with visitors to the site. He provides a highly informed commentary on the changing politics, economics and technologies of the distribution and reception of poetry, recollections of the San Francisco scene of the 1960s and 1970s and reflections on the literary history of the last hundred years. Always strong on details, these commentaries are sometimes continued and developed over days and weeks and feed into larger arguments that have been developed over months and years. *Silliman’s Blog* has come to be regarded as the most influential blog in its field in the English speaking world, and it receives a 1,000 visitors a day.

On Kawara and Ron Silliman are, as we have seen, remarkably single-minded artists, and each has developed and improvised an idea of autobiography notably incisive, full and informed by a widely felt imperative to change the instructions on which the practice of their art forms was based. It is perhaps no surprise then to find Silliman participating in *The Grand Piano, An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco, 1975-1980*, the first volume of which appeared late in 2006.⁴⁰ Ten are projected to be published with the same ten participants (Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Tom Mandel, Kit Robinson, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout and Ted Pearson). While each is concerned with the same place and time span, chronological structures are avoided and each volume loosely follows a theme proposed by whoever happens to be the first contributor. These instructions are designed to defeat the purposes of traditional autobiography and literary history and by continually re-directing the activity of writing towards the construction/discovery of a collective to produce a form of discourse both have suppressed.

1. Fay Weldon, *Auto Da Fay* (London: Flamingo, 2002), 125.
2. www.litencyc.com
3. But let me pursue it, down here, just a bit further. I fear that for as long as it continues to be considered "iconic," Angus' portrait will give me this sort of trouble. For example, in his review of *The Image Always has the Last Word*, Andrew Paul Wood takes Laurence Simmons to task for ignoring the work and its rich symbolism which he says involves a cactus, my father and a baby which "rests" in my mother's womb and which he claims to be the future "art historian", Wystan Curnow. As it happens, that's not what I was doing at the time. I was up and about "posing" for the pencil portraits Angus made of me, which perhaps Wood, who is an art historian, should know about since both are reproduced in the catalogue of Angus' 1982 retrospective. A more common claim is that my mother was pregnant with my sister Belinda at the time she sat for the portrait, but there is no sign of it in the painting and the circumstantial evidence is in fact shaky. See the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 4, no.1 (2003): 118.
4. Phillippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.
5. Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), 75.
6. <http://epc.buffalo.edu>. Author page, Ron Silliman, Bibliography. Listed there under both "Memoir" and "Autobiography", it was originally a commissioned contribution to the Gale Research *Contemporary Authors Autobiography* series.
7. Ron Silliman, *Under Albany* (Cambridge, [U.K.]: Salt, 2004), 45. "Albany" was included in *ABC*, Berkeley, *Tuumba* 46 (1983).
8. Kathy Acker, *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (New York: TVRT Press, c1978, c1975), 213.
9. Lynne Cooke and Michael Govan "On Kawara" in *Dia: Beacon* (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 2003) 177-178. See On Kawara, *Consciousness. Meditation, Watcher on the Hills* (Dijon: Le Consortium, 2002) for its 68 black and white images documenting the painting of Mar 30, 1997, and Jonathan Watkins et al., *On Kawara* (London, Phaidon, 2002), 77 for its 16 colour images of 6 Aug. 1992 in progress.
10. Wolfgang Max Faust, "Intersecting Parallels, Notes on On Kawara's Date Paintings", in *On Kawara 1976 Berlin 1986* (Berlin: Daadgalerie, 1987), 13. Faust illustrates this observation by juxtaposing date paintings with works by other artists contemporaneous with them.
11. Dan Graham in Jonathan Watkins et al., *On Kawara* (London, Phaidon, 2002), 25.
12. *Consciousness* (Dijon: The Consortium, 1990).
13. In 1995 the Nagoya City Art Museum marked the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an exhibition of three early On Kawara drawings and an installation by Rei Naito.*
14. Frida Bjork Ingvarsdottir, in *On Kawara. Consciousness, Meditation, Watcher on the Hills*, 301.
15. "An Interview with Ron Silliman," conducted by Tom Beckett, *The Difficulties* 2, no.2 (1985): 34.
16. Lyn Hejinian, "Barbarism" in *Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 324.
17. *My Life*, (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1980; Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987).
18. *My Life*, 1987, 8.
19. Galen Strawson, "A Fallacy of Our Age, Not Every Life is a Narrative," *Times Literary Supplement* 15 (2004): 13-14.
20. Lyn Hejinian, "Comments for Manuel Brito," in *The Language of Inquiry*, 187.
21. Ron Silliman's influential essay, "The New Sentence" appears in a collection of his writings on poetics, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987).
22. Silliman, "The New Sentence", 1987.
23. See also *Paradise* (Providence, RI: Burning Deck, 1985). Its 12 sections correspond to the months of the year.
24. Ron Silliman, *What* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1988) 62, 50.
25. Silliman, *What*, 48-49.
26. Silliman, *What*, 91-92.
27. Ron Silliman, "Oz", in *N/O* (New York: Roof Books, 1994), 86.
28. Silliman, "Oz", 79, 80; "Non" in *N/O*, 54.
29. Ron Silliman, *Demo to Ink* (Tucson: Chex Press, 1992), 173.
30. Ron Silliman, *Toner* (Elmwood, Conn.: Potes and Poets Press, 1992), 63.
31. Silliman, *Toner*, 34.
32. Silliman, "Non", in *N/O*, 43.
33. Silliman, *Ketjak* (San Francisco: This Press, 1978), 51.
34. Silliman, *Toner*, 32; *Paradise*, 12; *Ketjak*, 37.
35. Silliman, *Demo to Ink*, 154.
36. Silliman, *Paradise*, 12.
37. Silliman, *Toner*, 54.
38. Silliman, "Oz", 104.
39. <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com>
40. Bob Perelman et al., *The Grand Piano: an Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco, 1975-1980* (Detroit [Mich.]: Mode A, 2006-).

Fig. 1 Benvenuto Cellini
Perseus and Medusa 1545-54
Bronze, 549 cm high
Located in the Loggia dei
Lanzi, Florence



Is an Artist? Art, Autobiographies, and Humanity's Disappearance

Charles Reeve

How do we know we exist? The obvious answer – look around, here we are – seems so self-evident as to make the question appear ridiculous. Certainly Benvenuto Cellini, the Renaissance artist now likely known more for his autobiography than his art, had no such doubt and focused his life story on why, not whether, he existed. The scraps of self-questioning that dot Cellini's autobiography do little to fray his self-esteem, and trouble him far less than the obstacles that his rivals throw before him. This sense of self contrasts starkly with the dispersal of identity that marks *Modern Nature*, one of several volumes of autobiography that filmmaker and painter Derek Jarman published during the 1980s and early 1990s. And this recent impulse to undo identity takes an even more radical form in the account of herself that artist and management consultant Lucy Kimbell provides in her book *Audit*, which plays with the idea of the self as statistical cluster. Cellini's work – generally regarded as the first autobiography of the modern form – offers a ensorcelling foil against which to read these much more recent artists' autobiographies. Far from the confident Cellini, Jarman and Kimbell write out of a context in which asking how do we know we exist seems to presuppose too much. Safer, perhaps, to ask, "Do we know we exist?"

Not one to beat around the bush, Cellini displays right from the start of his *Life* the superb self-regard that prompts scholars of autobiography to invent adjectives like "Cellini-esque" when describing bombastic self-assurance. "I first began writing this Life of mine in my own hand, as can be seen from some of the odd pages attached here," Cellini begins, "but it took up too much time and seemed utterly pointless." He immediately clarifies that this undertaking is futile only in that his time is too valuable for it: "So when I came across a son of Michele Goro, of Pieva a Groppino, a young boy of about fourteen who was in a poor state of health, I set him to the task."¹ As quickly as Cellini expresses ambivalence, he resolves it, and the core of this resolution – if this writing is too meagre for him to do, it's also too important to be left undone – shows up if we brush lightly against the grain of the first two words in George Bull's translation.

“I first” could be read as a puffed-up form of “me first,” its excessive formality suggesting that this autobiography’s subject must be treated with the utmost dignity and that, if in doubt, one should err on the side of too much pomp rather than too little.

Extending this reading, it is inevitable that the opening word of Cellini’s *Life* should be “I”, since “I” organizes the book, constitutes the nexus that draws together the threads of Renaissance culture, politics, and intrigue making up this exemplary narrative. For providing an example is what Cellini hopes to do by recounting his life:

[E]veryone who has to his credit what are or really seem great achievements, if he cares for truth and goodness, ought to write the story of his own life in his own hand; but no one should venture such a splendid undertaking before he is over forty. Now that I am leaving the age of fifty-eight behind me and find myself in my native place, Florence, my thoughts naturally turn to such a task. (Cellini, 1)

Cellini’s “great achievements” culminate with the statue of *Perseus* (Fig. 1) that Cosimo I de’ Medici commissioned in 1545. Larger and more complex than any bronze statue previously cast in Florence, the *Perseus* offers Cellini ample occasion to brag, which he exploits in full by detailing his technical innovations before revealing their one limitation in a conversation with the duke. Cosimo visits to complain about Cellini’s slow progress and stays to question whether the molten bronze will flow evenly into the head of Medusa that the figure of Perseus holds aloft. On the contrary, Cellini argues, the trouble spot is Perseus’ foot rather than Medusa’s head:

[T]he nature of fire is such that it tends upwards, and because this is so I promise you that the head of Medusa will come out very well. But seeing that fire does not descend I shall have to force it down six cubits by artificial means: and for that very cogent reason I tell your Excellency that the foot can’t possibly succeed... (Cellini, 345)

Since his desire for a flawless work now competes with a wish to prove his expertise by ending up with an imperfect foot, Cellini has placed himself in an awkward spot. To his delight – and, by this point in the book, to no one’s surprise – Cellini has it both ways:

[T]he heel was perfectly formed, and continuing further I found it all complete: on the one hand, I rejoiced very much, but on the other I was half disgruntled if only because I had told the Duke it could not come out. But then on finishing the uncovering I found that the toes of the foot had not come out: and not only the toes, because there was missing a small part above the toes as well, so that just under a half was missing. (Cellini, 352)

Seeing the flawed foot, the duke “was filled with astonishment and he described to the Duchess how I had told him this beforehand.” The adversity of the foot throws into relief the triumph of the *Perseus* by emphasizing that, with this piece, Cellini explored the limits of artistic and technical possibility.

The missing toes stand for the many challenges – incompetent assistants, plotting rivals, the need for new methods – that nearly destroy the project. And the narrative of the *Perseus* emerging from a battle between good and evil encapsulates Cellini’s story. Although the duke’s support wavers, in the end he sticks by Cellini through a wide range of projects because, as the artist says of a later commission, the duke could “distinguish the correct method from the false.” (Cellini, 362)

For Cellini, the aesthetically pleasing and the morally good follow universal codes of artistic, practical, and factual truth. A bad statue, an evil deed, and an ineffective engineering design are as false, incorrect, or untrue as the statement that two plus two makes five. Recording a well-lived life therefore promotes goodness by describing impressive accomplishments and showing the proper way to do things, but also by illustrating such higher truths as the interaction between fate and free will, the inevitability of God’s justice, and the limits of honesty in an imperfect world.

The turn of Cellini’s thoughts to the task of writing “the story of his own life in his own hand” was not as natural during the sixteenth century as he suggests. By writing his autobiography between 1558 and 1566, Cellini antedated the first use of the word “autobiography” by 220 years.² The lack of a name for the genre, unfortunately for Cellini, correlated with an absence of interest. “The first printed edition of the *Life* did not appear until 1728,” Bull notes, “and it did not become widely known outside Italy until the early nineteenth century.”³ Despite the dearth of precedents, Cellini was clear about why and how to record his life. Apologising for truncating an account of a duel, he explains, “I shall not give any more details, since, although they would be very impressive of their kind, I want to save my breath to talk about my art, as that after all is why I am writing.” (Cellini, 40) Digressions about fights, pranks, and travels fill the book, but the day-to-day ups and downs of Cellini’s career remain its focus. Cellini wanted to write himself into history, perhaps motivated by the fact that Michelangelo was the only living artist immortalized by Giorgio Vasari in the 1550 edition of the *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*.⁴ (An omission that also may have inspired Cellini’s characterization of Vasari as a backstabber who scratched incessantly at his bad skin with “filthy little claws whose nails he never cut.” (Cellini, 155))

Cellini’s introductory paragraphs invert the task of writing his *Life* from a vanity project into a moral duty, from something he must do since it won’t be done for him into a “splendid undertaking” that every accomplished man

“ought” to perform. His reference to “writing this Life of mine” is overdetermined, its second meaning both more literal and less possible than the first, for Cellini’s book clearly fulfils his wish to be at the centre of everything. “The Florentine goldsmith seems to be draped in the magnificent folds of a legend,” writes Henri Focillon in his compact study of the artist, “and that legend is the truth.”⁵ A more accurate assessment might be that Cellini draped himself in those folds, hoping to create a legend that would become the truth.

The extent to which Cellini produces himself in his autobiography does not depend only on his intention. Even if Cellini sets out to describe his career with undeniable accuracy, he will stumble over the limits faced by any author. “We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences,” observes Paul de Man in “Autobiography as De-facement”:

but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?⁶

Life sets dates, sequences of events, intersections of motives and moments, those things that we keep calling “facts” no matter how hard we try not to. But I am not omniscient about myself: “The name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding,” de Man argues, “but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority.”⁷ An autobiography’s protagonist results from its author negotiating between, for example, more or less accurate memories, the author’s vision of who she or he would like to have been, and literary convention. In a turn of phrase that describes Cellini’s enterprise with startling clarity (though its example is Wordsworth), de Man characterises the outcome of this negotiation as “prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech.”⁸ Setting out to prove that he lived, as Focillon says, “a dazzling, heroic, sumptuous life, all the beauty of the human flower blooming in the bright sun,” Cellini takes care to tell us that most of his *Life* was spoken before it was written.⁹ *Pace* Vasari (and de Man), Cellini knew that he existed and was determined to have his say. (With the result that the first modern autobiography is of the “as told to” variety.)

While hardly universal during the Renaissance, such confidence has become steadily less common since then, its downturn prompted in part by the inventions and discoveries that grew from the Enlightenment. But this decline also generated reactions in the various manifestations of romantic individualism, of which autobiography is one, and the romantic notion of the artist – with its emphases on signatures and authenticity – is another. In his dated yet classic *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard links the assertion of

artistic selfhood to alienation's assent – and identity's decline – in the nineteenth century. “[U]ntil the 19th century, the copy of an original work had its own value, it was a legitimate practice. In our time the copy is illegitimate, inauthentic: it is no longer ‘art.’” Baudrillard writes. The advent of industrialization created the need for artefacts that distinguished the individual from the mass, and for traces and signs that linked the artwork to the artist. “The art of painting,” Baudrillard continues a sentence later, “and so the signature as well, did not [prior to 1800] bear the same mythological insistence upon authenticity – that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated and by which it becomes modern – which has been evident ever since the relation to illustration and hence the very meaning of the artistic object changed with the act of painting itself [i.e. from a workshop activity to that of a single person].”¹⁰ During the last 50 years, the proposition that this decline of a sense of self correlates with a decline of self has become progressively less surprising. The delight in Michel Foucault's lyricism no longer mingles with astonishment when he closes *The Order of Things* by suggesting that certain conceptual shifts could cause humanity to “be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” – not because we had been eradicated, but because we had ceased to register.¹¹ Similarly, we're unlikely to hesitate over the question “Does Humanity Exist?” at the start of Alain Badiou's *L'éthique*, or by Roland Barthes positioning himself as a series of fictions when he comments in *Roland Barthes*, “All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel – or rather by several characters.”¹²

This denial – or emptying out – of the self informs Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature* from its first line. Whereas Cellini opens his autobiography by calling attention to himself as autobiographer – “I first began writing this Life of mine” – Jarman begins by describing his surroundings:

Prospect Cottage, its timbers black with pitch, stands on the shingle at Dungeness. Built eighty years ago at the sea's edge – one stormy night many years ago waves roared up to the front door threatening to swallow it... Now the sea has retreated leaving bands of shingle. You can see these clearly from the air; they fan out from the lighthouse at the tip of the Ness like contours on a map. (ellipses in original)¹³

Note the pronoun that begins the last sentence. Not “I” or “one,” but “you,” the reader. Rather than introducing himself in the first paragraph, Jarman introduces his bungalow, its pitch-blackened face straining against the storm, its bleak setting contrasting starkly with its optimistic name. We imagine ourselves facing the ocean rather than looking at Jarman, our jackets snapping in the cold wind as he stands beside us, gestures toward the rocks, and shouts his commentary over the roar.

By positioning himself next to us in the opening paragraph, Jarman makes it easy for us to step into his place when he disappears in the second paragraph.

“Prospect faces the rising sun across a road,” it begins. “One small clump of dark green broom breaks through the flat ochre shingle.” Whereas in other contexts the fact that these sentences are mere description would make them unremarkable, here that’s what makes them count. Jarman’s fading from view is what matters.

Prospect Cottage and the landscape into which he subsequently faded became Jarman’s in May 1988, and *Modern Nature* comprises journal entries that he wrote from January 1989 to September 1990 while settling into his hideaway.¹⁴ If the natural landscape doesn’t make buying a retreat here perverse enough, the domination of the setting by a nuclear power station ensures its anti-idyllic peculiarity, which Jarman accents by incorporating into his garden relics salvaged from marine defence barriers. Christopher Lloyd describes the result as “not a romantic scene,” but his offhandedness misses the point.¹⁵ Jarman chooses the setting because it is unromantic, then emphasises this quality to make his part of this landscape anti-romantic and set the stage for the doubled eschatology – his decline and that of humanity – that forms *Modern Nature’s* armature.

Around this core, Jarman winds the themes of his first full year in his garden (Fig. 2) and his filming there of his movie *The Garden*. But the analogies between Jarman’s decline and that of humanity re-appear at key moments to dominate the narrative just as the nuclear power station dominates the scene. And if the apocalyptic valence of nuclear reactors seems remote now, it was close then, the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl disasters having occurred in March 1979 and April 1986. Moreover, an incident at the reactor near Jarman’s cottage in January 1990 gives those precedents alarming currency:

At three this afternoon the nuclear power station exploded in a roar of steam, which drifted over the Ness – a death rattle like a hundred jet planes taking off. Within seconds the enormous building vanished from view. (Jarman, 228)

By this point, Jarman has shifted from the circumspection of the book’s first part, complications with his health forcing him into protracted self-absorption. The blast at the power station foreshadows a return to the circumspect theme of the double decline. Saturday May 26:

Conversation throughout the day has revolved around the greenhouse effect and HIV. Both Stephen and I know of couples who had full sex till both were body positive. Who should have been responsible for whom? (Jarman, 289)

The conjunction between the greenhouse effect and HIV sounds desultory. But to Jarman, both result from heteronormative society’s unwillingness and inability to deal with the consequences of its ideologies and actions, and he weaves them together more tightly in his entry for the following day:



Fig. 2 *Derek Jarman's Garden* 1995
Photo: Howard Sooley

Thank God you don't attend your own funeral. I wonder if I'll end up with tacky white marble – or a slab of black Purbeck, like the old tombs in Romney church, with fine freehand lettering. Nurses rush by. They are short staffed. The oxygen bubbles away. In the night it roars like a river in full flood. The doctor worries that the sun will disappear before the weekend. I say not to worry: before his time's up he might wish he could switch it off. (Jarman, 291)

Jarman's roaring river neatly links the two sides of his eschatology by looking back to the beginning of the passage and the illness that creates the need for the oxygen hook-up but also forward to the apocalyptic vision of global warming's relentless sun generating torrents of glacial and polar melt. (And, as *Modern*

Nature nears its end, recalling the waves that roared across the shingle decades before.) Soon the planet will be as wasted as he is. The final sentence, from Monday September 3: “I’ve lost a stone and a half and the razor bumps across my face again.” (Jarman, 314)

Bumps across his face, that is, as a decrepit vehicle bumps across barren terrain. But even the passages in *Modern Nature* that occur in a landscape from which he (or we) have vanished follow autobiographical convention by retaining a highly personal flavour. As Philippe Lejeune notes in “The Autobiographical Pact,” a venerable essay on the genre, an autobiography is not a biography one writes about oneself, since biography turns on a claim to factual accuracy while autobiography turns on sincerity. “The referential pact [to accuracy] can be, according to the criteria of the reader, badly kept [in autobiography], without the referential value of the text disappearing (on the contrary),” Lejeune writes.¹⁶ The lack of epistemological authority that de Man discusses in “Autobiography as De-Facement” (in many ways supplementing and commenting on Lejeune’s article) is both weakness and strength of autobiography – idiosyncrasy is its selling point. An autobiography written through diligent bibliographic and archival research seems almost as unusual (perhaps even misguided) as a biography that isn’t – which is why Anne Coffin Hanson, introducing the Futurist Gino Severini’s autobiography, finds it worth remarking that Severini approached writing about himself “like a professional scholar, using contemporary published reports and even his own letters as sources of dependable information.”¹⁷

Against this background, Lucy Kimbell’s construction of herself as a statistical person is humorously peculiar. As an engineer turned management consultant and artist, Kimbell shifts between these realms by, for example, moving from a research fellowship at Oxford University’s Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in 2005 to a fellowship in design leadership at Oxford’s business school in 2006. *Audit*, published in 2002, belongs to a series in which Kimbell combines these backgrounds to measure “how political have you been this week?” (*Pindices*, 2005) or help artists evaluate how well their practices match their career goals (*Free Evaluation Services*, 2005) (Fig. 3). “I measure therefore I am,” the title of the research project to which these works belong, summarizes them well.

The equation of measuring with being loops back on itself in *Audit*, wherein Kimbell measures herself. The book’s “Respondent Overview” explains that Kimbell devised a survey about her worth and sent it to 69 people, 56 of whom responded.¹⁸ The first two of the form’s nine sections establish the nature and context of Kimbell’s relationship with the respondent, the remaining sections turning on the subtly but significantly different meanings of “worth” in the stock phrases “what’s she worth” (a question about financial resources) and “she’s worth it” (an assessment of general desirability). The survey starts from

Fig. 3 Lucy Kimbell
Free Evaluation Services
 2005
 View of performance/
 service, Atlanta, Georgia
 Photo: Laura Noel



the most literal estimation of Kimbell's value – namely, her financial worth. Subsequently, it asks respondents to assess Kimbell on increasingly abstract, subjective axes: cultural value, social value, environmental value, “my value to you,” the value of Kimbell's audit. Each section probes a wide range of areas, from evaluating Kimbell's possessions, flat and pension to naming the “main emotion” respondents feel when thinking of her.

This technique suggests Kimbell is literalizing the idea of the individual as an empty intersection of probabilities rather than a solid core of being. The veneer of objectivity created by this statistical approach gets set up in the introduction to *Audit*, wherein Kimbell matter-of-factly lays out anticipated responses to the book: “Some people will read this and ask what the author is trying to say...”; “Some readers will find this book extremely irritating”; and so on. (Kimbell, 5) Toward the end of the list, she writes:

Some readers will compare this book with other forms of investigation into the self undertaken by creative people, through painting, film-making, poetry and autobiography. They will consider formal concerns such as narrative, presentation and style. (Kimbell, 6)

My consideration of Kimbell's narrative, presentation, and style leads me to observe that, by positioning autobiography as one of several “other forms of investigation into the self,” Kimbell proposes that *Audit* is not an autobiography. A reasonable proposition, since *Audit* does not chronicle her life, as autobiographies conventionally do, but provides a snapshot of her at that

moment. (It doesn't discuss her family history, childhood, or education.) Moreover, *Audit* shifts between discussing Kimbell in the first, second, and third person, a function of the fact that she didn't so much write this book as compile it.

This shifting troubles the book's claim to be an audit, since it emphasises that this research is not the work of a disinterested third party. As the survey's opening sentence makes clear, Kimbell is studying herself: "I've sent you this because I am conducting an audit to find out what people who know me think I'm worth." (Kimbell, 10) Even if Kimbell overlooks this flaw at the start of her research, she sees it by the end, as we know from the inclusion in *Audit* of a conversation she has with auditor Richard Nicol. "Auditing yourself is an oxymoron," Nicol says, "because you should be independent of the institution being audited." (Kimbell, 62) As the discussion continues, Kimbell realises, "So I'm not conducting an audit. But I could." To which Nicol, summarizing why *Audit* is not an audit, replies, "Yes, you could engage someone to provide assurance that the summation of the opinions and the consolidation of the results from your questionnaire is a fair reflection of what people have said about you." (Kimbell, 63)

By highlighting Kimbell's role in auditing herself, this conversation both explains and enacts the flaw in her process, a flaw reinforced by the bubbles that sprinkle *Audit* with Kimbell's speech. Sometimes Kimbell deflates apparently dismissive responses, as when she adds the comment "He's having fun" to a prediction that, in 10 years' time, "Pimp daddy will take care of you." (Kimbell, 27) Other times, the speech in Kimbell's bubbles ponders her survey design, as when she wonders whether 80 percent of respondents would have characterized her art as "interesting" were that not "the first word listed on my form" (Kimbell, 40), or acknowledges her shortcomings, as when one respondent's opinion that Kimbell taught him "How not to manage people, how journalism, news and media are a crap model for anything requiring scientific collaboration" provokes her to remark, "Ouch. But he's right." (Kimbell, 71) Scattered liberally through the book, these observations repeatedly puncture its veneer of officialness and objectivity with the "I" that Lejeune playfully calls "the great refrain of the autobiographers."¹⁹

In ways that are both less and more subtle than those in *Audit*, this "I" also assumes an important role in Jarman's *Modern Nature*. Like his films, Jarman's books are deeply romantic, driven by a desire to speak out against the myriad forms of discrimination directed toward gays generally and HIV-positive gays specifically.²⁰ To stress the concreteness of these patterns of exclusion, *Modern Nature* cycles between the depersonalized view of its opening pages and an intensely personal voice that takes over mid-way through the entries for September 1989. Jarman's deepening illness causes his priorities to reverse, the broader theme of humanity's decline giving way to a day-to-day self-consciousness that drives much of the book's second half. Saturday September 16:

The perception that knowing you're dying makes you feel more alive is an error. I'm less alive. There's less life to lead. I can't give 100% attention to anything – part of me is thinking about my health. (Jarman, 152)

Unlike the discussion of the river of oxygen that flows from Jarman's illness to global warming, this passage can't find the energy to move beyond Jarman and his plight. As friends die and his health worsens, Jarman turns morose before attempting unsuccessfully to become detached:

HB won't let me get involved any longer [with a suicidal friend]. I know he's right about this but feel guilty. One last time? (Jarman, 158)

The intensity of these experiences keeps Jarman engaged. When *Modern Nature* becomes a punching bag for the *Evening Standard's* Alexander Walker, Jarman responds by writing *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, in which he juxtaposes the chronology of his life with major episodes in gay history since the 1940s.²¹ This juxtaposition highlights the forms in which homophobia persists in the 1990s – as such a prejudice would, given that in the 1960s (i.e. very much within living memory), homosexuality, though open in Britain, remained illegal there.²²

By alternating the voice of indignation with the image of disappeared humanity, Jarman sets out the trope of the missing self as one of several models of identity rather than a definitive explanation of what we are.²³ Sharing Jarman's equivocation, Kimbell similarly shifts through a range of positions, from the dispassionate observer, to the statistical person, to the teasing interloper. This juggling of conflicting ontologies as equally plausible has a significance that goes beyond the rhetorical strategies of *Modern Nature* and *Audit*, since it nicely figures the porousness of periodization. While Cellini's self-image contrasts sharply with those of Kimbell and Jarman, contemporary artists' autobiographies mostly adhere to the tendency among autobiographers to follow the conventions established by the Renaissance artist. Tracey Emin in *Strangeland* (2005) introduces her "I" in the first sentence, though she unsettles her identity as she introduces it: "When I was born, they thought I was dead."²⁴ Similarly, Jacqueline Fahey's *Something for the Birds* (2006) follows Cellini's example by starting her conventionally chronological account of her life a generation before her birth.²⁵

This tradition's persistence shouldn't surprise us, but nor should we underestimate its complexity. As Lejeune points out, the convention of beginning from one's birth or early childhood disrupts the autobiographer's claims to be sharing reminiscences and to be an authority on what happened.²⁶ Complicating things further, Cellini's standard of self-promotion (sidestepped by Emin and Fahey) might prompt us to wonder if confidence, taken far enough, morphs into its opposite. "Protesting too much?" his late contemporary William Shakespeare might have inquired.

These difficulties point out what scholars of autobiography have known for a long time: that this genre becomes muddled not when it tries to separate itself from biography, but rather when it attempts to stand apart from the novel. Inspecting this margin shows that, at least in this realm, the difference between fiction and non-fiction is disconcertingly vague, and gives a sheen of critical knowingness to the question that hipsters used to ask people they'd just met: "What's your story?"

1. Benvenuto Cellini, *Autobiography*, Gerald Bull, trans. (Toronto: Penguin, 1998), 1. Henceforth cited in text as "Cellini." The possibility that Cellini contrived this anecdote underscores the likelihood that he distanced himself from the task of writing in order to emphasize his self-importance (Cellini, x).
2. Robert Folkenflik "Introduction: The Institution of Autobiography," in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, Robert Folkenflik, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1. This genealogy does not mean that Cellini's autobiographical impulse comes from nowhere (see Dino Sigismondo Cervigni, *The "Vita" of Benvenuto Cellini: Literary Tradition and Genre* (Ravenna: Longo, 1979), 19-42; 61-81). Cellini's prescience creates a tension in the Penguin Classic edition as the title, *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*, is clearly anachronistic. Bull subtly disagrees with this editorial decision by referring to the work throughout his introduction as Cellini's *Life*.
3. Cellini, vii. By contrast, at least three editions currently are in print. Cellini's autobiography nonetheless had currency with his contemporaries: in the 1568 edition of his *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari writes, "I shall say nothing more of [Cellini] here, seeing that he has written of his own life and works...with more eloquence and order than I perchance would be able to use here..." (*Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, vol. 10, Guston du C. Devere, trans. (London: Medici Society, 1915), 22). Vasari caught on quickly, concluding his survey with an autobiographical chapter.
4. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxii.
5. Henri Focillon, *Benvenuto Cellini* (Paris: Agora, 1992), 7.
6. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 69.
7. de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 71.
8. de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," 75-76.
9. Focillon, *Cellini*, 7.
10. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Charles Levin, trans. (New York: Telos, 1981), 103. Baudrillard overstates this contrast's neatness since the counterexample he adduces—the Renaissance use of workshop assistants to paint backgrounds—was far more problematic than he acknowledges. Steven Shapin recently suggested a similar explanation for the rise of the virtuoso chef and the change of domestic cuisine from something one has done to something one does (Steven Shapin, "When Men Started Doing It," *London Review of Books*, August 17, 2006, 3-5).
11. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 422.
12. Alain Badiou, *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993), 7; Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, Richard Howard, trans. (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 119.
13. Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (New York: Overlook, 1994), 3. Henceforth cited in text as "Jarman."
14. Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman* (London: Abacus, 2001), 394.
15. Christopher Lloyd, "The Jarman Garden Experience," *Derek Jarman: A Portrait*, Roger Wollen, ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 148.
16. Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," *On Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin, ed.; Katherine Leary, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), 23.
17. Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter*, Jennifer Franchina, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1995), xi.
18. Lucy Kimbell, *Audit* (London: Book Works, 2002), 9. Henceforth cited in text as "Kimbell."
19. Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," 8.
20. Jonathan Grimshaw details the patterns of exclusion from this time in "The Nature of AIDS-related Discrimination," *Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs & Politics*, Joshua Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt, eds. (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 379-393.
21. Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 486-8.
22. Derek Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament* (New York: Overlook, 1993), 42.
23. Daniel O'Quinn powerfully argues for a further complication to Jarman's rhetorical strategy, showing that part of Jarman's interest in removing himself lies in creating a space for a community ("Gardening, History, and the Escape from Time: Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*," *October* no. 89 (Summer 1999): 113-126.)
24. Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (London: Sceptre, 2005), 3. This persistence of the convention of beginning with a first person pronoun is emphasized by its appearance in two artists' autobiographies that, while not new, recently have resurfaced. Toss Wollaston's *Sage Tea* (1980 but republished in 2001 by Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) begins "My mother wished I had been a daughter," thus—like Emin—introducing his identity in a way that undermines it (Wollaston, 9). Rosalie Hook's *Italy Diary, 1846-48*, published in 2006 by University of Alberta as *Woman Behind the Painter: The Diaries of Rosalie, Mrs. James Clarke Hook*, begins unsurprisingly with the first person plural: "We [i.e.: she and her husband of five days, James] left Boulogne in the morning, and travelling all day we arrived at Amiens" (Hook, 3).
25. Jacqueline Fahey, *Something for the Birds* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006), 1-49.
26. Lejeune, "The Ironic Narrative of Childhood: Valle," *On Autobiography*, 53-69.

Fig. 1 Louise Bourgeois
Spider 1997
Steel and mixed media
444.5 x 666.5 x 518.2 cm
Courtesy of Cheim and
Read, New York
Photo: Marcus Schneider



Autotopography: Louise Bourgeois as Builder

Mieke Bal

1. Against Biographism

The concept “autotopography” refers to autobiography while also distinguishing itself from the latter. It refers to a spatial, local, and situational “writing” of the self’s life in visual art. In this paper I will argue that in the case of self-expressive artists such as Louise Bourgeois, art criticism wrongly props itself up against the artist’s statements and stories, to produce biographical narratives that sidestep or even ignore what is most characteristic of the artist’s work: its visual nature. Yet the element “auto-,” or self, need not be thrown away with the bathwater. Nor, of course, can “-graphy,” or writing, be so easily dismissed. I propose the term “autotopography” to accomplish three goals: to explain the biographical tendency in Bourgeois criticism, to characterize Bourgeois’ work as visual art, and to position her work culturally. As will become clear, when Bourgeois’ work is conceived of as auto-topographical, its relationship to autobiography – to writing one’s own life – becomes more rather than less meaningful but can no longer be an alibi for criticism’s intellectual laziness.

Since estranging criticism from its obsession with the biographical is my first goal, I will engage a single work closely, so that its visual properties and cultural significance can be brought to the fore. I have selected one of Bourgeois’ most famous and most frequently exhibited works, her 1996 installation *Spider*. I have chosen it both for its public accessibility and because it triggers biographism most strongly, almost irresistibly.¹ The huge spider hovering over an iron cage “is” the artist’s caring mother, and the fragments of tapestry decorating the cage come from her parents’ workshop in tapestry restoration. Suspending – but not ignoring – these autobiographical elements, I will first broach this work as the installation it primarily is: as a piece of building.

Indeed, nowhere more clearly than in her *Cells*, a series of installations from the late 1980s and 1990s, of which *Spider* is an example, is Louise Bourgeois’ work architectural.² The installations are huge and yet have a great intimacy. They

invite the viewer to enter a space that is filled with the artist's gadgets, memorial objects, bedroom furniture, or body parts. If they don't invite physical entrance, then at least their doors are left ajar to allow peeping in; inviting, that is, an act of voyeurism that is emblematic for looking at art from the principle of "non-indifference."³ Not only are these works fundamentally architectural; more specifically, they are domestic.⁴ Their personal quality intensifies the critical tendency – it appears nearly irresistible – to read Bourgeois' work as autobiographical. While at the same time acknowledging that her work and her own rhetoric strongly solicit it, I object to such a tendency for two reasons. I find it authoritarian, as if the artist rather than the public is the master of its meanings. And I find it paraphrastic, reiterating the artist's words – in Bourgeois' case, primarily her writing and interviews – time and again, thus saying about the work what concerns its maker and what we already know. Instead, Bourgeois' visual rhetoric is geared toward a fiction of autobiography that is shaped through a domestic environment that literally surrounds its content – the *Cells* are round. Thus, autobiographical reading ought to yield to reading these works – in ways I will suggest below – as autotopographies.⁵

Autobiographical readings of works of art are predicated upon two assumptions: that the work narrates elements from the artist's life and, at the same time, that it expresses her/his personality. Both narrative and expression are problematic as modes for reading Bourgeois' *Cells*. Narrative, on the one hand, is a function of Bourgeois' architecture, because, uniquely, she infuses form – including the form that informs her work's architecturality – with memory. Memories are made present by the indexical use of actual objects from her past; they are combined with objects that could have been from that past. Not one of the *Cells* leaves you indifferent to its personal atmosphere.

I first viewed *Spider* in Lisbon in 1998, at which time I made the following notes (Fig. 1):

The work consists of a round cage, about 4.5 meters in diameter and 5 meters high. Woven steel – sturdier than chicken wire – in sections of about 1 meter. Inside is a sitting-room chair, with a fragment of old woven tapestry lying on it.

Correction: at first sight, this structure is dominated by a gigantic bronze looming over it. On one side of the outside of the cage a fragment of tapestry is affixed in which antique architecture is represented. This representation of architecture is quite emphatic: the forms in the woven trompe-l'oeil are strikingly square, representing linear perspective extending to the left. The squareness seems introduced as a counterpoint against which the round form of the *Cell* agitates. Another fragment of tapestry mounted on a plank shows the lower body of a putto whose smile we can only imagine. He lifts his left leg, displaying the gaping hole

between his legs, where scissors have exercised censorship in yet another past. The woven steel of the cage's wall behind the figure unwittingly offers a cross, crossing out what was there and foregrounding the act against the body.

This work, as I have suggested elsewhere, is built out of fragments from, or suggestive of, the artist's past. It consists of what I tag as "memory traps." The objects and fragments are traps because the memories that inhabit the work cannot really be "read" as narratives. They are personal, while the works, made public, are no longer uniquely bound to one person's history. For, on the level of their theoretical import, many of them which are so architectural that they represent, seem to be, or envelop the viewer in homes – conjure up a narrativity that refuses to yield stories. Expression, on the other hand, suggests that the personal and intimate quality of the works "betrays" the subject's self, suggests, that is, that the memory permeating the works hides – and if expertly read – reveals the artist's own memories that could then be traced to build the story of her past. Together, narrative and expression form the ingredients of autobiography or – when predicated upon the acting out of unconscious memories – of dreams.

While Bourgeois' work and her personal communications, both replete with autobiography, do solicit biographical criticism, I have two theoretical problems with the latter.⁶ Within biographism, a peculiar blending occurs: I mean the appeal to the artist's intentions – to her own interpretations of the works and her explanations of how they happened – as it combines with the psychoanalytical slant of criticism. This is contradictory, because these two narrative models of explanation utilize a different, if not radically opposed, conception of subjectivity and agency. Biographical criticism is grounded in a rationalist, unified conception of subjectivity as effectively intentional. It makes an appeal to the artist's intention. And in such cases as Bourgeois', where the artist is extremely articulate and strongly committed to preventing the misunderstandings that constantly threaten her complex work, the criticism of the work tends to reiterate what the artist says it means. The result is that quotations of her statements and interviews are frequently interspersed among presentations of and responses to her work. This biographism is blended with iconography when critics reiterate, after Bourgeois, that the figure of the spider is a metaphor for her mother's protective and caring attitude within family life. I find this a more idyllic, sentimentalizing view than the work deserves.

But psychoanalytical criticism is by definition committed to exploring *unconscious* impulses alleged to flow out of the work. Strictly speaking, such criticism cannot appeal to intentionalist statements at all. The conception of the subject underlying such criticism is, or ought to be, that of a split subject, who, to use Freud's words, is not master in his or her own house. In the case of Bourgeois' *Cells*, this Freudian phrase is particularly apt. For these works appear in both

shape and content to be houses in just such a double sense. The *Cells* are, or represent, houses in a literal sense, in the enclosed shape and the shelter they suggest. This is their primal sense of architecture, and introduces the element of *topos*: place.⁷ The *Cells* are both building blocks and complete houses, body-houses. In this sense, they recall an earlier series of works titled *Femme Maison*, through which Bourgeois' inquiry into the relation between women and their houses pivotally moved from two-to three-dimensional, and from representation through sculpture to building.⁸ Here, *Cells* militate against the predominant model in architecture of the spirit of building, of the house as unified, idealized, symmetrical body. And they are, represent, or rather, perform, that house where the Freudian subject whose own house it is, is not master. For figuratively, the *Cells* are houses of the mind, through the childhood memories they obviously house. The huge spider-house of *Spider* brings in its wake the small child who first saw it. *That* anteriority, instead of the biographical one, infuses the work with an outrageous instability of scale that turns a sculpture into a building and back again. This is the level where narrativity – not specifically narrative content – serves as the cement that builds the house.

The Freudian sensibility – rather than the content – of the *Cells* as houses of the mind consists, moreover, of a precise, sensitive, very subtle resonance with the famous metaphor of the creator of psychoanalysis. For, though masterful works, “mastery” is not the sense they convey. “Mystery” is more like it. Their strong affect and power of meaning-production suggest precisely the kind of subjectivity that would generate what cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin termed “ungrasped symbolism,” and what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas called “the unthought known.” The subject senses something, and acts upon it, but cannot articulate it in a fully rational discourse – the intellectual discourse of the artist's statements, for example. The mastery of Bourgeois the artist, then, is that she is able to create that lack of mastery in such a way that it traps the viewer strongly. As an artist, she demonstrates her mastery by this creation; as a woman, who cannot even turn the word “master” into a feminine form, she adds a profoundly relevant gendered aspect to this Freudian metaphor.⁹ For, at the same time, this “unthought known” is something the subject knows, and needs to make and mold, so that it can actively – but outside of intellectual discourse – participate in the cultural process that leads to knowledge.¹⁰

Boldly, then, Bourgeois' *Cell, Spider* (1997) engages a theoretical debate with Freud, shifting this master's tendency to anteriority narratives back to where, according to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, they emerge: in the visual present.¹¹ This “debate” with psychoanalysis – not the subjection of her work to it – turns the metaphor of the mind's house, whose master does not master it, into a literal, embodied, work of architecture. The “arch” of the past is provided with the roof (“tect”) that leaks mother (through the eggs) (Fig. 2) and whose key dangles uselessly inside. But then, such a characterization of *Spider* does look a bit like a dream. The chair inside it beckons you, as if it were the dreamer's seat (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2
Detail: eggs in a basket
Louise Bourgeois
Spider 1997
Steel and mixed media
444.5 x 666.5 x 518.2 cm
Courtesy of Cheim and
Read, New York
Photo: Marcus Schneider

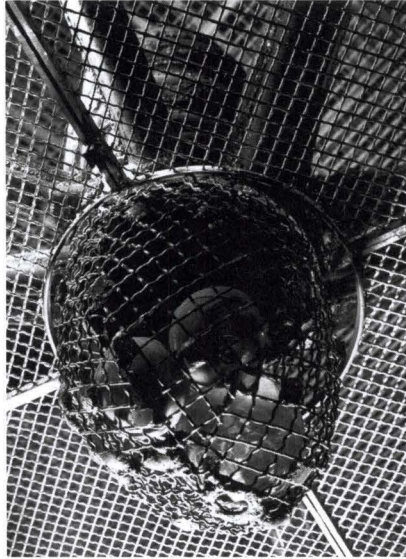
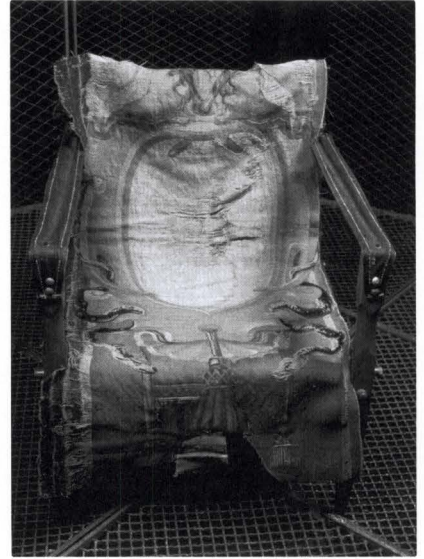


Fig. 3
Detail: chair with tapestry
Louise Bourgeois
Spider 1997
Steel and mixed media
444.5 x 666.5 x 518.2 cm
Courtesy of Cheim and
Read, New York
Photo: Marcus Schneider



2. The Unthought Known

The site *Spider*, I contend, uses the structure of the dream to turn *a place of the fictional self* – an autotopography – into a stage for the viewer’s dreams. The dynamic between self and other that affects the viewer by means of a fictional self is aptly theorized within psychoanalysis, that science of the self. Bollas, a theorist close to object-relation theory, begins his discussion of dreams – in the chapter “At the other’s play: to dream” in his book *The Shadow of the Object* – with a critical comment on Freud’s view as expressed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which Bollas summarizes as follows: “the dream is an emblematic arrangement of veils articulated by the unconscious, and the task of psychoanalysis is to read the discourse of the dream by translating its iconographic utterance into the word” (64). Bollas goes on to offer an alternative to Freud’s view, to which I will return in a moment. His criticism of Freud’s perspective is that despite the latter’s emphasis on the visual *Darstellbarkeit* of dream-thoughts, he privileges the word. Bollas’ criticism also suggests to me why visual art and the people who study it are resistant to such an activity of translation. For reducing visual art to its iconographic elements, and then translating these into words, is less than helpful as a way to better understanding the visual impact and affect of visual art.

It deserves pointing out that the quoted account is also an adequate rendering of the practice of iconography, that stock-in-trade of traditional art history.¹² Iconography, too, requires the first reduction, and entails the second as its practical consequence. Bollas’ alternative view offers a helpful, clear account of how dreams can also, and more adequately, be construed – not as what they are not and stand for, but rather as what they are and do: “I regard the dream as

a *fiction* constructed by a unique *aesthetic*: the *transformation* of the subject into his thought, specifically, the placing of the self into an *allegory* of desire and dread that is *fashioned* by the ego” (64, emphasis added). If we tentatively transpose this vision to the experience of Bourgeois’ *Cells*, and to *Spider* in particular, the elements of fiction and of a unique aesthetic constitute precisely the core argument against the use of biographism based on autobiography for understanding art.¹³ The key question is whether it is possible to accept the remainder of the statement. Accepting that art is like a dream – in the sense of “unthought known,” not of a specific dream – requires that we accept a number of ideas.

3. In Praise of the Unknowing Self

First, the equation art-dream claims that the subject – say, the maker of the artwork – is, through the aesthetic, transformed into his or her thought. Unlike traditional psychoanalytical metaphors of depth, this is instead an exteriorization, for which the term “autotopography” is more suitable than “autobiography.” This movement outwards makes the subject’s thought-yield available to the work’s viewers. *Spider*’s transparency, round form, and open door do this. Second, the equation suggests that the self is not the director of the play thus staged but a character – most likely, but not necessarily, the hero – in the representation. This would require Bourgeois to surrender her autobiographical voice in order to be effective as a character on the autotopographical stage.

The first assumption says that the fiction which is the work of art is a transformation of subjectivity into thought in the same way as a dream is. This idea – that subjectivity is transformed but not eliminated, and that thought, not just form or fun, is the result – is important to a feminist conception of art. The idea of thought does not imply that art-as-thought steers away from visibility. I have argued many times that images have conceptual content, that they “think” in a visual way rather than just illustrate pre-established, non-visual thought.¹⁴ In connection with the image-as-dream idea, thoughts are even more emphatically shielded from a linguistic construction, since they are supposedly unconscious, unarticulated in language. Even at this very elementary level, I think it is heuristically useful to provisionally accept the equation.

But the second element in this assumption is that the thought is that of the artist-dreamer. It is more or less commonplace for art historians to think this, since to attribute whatever we see in the image to the maker’s intention is usually taken as valid – so much so that arguing against it is an exceedingly difficult task.¹⁵ Yet, the transformation of subjectivity into thought disassociates the maker’s intention from the result, even if the former is somehow still involved in the latter. “How” is precisely the question.

The consequence of this idea could be recognized as being similar to Leonardo’s enigmatic statement that all painters paint themselves: that all art is to some extent self-representational, just as literature is always somewhat autobio-

graphical (see Zwijnenberg). I tend to be willing to defend this view for much of Western post-Renaissance art, even if I am a radical anti-intentionalist, and even if this view begs several questions. It fails, for example, to argue why art-as-self-representation would be relevant, to offer a specific insight, given the ubiquitous presence of the “self” in art. It also begs the question raised by Bollas’ view of what the aesthetic does to transform the subject into thought that is both her, and not hers to master. For these two reasons, a reverse view deserves more attention. This view would say that something of the maker does reside within the image, but that the maker has only partial mastery over the result. In a discipline where the maker is indicated by the – exclusively male – word “master,” this is a crucially important revision. Bollas, who uses the terminology of theatre, articulates the nature of the aesthetic involved by insisting that the ego, not the subject, “directs” the play. The validity as well as the implications of the artwork-dream equation depend on this split within the individuality of the maker. In other words, they depend on whether we can accept the fact that, on the one hand, the maker’s thought is in the image, and on the other, she does not wholly master it – neither the thought itself nor the transformation that produced it. But conversely, we must also accept that persons are not whole. This, I contend, is one of *Spider’s* “masterfully” embodied claims. Bollas states:

The ego is defined as somehow “other” to the subject, out of the latter’s grasp: the unconscious organizing processes determined by a mental structure that evolves from the inherited disposition of the infant and the dialectic between this intrinsic character of the child and the logic of the parental care system. (285)

The subject, including the one who is a masterful artist, is dependent on a “second person.”⁶ Similarly, Bourgeois’ installation is dependent not simply and autobiographically on the equation spider = mother, but on the viewer’s willingness to be the work’s “second person,” and conversely, to allow the work to “work” as the viewer’s “second person.” In this case, it is the subject who “has” the dream, undergoes its feeling and mood, and “sees” the images. It is also the subject who makes the images – dreams them up, so to speak.

4. Moody Art

Bollas’ alternative view also implies that desire and dread define the “mood” of the representation. With regard to *Spider’s* autotopographical status, I would like to draw attention to the dynamic quality of such impulses – their “interactive” quality as well as their ambivalence and intensity. These features perhaps make “desire and dread” quite attractive as an alternative to “beauty.” Indeed, *Spider*, although extremely powerful and clearly a work of art, is emphatically un-beautiful. But “the placing of the self into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego” points to the bond between the splitting of the subject and the exteriorization of an artist’s dearest ambition into an object that is not her. The splitting necessarily entails the exteriorization, with the

fictional nature of the resulting image as the inevitable consequence. The role of the viewer is not to be the “sleeper” but to stand on the stage where the dream images make their disturbing appearance. The viewer, of course, does not actually have those dreams, nor do we know if the “sleeper” does. The brief flickering of images evoked by the objects that build the fiction of the past’s present – most notably, the fragments of tapestry – results in the *mood* of the images, the visual colouring of the stage, which remains on the viewer’s mental retina after the disappearance of the imaginary images. In this sense, it is as the subject in whom the mood of the dream coheres and sticks that the viewer takes over the role of the disappeared “sleeper.” And it is in the way the setting manages the subject as an object undergoing the force causing these moods that the subjectivity of the maker is transformed into dramatized thought – split and wilfully given over – to be shared with the viewers. This makes it doubly problematic to read *Spider* autobiographically, for it can no more be – iconographically – read than that its autobiographical centre coheres.¹⁷

As a consequence, in any deployment of narrative based on forms of autobiographical “anteriority” – based on the maker’s past instead of the work’s present – one can only face contradiction. To anticipate my conclusion concerning the meaning and impact of *Spider* as a theoretical object that theorizes autotopography, I submit that Bourgeois’ work *embodies* that contradiction – indicts it, traverses it, then moves beyond it to propose a different kind of narrativity. Iconographically speaking, her work is as much non-or even anti-figurative as it is non- or anti-expressionist. At the same time, it is far from abstract. Wildly figurative in fact, it nevertheless precludes an analysis that relies on figuration. It is as bodily as it is domestic, and as such, unreadable. In this sense, it militates against an iconographic “reading off the page,” or translation according to a dictionary-based mode of reading.¹⁸

True, the spider that hovers over the cage in *Spider* is indeed a spider, a representation of one. In combination with its realistic shape, its hyperbolic size insists on that. But here the trouble begins, for this hyperbole makes it unreadable again. How do we get beyond tautology? This spider is a spider. It thus marks the futility of a figurative, realistic reading. Second, the spider’s size recalls Freud’s witty remark on the unreadability of widely printed letters on a map. This remark was taken up by Lacan in his analysis of Poe’s overzealous prefect of the Paris police. This good fellow was unable to find a compromising letter because it was not hidden but displayed before his nose, pulling on his nose, as it were.¹⁹ Adding “fun” to the nostalgia and sadness about lost time as a mood to be activated, *Spider* makes the case for such blindness due to scale, integrating a Freudian with a scientific argument that goes back to Leibnizian mathematics.²⁰

5. Topological Reasoning

But this integration is itself a good case for the kind of topological reasoning advocated here. The concept of autotopography thus links the work to a kind

of reasoning that is logically coherent but not “mastering.” It fills this scientific engagement with baroque thought.²¹ It is on this level that *Spider* challenges the use of anteriority narrative as flawed reasoning. For topology destroys linearity by making not “sequence” but “embedding” a principle of narrative time. Embedding, an enfolding of one thing into another – a body into a house. Each element of *Spider* comprises both itself and the whole of which it is a part. This is not simply a move away from narrative to architecture, but the invention of an architecture that encompasses the very material out of which it also consists: sculpture, bodiliness, narrative. As a result of subjecting the spider, its cell, and its viewer to a revision of scale that precludes visibility, and to a figuration of repression – a theorizing, not an acting out of it – what emerges is, precisely, a spider that makes the point that anteriority narratives inhere in it yet remain out of reach. Thus, Bourgeois the artist “explains” here why the statements of Bourgeois the person, serious and to-the-point as they are, cannot, must not, stand in for a critical engagement with her work. They are just additional narratives that change as they travel through time.

This third point is yet another move away from the representational bias that the spider first solicited, paradoxically figured, or configured, in its position in *Spider*. To put it simply, the huge spider cannot be isolated from the round cell of woven steel. The basket filled with eggs is both her body and her yield. She is not just hovering over the cage. Once we look from inside the cage – which we should but most often cannot – the ceiling is and is not the spider’s body, the part of it that lays eggs, that projects a future beyond anteriority.

Instead of an anteriority narrative, *Spider* both requires and “thematizes” a *processual* narrativity, as I will call it here. I mean a narrativity performed by the viewer as a response to the suggestions of narrativity that fail to fulfil the desire for the story, but at the same time make a non-narrative viewing impossible. Sticky, like the spider’s web, the narrativity has us caught – and caught in the act. This narrativity is more than an alternative to the anteriority-based narrative modes. It provides these modes with both a critical commentary and more “thickness”; another layer of narrative meaning that may resolve some of the conflicts burdening these modes. *Spider* tells a story of visual engagement which, although anchored in the past of the moment of viewing, proposes the act of viewing in the present as an active recall of this past. Thus, overruling anteriority, the installation reactivates old stories in new moments. They remain stories of the self (auto-) and they are visually written (-graphy). But they only exist, function *qua* stories, on the condition that the viewers, in the present not the past, activate them. This happens “on the spot,” in the here-and-now of *topos*.

In this context, another related aspect of visual art that Bourgeois revitalizes in highly significant ways shifts narrative even more prominently into a

different temporality. This aspect is grounded in the sense-based bodiliness of the specific present that each act of viewing produces and shapes. Here, the substance of narrative is not so much the process of viewing as the work imagines and offers it in fictional form, but the actual “utterance” or “enunciation” that it performs in a temporality rigorously located in the present. This performative narrative is done by the viewer. It blurs the distinction between narrative as it is traditionally construed and drama in the Aristotelian sense of action. But it also revises the idea of narrative so that it is able to specify narrative presenting: the making present, through narrative, of a reality that is more than fictional. *Spider* exploits visuality, and specifically, the domestic-architectural aspect of the *Cells* concept, to achieve this effect as *topography*.

Although fantasy-based and appealing to fantasy, this fictional reality is offered as utterly important – indeed, vital – to our need to integrate into today’s real world, which is so increasingly informed by what is called virtual reality. We can aptly call the embodied, present reality “told” by *Spider* “virtual,” according to the broad but culturally important definition of virtuality as “fictions of presence.”²² Thus, rather than letting us be overruled by a pre-established narrative that subordinates the work to convention, *Spider* helps us to understand its own cultural contribution by helping us to understand aspects of narrative itself. It puts forward the topographical reasoning without which narrative remains an empty skeleton.

6. Graphing the Auto-body

This, I insist – and here is the point of the question of narrative for visual art – *Spider* does by foregrounding the way its most notorious visual aspects embody the tenacious refusal of the dichotomies that rule our culture. On all levels of visuality (and that is where the “unthought known” resides), Bourgeois’ work categorically rejects these dichotomies: between mind and body, abstraction and figuration, visuality and tactility, flatness and volume, time and space. These fundamental dichotomies generate other, more directly recognized dichotomies, such as male-female and white-black, but also the ones that tend to prevent visual art from achieving its effectivity as thought. In particular, I am referring to oppositions that cast visual art as spatial, and narrative as temporal, confining each to a restricted domain of visual body and narrative mind, and hence, semiotically disabling both.²³ *Spider*, like many of Bourgeois’ other works, integrates a strong and embodied visuality with a story-telling activity that does not allow one to take over the other. What holds all the poles together, so that they are no longer opposites but mates, is the architectural sense of habitat that shelters us while we contribute, in real time, to building it. The interplay of light and form is thickened with an interplay of time and space, played inside and out.

The use of objects from her own past, which Bourgeois introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is a significant element in the architecture of a humble,

non-spectacular yet intense sense of habitat. Not only do they invoke, through metonymic troping, the individual (the young girl growing up) life that encapsulated these tiny objects in a past which is narrativized into the present of viewing. These objects' metaphoric sense of the body's cells inscribe life within lifelessness and vice versa. The relentless coexistence of things infused with individuality and time, with mass-produced mute objects, also works at the intersection of individuality and collective existence. This in turn challenges the ideologies that have accrued to the notion of home itself. The home built here, and through which these objects give us a guided tour, is not the cell of family life but the cutting edge that separates and binds public and private, mockingly demonstrating the futility of that indispensable illusion.

This aspect of *Spider* – it's foregrounding of the body's participation in viewing by way of its destabilization – proposes viewing in an embodied and actualizing mode that re-invigorates narrative outside of the hang-up with development, importance, heroism, and individual-masculinist mastery. In the same move, as it cements the building blocks together into an architectural work, this un-grandiose narrativity counters the seduction of monumentality. The association with memories of homeliness, unspectacular care, and unsatisfied ambition said to inhere in Bourgeois' huge spiders acquires a polemical sense that opens up the confinement it also induces. Like Cotán's paintings as discussed by Norman Bryson in his study of the still life – but in a different, not religious but more “intellectual” mode – as visual thought, this work aims to persuade vision “to shed its worldly education – both the eye's enslavement to the world's ideas of what is worthy of attention, and the eye's sloth, the blurs and entropies of vision that screen out everything in creation except what the world presents as spectacular” (*Looking*, 64). Through its work with metaphor, which “embodies” this rhetorical figure, and specifically with hyperbole, Bourgeois' work indeed puns on the very notion of the spectacular.

Presenting a spectacularly imposing spider, she offers no spectacle, for the spider cannot be seen at the same time as the cage to which the spider draws the viewer. The perfume bottle and other objects from ordinary life are simply there, inscribing the sense of home on which the narrativity depends. Instead of spectacle, *Spider* offers only a stage on which – in which – the viewer is invited to act. Drama takes over: narrative becomes action; vision, the play's actor. The director is not the artist but the work, in the dream of which the dreamer is just a player among many others, an indispensable actor who does not hold the strings. The plot consists of *Cells* that compel a new kind of attention after the unlearning.

7. The Spider as Autobiographical Narrator

Earlier I suggested that whereas the *Cells* preclude any traditional sense of narrative, the figurativity of spiders promotes it. In terms of the question of autobiography, I can now qualify this: the spiders promote a nostalgia for narrative which is itself narrative.²⁴ But they withhold their tales. *Spider's* spider

is exorbitant in size, its scale undercutting the illusionism of its representational mode. Yet that very scale also turns it into, say, a character in animal fables that we read when we were small. But the compulsion to fall back into a narrativity that the spiders promote depends less on their hyperbolically figurative status – as humongous and illusionistic – than on something altogether different. They do so, not so much by a direct yet deceptive appeal to childhood memories, but rather because they embody vicissitudinous temporality. Remember this: spiders can sit still for hours in the middle of their web. Then, suddenly, they make their move. The spider on the ceiling of my bedroom showed up suddenly, without ever telling me where it came from. But it was always already there, immobile. And when I least expected it to ever move again, it went scuttering away, into another dark corner where it could frighten me. Whether one finds them frightening or comforting, spiders have an uncanny way of being in time. This is my autobiography, not Bourgeois'; and it is *Spider's* performance to make it narratable.

This is also a function of the webs they weave. These webs are sticky, but visually, they shine like silver. Or, they are old cobwebs in corners, which look like balls of wool. Their look and feel are widely divergent. That is the “iconographic” source of the most strident mis-fit to the tactile eye – the contrast between the dry, rough, coarse fabric of the tapestry fragments and the glimmering look of the wire woven as cage. It also betokens that other strident mis-fit between eye and skin. Of the steel, our eyes say it is smooth, but our tactile memories of spider webs contradict that, unmasking the eye's habit of lying. The spider that remains exterior and interior to this *Cell* is constantly forgotten, too huge. But, as the entrance you pass through on your way to the cage, it is also inside it, at the centre or core, where its body becomes another cell enclosing the eggs. Hence, when you have most forgotten it, it shows up, suddenly, like the spider that scared you so, or its sticky web.

According to many of her public statements, Bourgeois associates the spider with her mother: protecting, comforting, diligent, repairing.²⁵ Hovering over the cage, laying its eggs, it could very well be associated with such hominess. Everything possible is done to prevent unambiguous creepiness from creeping in. But here, perhaps, the conflict between the concepts of subjectivity in biographical and psychoanalytical criticism is most acutely felt. Such statements are neither true nor false. They simply fall short of the work.

Biographical criticism would be even more inherently reductive if based on autobiographical discourse. The explicit statement of the artist about her work cannot account for the spider's most decisive contribution to the work's affect. Whether “good” and motherly, or “bad” because scary, the spider operates through its imposition of bodily involvement that destabilizes scale. Then, in the wake of that shaking, it is free to perform its imposition of mood within that body made vulnerable to the past, so that narrative can take its course.

The spider *is* a home as well as stands over one; at the same time, she is inside it. Thus, she is the incarnation of Bourgeois' sculptural architecture. The best term for this specific sense of architecture is the title of Anthony Vidler's study, *The Architectural Uncanny*. Spider is both uncanny and motherly. Or rather, the uncanny, as is well known, is strange, frightening, and motherly all at once. For it recalls the home the mother's body once was, when we had no mastery whatsoever.

Psychoanalytic criticism would ask how the weight of unconscious memories can remain, once insight has replaced them. I am not questioning the artist's insistence on a positive mother image, where ambivalence seems to be inevitable. Rather, the relevance of the artist's biography must yield to the presentness in which the viewer performs the work – Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* – the dynamic power the work imposes. The relevance of her psyche, even those aspects of it that remain unconscious, must yield to the mood where the viewers unconscious meets the work's power, in a pastness of each viewer's memories that comes after, not before, the encounter.

In other words, anteriority falls apart: the work is greater than the subject who made it. For some viewers, the spider may represent the deadly threat associated – in the vulgarization of surrealism – with the Black Widow, who eats her mate. For others, she may simply stand for disgust, where memories of sticky webs predominate the sight of her, despite the cleanliness accorded spiders in natural history books. If you have ever been threatened by a spider – or by your mother, for that matter – no amount of reassurance will help.

Of course, I am not going to tell you what mood this spider ought to instil in you – or absorb you in. The point is, precisely, that this must remain undecided, for each event of viewing, each act of looking and experiencing this spider-cell, catches the moment in its sticky web, so that the *Jetztzeit* is drawn out into long threads. Like the ribs of spider webs, these threads are centrifugal; they go in different directions. We all have different memories/cells that coalesce into a new organism. But, whereas the specific mood, the particular narrative of each reactivation of memory cannot be determined, the narrativity that the spider emanates through its mood – its virtual viscosity – is unavoidable. There, in that viscosity, not in the specific plot, lies the paradoxical power of the work to impose free, individual tales of the past on each of us. This is how, at the end of the day, it is *Spider*, not the spider, that tells the stories and lays the eggs that breed spiders. In this sense only, there is a mother busying about in this work, building the rooms in which spiders can sit.

The fragments of tapestry covering the walls of the cell primarily spin the tales. Sitting at the border of the cell, these fabrics stand guard against exteriority. This is one reason why they cannot be expected to cover the entire surface of the wall. If they did, they would, paradoxically, ward off the viewer's gaze. But part

of the work's point is, precisely, to inscribe, inside the viewer's body, the tension between being shut out of and let into the cage. However, even when this paradox is absorbed, the work keeps us suspended in confusion yet again, for these scraps of pastness remain stubbornly fragmented. They do not ask for restoration, even if they did so in the workshop from whence they came. Not only are they emphatically not-whole; they have holes in them that point to the hand that made them. Made them as such: full of holes.

8. Autotopography Made of Holes

One such hole is famous for binding biographism and psychoanalytic hermeneutic so tightly that it may be considered an allegory of the problem at hand. It was made by the artist's mother. She cut out the genitals of a putto in one of her tapestries to accommodate rather prudish customers. Or so the story goes (Fig. 4). The gesture of literal castration for the good of the family business is just one example of the extreme and daring ambivalence that pervades Bourgeois' work when it makes explicit reference to her mother. This is the same mother who mended and healed, comforted and protected, in her remembered state of spider. But since this work's theoretical tenet is to counter the reductive psychoanalytical practice that such an interpretation requires, the notion of castration as a specific psychoanalytic concept must cautiously be kept at bay, at arm's length, although not out of sight. Instead, making holes is offered here as something that cannot be read "off the page." For regardless of why the hole was made – when, and by whom, and for whatever overt or unconscious purpose – its signifying effect is to multiply the layers of pastness as an effect, and hence a posterior moment, of the work.

That particularly notorious hole also indicates that fragmentation is not simply a state of the ancient tapestry. It is also an activity, subjectively informed, subjectively co-produced. If the artist took up where her mother left off, so the viewers take up where the artist left off. The act of fragmentation partakes of the complex and multifarious act of involved vision that *Spider* requires. Rather than reading the hole "off the page" as castration, it must be read as an integrated element in the visual discourse and its foregrounded rhetoric that beckons the viewer in. Rhetorical reading, therefore, seems more suitable here.

Metonymically related to a past that it projects within the present of looking, the hole is also a synecdoche of the fragmentation of all these shreds and scraps. As synecdoche, it articulates fragmentation's defining function in the irresistible narrativity of *Spider*. But its operation is more complex than the sheer mention of such rhetorical figures might suggest. Instead of conjuring up terms used mostly for the analysis of language, I propose calling upon this hole to flesh out these terms in their visual specificity. For, whatever else the tapestry fragments are, they are real, material leftovers of a past which – through their doing – is here, with us, in the *Jetztzeit* of this work. Materiality, then, is the language that builds the fictional site called autotopography.



Fig. 4
Detail: putto
Louise Bourgeois
Spider 1997
Steel and mixed media
444.5 x 666.5 x 518.2 cm
Courtesy of Cheim and
Read, New York
Photo: Marcus Schneider

Metonymy binds the hole's materiality to another materiality which coexists with it, in time, space, or logic; or, as the case may be, in all three. In time, the hole is bound to the artist's past, childhood, mother, work, even if any specific reference is bracketed. It frames that past and displays its framing. The edges of this hole are different, more recent, than the edges of the other pieces' boundaries. As such, they are emphasized by the repetition of piercing in the steel plate on which the fragment is mounted. In space, it lets our gaze into the cage, through that particular, disturbing hole. And if you are inside, you can look out through it. Do you really want to look through this figure's genitals? But can you resist doing so? Well, you didn't, did you, when boldly approaching the cage from between the spider's legs? Just look back, after looking in. And then, if you go inside, bodily or only visually, the hole attracts and forces you to look out again. But across the hole runs a cross, of the woven steel of the cage, a symptom-sign of censorship.²⁶ And in logic, finally, when we peep through it, our look is facilitated, caused by an act – of making an artwork, or holes – of fragmentation. From the abstraction of an exterior, disembodied logic, the hole, while only being negatively defined as absence, moves logic and its major player, causality, into concreteness. Given the extreme bodily mode of looking that this work solicits, primarily through its work with scale, the fragmentation is then contagious.

It suddenly shifts our rhetoric from metonymy to synecdoche. If the hole stands for the whole of which it is a part, as the figure of synecdoche has it then this

hole represents wholeness as hole, caused by and resulting in fragmentation. The emptiness at the centre of the subject's body, here signified in this small hole, refers us back to the empty chair in which the director of the play did not sit, so that we can sit there, virtually. But before the work extends the discussion to other aspects of fragmentation, a third figure of rhetoric beckons from the wing. Metaphor, the mother of rhetoric, must relieve the anxiety that this web of implications might arouse. For, whereas metonymy and synecdoche are grounded in material contiguity, metaphor allows escape into a flight of the imagination. It takes us out of the sticky concreteness of metonymy and synecdoche. One thing stands for another, which is absent. Or so it seems.

Metaphor is the figure that establishes partial similarity – hence similarity-in-difference – between the present sign and its absent counterpart. But here, too, Bourgeois does not allow convention to dictate her concepts. It has been pointed out that Bourgeois' *Cells* are “the very embodiment of metaphorical thinking” (Crone and Graf Schaesberg, 90). But that's a very paradoxical, if not metaphorical, way of speaking. The *Cells* offer not so much metaphors as particles that can be isolated and interpreted, such as the metaphor of “cell” for life, disease, the infinitely small, confinement, protection what have you. When the *Cells* embody metaphors, they are such figures. This sounds precisely right to me.

The literal sense of metaphor is to transfer onto the viewer what the object is, says, and does. In the case of the fragments of tapestry that characterize *Spider*, these mediators between inside and outside that contaminate the viewer are not conceptual as opposed to material, but conceptual in their very materiality. With their frayed edges bearing witness to their ancient history and to the pastness this history carries with it – metaphorizing – into the present, they conceptualize metaphor in a hyperbolic materiality. From the present in which they exist, the fragments, like the bodies they activate, beckon to the past, to become part of the virtual present of a fictional auto-topography in which they, and it, *matter*.

Postscript. Mieke Bal in Conversation

15 December 2006

Editors: The notion of “an autotopography” as “a place of the fictional self” seems tailor-made for Bourgeois’ *Cells*. Can you apply it to some quite different work, such as a painting or a video work, to show how it is generally useful for opposing biographical interpretations?

Mieke Bal: The concept was developed through a consideration of what is most important in Bourgeois’ *Cells*. But I borrowed it from Jennifer Gonzalez, who used it for the work of Amalia Mesa-Bains. These are installations, an obvious form for this. So, it is neither singly applicable nor totally general. But I use the *Cells* as “theoretical objects”: artworks that inspire, or even propose, theoretical ideas. The point is that the concept has a double mission: it must account for important features of the work it described, here the *Cell*; and it must inspire interpretations of other artworks as well. I can imagine that it can work, not for single paintings, but for installed sets of paintings that begin to offer a glimpse of an artistic self; or for sculptures, again, installed, so that the architectural or otherwise spatial aspects become important and telling.

Editors: Also, can you name other structures within the domain of the autotopographical besides architecture that house and/or articulate the fictional self?

Mieke Bal: Yes, the term architecture was just a summing-up term, which makes immediately clear what kind of spatial considerations are at stake. But for a series of paintings installed in a gallery, the concept can be used simply to draw attention to the way their installation matters to the works, so that the works lose their illusory autonomy, while the “self” that makes the works on an artist cohere remains in sight without dictating an intentionalist interpretation.

Editors: In this issue we have a particular interest in autobiography “in the wake of conceptualism”. Are there more recent, younger artists—we thought of Sophie Calle, Kutlug Altman, Francis Alys—whose work has autotopographic appeal?

Mieke Bal: I would certainly think so. The new conceptual artists make an excellent case because their explicit appeal to autobiography is always deceptive, fictitious. But the way the viewer is surrounded by (Calle) or immersed in (Altman) the work makes the autotopographical point quite precisely. In relation to the space, the viewer is involved in an encounter – an encounter with “someone” who is not Ms Calle or Mr Altman but the self that infuses the work with a sense that someone was/is there who makes this viewing experience possible. On the condition that the viewer is willing to engage.

Editors: Also, do you think your strictures against biographical criticism have the same force, regardless of “period”?

Mieke Bal: Well, I don’t want to sound dogmatic, but I think so, yes. The issue is not to censor viewers’ desire to get to know an artist, but to redirect attention to the work as having something to say beyond the causal logic of anteriority narratives. Even an artist like Bourgeois who keeps trying to make her autobiography relevant has to be put aside as a person if we want to make her work visible. Of course, just as there are autobiographical texts, so there are autobiographical artworks. These are “about” the artist, but really, still as a fictitious presence.

Editors: One of us recalled a conversation with Thierry de Duve about how in thinking/writing about our experience of a work it was easy to slip into thinking of it as person. Does this relate to your discussion of the viewer as the work’s “second person”?

Mieke Bal: Not really, since De Duve’s point is that the work becomes a person. My second-person posture draws attention to the viewer, not the work, as being addressed by a dynamic work, but that work need not be personified at all. David Reed’s works, for example, are erotic, without in the least being “personifiable”. Things can be sexy as well! Nor are Bourgeois’ *Cells* personified when I discuss them as addressing the viewer.

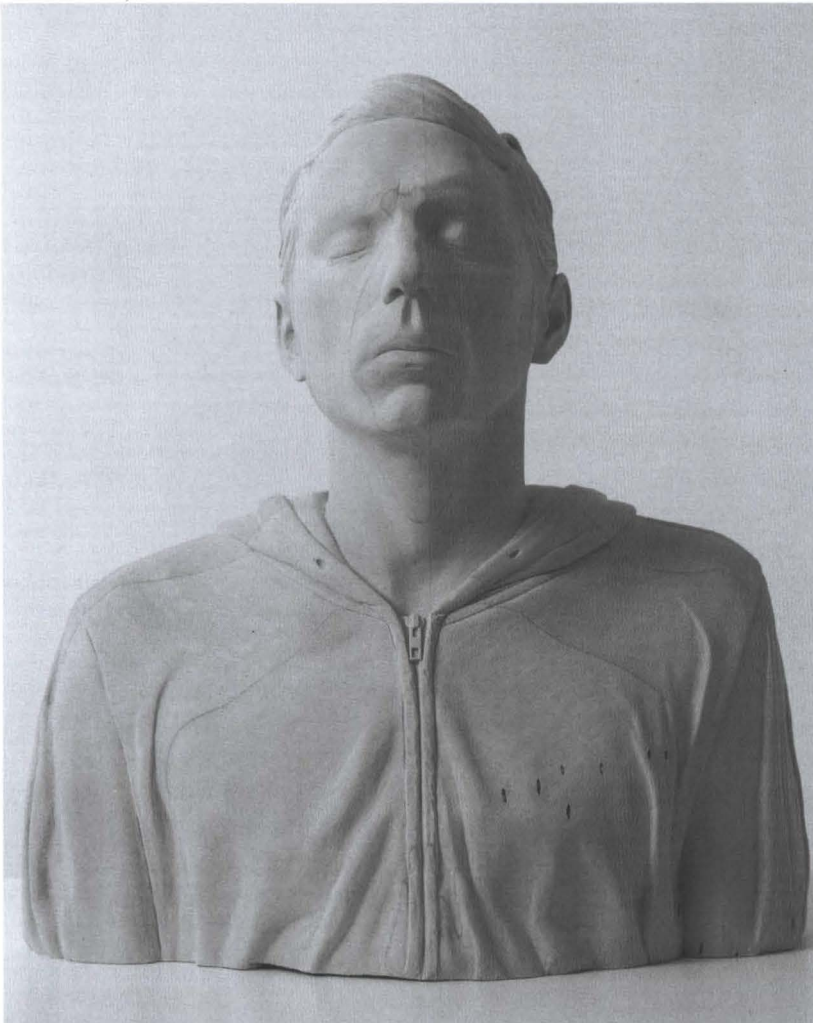
1. *Spider* has been exhibited prominently in various sites, including the Tate Modern in London. Pictures of *Spider* have been widely published, and it is arguably the best known of her *Cells* series.
2. See Crone and Graf Schaesberg for the most extensive study of the *Cells* and their reproductions. The catalogue of a recent exhibition at Reina Sofia in Madrid is entirely devoted to the architectural in Bourgeois' work (Bernadac et al.). Elements in the present essay draw on, and further develop, ideas in my recent short book *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*.
3. This is why I have titled my collection of essays on acts of looking *Looking In*. The term "non-indifference" echoes Giovanni Careri's deployment of Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage to explicate Bernini's chapels in Rome.
4. I thank Richard Meyer (UCLA) for drawing my attention to the importance of domesticity in Bourgeois' work. This paper has benefited from in-depth discussions with him at the Gehry Research Institute.
5. This felicitous term was coined by Jennifer A. Gonzalez to characterize Amalia Mesa-Bains' autobiographical and autohistorical object installations. Whereas Mesa-Bains' work focuses on cultural memory, longing, and nostalgia, Bourgeois' installations cannot be interpreted so easily along these lines.
6. A few recent examples are Bernadac et al., Gorovoy et al., and Kotik. The papers collected in a recent issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* (22.2, 1999) form an exception to this tendency.
7. "Primal," as in Freud's concept of the primal scene, which occurs when the child witnesses parental intercourse and fails to understand it. This primal visual experience is formative and can be traumatic in the sense explained above. Within the short duration of the experience with a *Cell*, the subliminal sense of *house* is just such a formative experience—strong in its impact, even if the precise nature of that impact cannot be pinned down. For a definition of *primal scene*, see Laplanche and Pontalis.
8. On the works titled *Femme Maison*, see my paper "Ecstatic Aesthetics."
9. This last sentence evokes Parker and Pollock's decisive intervention in art history from a feminist point of view.
10. Both Benjamin and Bollas use their respective concepts to develop a notion of "visual thought" as a richer, thicker substitute for narrative. On Benjamin's development of his concept of thought-images and the ungrasped symbolism, see Weigel, especially 80-83. Bollas' account of the multiply split subjectivity in dreams is eminently helpful in rethinking psychoanalytical criticism of visual art; see my article "Dreaming Art."
11. Freud's work on visual art (in)famously falls short of the visual impact of his theory. See, for example, his essay on Leonardo. The argument I am making here is at the core of Damisch's essay on Piero della Francesca.
12. Most commonly known through Erwin Panofsky. For a critical and historical study that offers a much more complex image than the practice of iconography suggests, see Holly (1988).
13. For a fundamental critique of the hermeneutic use of psychoanalysis, see Laplanche.
14. In particular, see my "Semiotics and Art History," and *Quoting Caravaggio*.
15. On this topic, see my article "Abandoning Authority."
16. For my discussion of the theory of social, psychological, and linguistic dependency involved in this term, see chapter 5 of *Double Exposures*; see also Code.
17. On the flawed logic of anteriority-based "contextualism," see Norman Bryson's "Art in Context," which draws on Jonathan Culler's justly famous author's preface to his book *Framing the Sign*.
18. The major impact of Krauss' proposal that Bourgeois' work be read in terms of part-object (54-55) is to suspend the opposition between the abstract and the figurative.
19. Lacan's analysis triggered an impassioned debate, now available in a volume edited by Muller and Richardson. See also Lowenthal, and especially Grootenboer's superb discussion of *trompe l'oeil* painting.
20. See Deleuze's updating of Leibniz's ideas on perception; see also Serres on Leibnizian mathematics. For the relevance of baroque mathematics and especially baroque scale for contemporary art, see my *Quoting Caravaggio*.
21. For an extensive deployment of baroque thought for contemporary art, see my *Quoting Caravaggio*.
22. See Morse, especially 3-35.
23. For a tenacious recurrence of these dichotomies in discussions of visual art, see Mitchell.
24. On nostalgia, see Roth, and my *Quoting Caravaggio* 64-75.
25. She points in that direction in the quotations throughout Gorovoy et al.; see also Kotik.
26. A symptom is an involuntary, unintentional sign. When a tree's leaves turn yellow, the colour change is a sign of the changing season. But no one designs that sign. The term has no medical connotations, but obviously lends itself for use in medical diagnosis, where the doctor reads the signs of disease that no one intends. Similarly, Bourgeois' use of the castrated putto is a sign, but the accidental visibility of the x behind it is an accident that can receive meaning in the context of the work; hence, it is a symptom.

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Fig. 1 Ricky Swallow
*And the Moment Will
Come When Composure
Returns (Decoy)* 2002
Laminated jelutong
54.25 x 49.25 x 35.25 cm
Collection of Samuel and
Shanit Schwartz,
Los Angeles



Art in the Face of Fame: Ricky Swallow's Reflection of Reputation

Anthony Gardner

Ricky Swallow's rise to prominence in Australia's art market and popular art discourse has attained an almost mythic status. Less than a decade after graduating from Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts, Swallow had won Australia's paramount contemporary art competition (the 1999 *Contempora 5 Award*), represented Australia at the 2005 *Venice Biennale* and presented a self-titled solo exhibition at New York's P.S.1 gallery in early 2006. His meticulously detailed sculptures, in materials as diverse as PVC piping and hard woods such as American walnut, have graced group and solo exhibitions across Europe and North America, in Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, Swallow's biography franks the market-centric rhetoric through which his work circulated in 1999-2000 – neatly represented by one journalist's claim that "A Swallow Might Make a Handy Nest Egg"¹ – while disproving Alan Bowness' claims, made as recently as 1989, that artistic recognition generally takes 25 years to acquire.²

Swallow's increasing celebrity within global circuits of contemporary art has not, however, translated into scholarly attention toward his practice.³ Equally surprising is the limited *analysis* of Swallow's work in art criticism, which has largely folded into two opposed approaches. The first is a cynical (we could even say anxious) appraisal of the culture industries' fascination with a very young artist's ostensibly outmoded technique of carving. For one Sydney-based critic in particular, Adam Geczy, this fascination is emblematic of "an insecure culture... that needs the assurance of objects over ideas;" it signifies, as Geczy elaborates further, a conservative reaction against new media and the increasingly immaterial networks and exchanges brought about by globalization's technologized economies.⁴ The second approach comprises a quasi-hagiographic celebration of Swallow's life and his interests in pop and music cultures, and the overtly painstaking skill required to make his carvings. (The seven months taken to create one sculpture, *Killing Time* (2003-4) has become a frequent point of reference; the "12 to 14 hours a day" that Swallow works alone in his studio is another ubiquitous trope.⁵) At best, Swallow's works are glossed in poeticized

accounts of his transcription of ready made commodities into sculptural form, such that a sleeping bag “seems to gasp in astonishment at its own transformation into wood.”⁶ Consequently, and at odds with their material presence, Swallow’s sculptures have become ghosts within discourse: they are at once hailed and denigrated as an artisanal rejection of conceptual tropes; delimited to atomized individual production rather than perceived as critically responding to contemporary socio-cultural conditions; and historicized not within art historical contexts but through personal details and biographical anecdotes (from memories of childhood fishing expeditions, to the lyrics of particular songs playing in Swallow’s studio while he carved).⁷

In this essay, I will not reject outright the importance of these tropes to Swallow’s sculptures, for Swallow’s consistent and conscious invocation of biographical anecdotes in his interviews and in the works themselves cannot be ignored.⁸ My argument is more complex: Swallow strategically entwines autobiography and a *prima facie* critical engagement with contemporary commodifications of identity and contexts of artistic reputation. His works – particularly those made after 2002 – are both symptomatic of, and self-consciously reflexive toward, key conventions of contemporary art practice as they have emerged both in Australia and internationally. Central to these conventions, I contend, are tropes of indexicality and aura after their supposed rejection by (but actually their maintenance within) conceptual and postcolonial art practices.

This essay comprises three sections: the first establishes Swallow’s presentation of autobiography in his sculptures; the second identifies this autobiographical turn as highly strategic, especially given the discursive importance of autobiography, individualism and localism within particular Australian and international art contexts; and the final section examines Swallow’s attempt to critically engage with those contexts – most notably, art’s networks of publicity and marketing – as his reputation grew. As a consequence of these analyses, Swallow’s practice can be seen as providing a deceptively sophisticated relation to tropes of identity and reputation as determined and mediated by art’s prevailing institutions of the market and (its) discourse.

Wooden Problems

In *Wooden Problem* (2002), his second solo exhibition at the Karyn Lovegrove Gallery in Los Angeles, Swallow presented two significant shifts in his still-nascent career. The first is well-documented: his departure from making models in MDF, PVC, resin or balsa wood, in favour of the overtly laborious carving of sculptures in a soft wood called jelutong. The second shift, though equally overt, is rarely discussed: Swallow’s move from the implicit autobiographical allusions in his previous works to the creation of an explicit self-portrait, an effigy-like bust with eyes closed and chin raised, entitled *And the Moment Will Come When Composure Returns (Decoy)* (2002, Fig. 1). The conjunction of these shifts is not coincidental, but instead is crucial to Swallow’s complex



Fig. 2 Ricky Swallow
Vacated Campers 2000
 Binders board, paper, glue
 10 x 32 x 35 cm
 Collection of Suzie Melhop
 and Darren Knight, Sydney

and changing relationship to autobiography and identity and his attempt to create a “new beginning” within his practice.⁹ In order to understand this “new beginning,” however, we must first understand the role played by autobiography in both Swallow’s practice leading up to *Wooden Problem* and in broader contexts of contemporary art.

Prior to 2002, Swallow’s works frequently alluded to memories from childhood popular culture or possessions threatened with obsolescence by time, use and commodity supersession: a cassette player (“the first thing you curate”, according to Swallow) recreated in MDF and called *The X-Bass Woofer* (1998);¹⁰ the devolution into the gallery floor of Darth Vader’s head (*Model for a Sunken Monument*, 1999); binders board remakes of his worn-out sneakers (*Vacated Campers*, 2000, Fig. 2); or the turntables familiar from both the pre-CD era and the renewed domestic and commercial market in vinyl records and music decks in the 1990s (the *Even the Odd Orbit* series of 1998; *The Multistylus Programme*, 1999). Swallow’s aim was to reanimate these “evaporated self-portraits,” as he called them¹¹ not as a therapeutic reclamation of the outmoded, nor simply as the appropriation of *passé* pop objects so as to underscore the “radical” non-originality of Australian art practice (as was orthodox throughout the 1980s).¹² This reanimation was instead reliant on bodily presence, which was manifested in two ways. The first was through the implied presence of the objects’ prior “use” (such as the carefully transcribed erosion of the sneakers’ soles in *Vacated Campers*, or the randomly positioned tuners on *The X-Bass Woofer*). For Swallow, an owner’s use or inhabitation of the mass-produced and mass-marketed referents “personalizes” those objects, transferring them from a homogenizing and universalized sphere of capitalism to the particularity of “being my own items.”¹³ While the recognizability of the commodity referent provided a means to date the apparent memory of that referent, the transcription of an object’s use also

pointed toward a particular, auratic presence – namely Swallow, through his implicit possession and use of these objects at some point in his life. This auratic presence was reinforced by the second manifestation of the bodily: the indexicality of the unique objects’ (re-)construction by Swallow, of the “performance behind their forms.”¹⁴ In many cases, this “performance” was obviously time-consuming, particularly in the attention paid to details such as ridges inscribed into the cassette deck’s buttons, or capturing a sneaker’s varying textures and creases in paper and board rather than plastic and leather. One shoe in *Vacated Campers* lay up-turned, ensuring that Swallow’s recreation of the eroded sole and its appeal to verisimilitude could not be missed by viewers. Consequently, the weeks and months taken to create each work – as evident in their appearance and often reiterated in the discourse surrounding them – ensured that indexicality was not just autographic (that is, a mark or trace made by Swallow – the normative definition of the index). It was also *autobiographical*: the sculptures signified both traces of Swallow’s past and the extensive time he had spent “performing” in his studio to recreate those traces.

In *Wooden Problem*, this conceptualization of “autobiography” was made explicit to the point of tautology. The overt physical presence and solidity of carved jelutong exaggerated Swallow’s earlier reliance on indexicality: jelutong is a harder and more voluminous wood compared with the light, mass-produced sheets of binders board and soft balsa wood; and whereas binders board fragments were delicately glued together in previous works, jelutong signalled the need for a more forceful pressure so as to carve the folds and nicks in the bust’s hooded sweatshirt or, as in *Come Together* (2002), the seams of a beanbag. This overtly forceful pressure in turn buttressed the artist’s more forceful presence within the jelutong sculptures, in terms of both the “artist’s hand” evident in their manufacture and in Swallow’s shift from “evaporated” to literal self-portrait in *The Moment Will Come When Composure Returns*. But by treating the autobiographical (in terms of both index and content) as obviously inextricable from any current or revisionist reading of his practice, Swallow also opened the works to certain significant risks. The first was that Swallow merely appealed to nostalgia for a mythic, pre-globalized past that no longer existed (if it ever did) but that could nonetheless be actualized through an equally nostalgic return to masterfully produced signifiers of that past.¹⁵ The second risk was that viewers would fixate strictly and uncritically on the works’ skilled production. This is a spectatorial fascination that Justin Paton champions and that Adam Geczy (following Walter Benjamin and John Berger) laments: for while it potentially reduces the difference between “the time taken (by the artist) and time given back (by the audience),” as Paton claims, it may also risk ignoring Benjamin’s important call for self-reflexive politics to outweigh the absorptive spectacle of aura and time-consuming ritual.¹⁶ By reducing Swallow’s works to synchronic spectatorial engagement, however, neither Paton nor Geczy are able to address the broader and more nuanced implications of Swallow’s autobiographical tropes, especially given the return of autobiography and (albeit to a lesser

extent) self-portraiture to art practice and discourse in the late-1990s in Australia and elsewhere. To an extent, this type of critical reductionism is not surprising, given the general lack of scholarship on the contexts and conditions of art practice after postcolonialism. It is therefore necessary to examine some of the reasons for, and inferences from, Swallow's strategic use of autobiography leading to *Wooden Problem*.

Localism in Extremis: Autobiography and Identity

For the influential theorist, Rex Butler, Australian art discourse in the 1990s was characterized chiefly by its attempts at "radical revisionism": art historians and critics frequently reframed canonical nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and their works as having engaged in postcolonial dialogue *avant la lettre*.¹⁷ This critical appropriation was both politically and culturally urgent, given the topicality and fragility of postcolonial paradigms in Australia from the mid-1990s on. In one of his first speeches as Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard declared that:

One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to rewrite Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.¹⁸

In the ensuing years of the so-called "history wars," Howard (in company with conservative allies such as Geoffrey Blainey and Keith Windschuttle) continued to denigrate the "partisan" politicization of historical analysis – in particular, the "black armband" revisionism of Australia's past that focused on the foundations and effects of ongoing indigenous disposessions since Australia's non-indigenous settlement, and which Blainey for one perceived as overly mournful and potentially falsifying.¹⁹ Australian cultural institutions were certainly not immune from the "history wars," as made clear in the debates surrounding the National Museum of Australia and its inaugural displays of national histories. David Barnett, a member of the Museum's council and the author of a biography on John Howard, disputed the veracity and alleged bias of the didactic panels accompanying the Museum's inaugural exhibition. The Museum's director, Dawn Casey, was granted a mere 12-month continuation of her position once her original contract expired, in large part because of her attempted rejection of direct and indirect government intervention in the Museum's exhibition policies.²⁰ "Radical revisionism" – both as a paradigm and as an anthology of critical writing – was an attempt, however minor, to militate against the neocolonial anaesthetization of Australian histories.

By the early-2000s, however, many emerging Australian artists – mainly but not exclusively non-indigenous – had ostensibly moved away from postcolonial revisionism as the impetus for their practice. In lieu of national cultural politics, these artists took themselves, their relations with artist-friends and/or their personal interests – in other words, markers of autobiographical and



Fig. 3 Lyndal Walker
1990s Share Household
Living Room 1996
Installation
Dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

subcultural identity – as primary points of reference. Shaun Gladwell’s video *Storm Sequence* (2000) presented the artist’s investment in skateboard subcultures through a self-portrait of him kick-flipping on the Bondi Beach foreshore in a romanticized rainstorm. Lyndal Walker recreated her home’s main communal space – replete with beanbag, op-shop furniture and dirty dishes – for display at an inner-Melbourne artist-run space called 1st Floor (Fig. 3) and exhibited a suite of enlarged snapshots of friends, mainly other artists, at a barbeque, at parking lots or in retail outlets (*All New Personal Style* (2000)). A number of Swallow’s other peers similarly turned to narrow networks of local artists and friends, so as to present tropes of personal and collective identity. These included the anomie and anxieties associated with being part of the key market demographic of 20-something inner-city dwellers, as in David Rosetzky’s quasi-confessional videos from the late-1990s on; Andrew McQualter’s *Studies for Sculpture* (2003), in which photographs and distended plasticine sculptures indexed McQualter’s collaborative moulding of the plasticine by shaking hands with colleagues; and Bianca Hester’s photographs and transcripts from interviews with her peers, interviews in which she would canvass questions about her friends’ expectations of culture, politics and the local art scene, or their personal dilemmas (*An Example of an Exhibition* (2000)).²¹

This brief exposition of Australian, and particularly Melbourne-based, artists’ works is not intended to suggest particular influences on Swallow, who was also Melbourne-based until 2001. It instead asserts a paradigmatic interest in identity on the part of key emerging artists in Australia in the late-1990s – but not in the sense conventionally understood within either postmodern or postcolonial art. They did not try to assert a self-consciously, paradoxically unique Australian identity as one that was always derivative and unoriginal,

as Rex Butler and other critics have argued of Australian postmodernism and its apparently slavish appropriation and copying of dominant international art trends and imagery.²² Nor could these younger artists – who for the most part came from privileged caucasian backgrounds and were firmly ensconced in inner-city studios – credibly espouse identity as either metonymic of non-Western and/or colonized cultures, or present hybridized identities between cultures, as dominated postcolonial art practices. “Identity” for emerging Australian artists at the end of the 1990s was frequently and determinedly more localized; it operated on the levels of subculture – whether of leisure pursuits such as skateboarding, or the marginal networks of artist-peers – and, more precisely, one’s individual engagements with, or friendships within, subcultures.

This is not to say that the localized and individualized reframing of identity rejected or ignored its postcolonial and other pedigrees, nor that it somehow, somewhat miraculously “survived new media, the elimination of the unique work ... and the end of personal manufacture,” as Charles Green has argued.²³ This reframing instead *exploited* the paradoxical retention of auratic identity even in the attempts to dispel, deconstruct or otherwise problematize that construct within, for example, postcolonial and (New York-based) conceptual art. As the American critics, Alexander Alberro and Benjamin Buchloh, have both noted of Seth Siegelau’s dealership of New York conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, the greater the artwork’s ephemerality or the apparent anonymity of the artist-creator became, the more publicity and thus the greater “name recognition” the artist received.²⁴ For Alberro, this was both compensatory and strategic: the lack of a visual or material product transferred focus to the artist and public recognition of his name, which Siegelau in turn actively promoted and circulated through client lists, catalogues, advertising and other channels of publicity. For Buchloh, the supposed “critical annihilation of cultural conventions” of visibility, material presence and authorship was in fact a disingenuous capitulation to the spectacular infamy of such annihilation, which resulted in the revitalization of artist “brand names.”²⁵ In other words, as conceptual art turned away from subjective and aesthetic expression and entered the depersonalized spheres of information and analytic propositions and systems, so the artwork became subsidiary to the individual artist’s reputation and its circulation in art world networks.

Few of the Australian artists who emerged at the twentieth century’s close responded directly to New York conceptual art from the 1960s and 1970s. This was in part because of the geographical and temporal distance between conceptual art precedents and the more immediate contexts of contemporary Australian art production. And while there were notable exceptions – such as McQualter and his collegial collaborations that systematically worked through pre-established plans of interaction, or Hester’s information relays and interviews – these artists did not see art world networks as inherently depersonalizing as Buchloh had claimed. This latter perception ignored the

crux of art's contemporary exchange: the circulation of information and ideas through friendships and relationships, at share houses, studios or parties. Nor could these networks be divorced from an "aesthetic of administration," Buchloh's condemnatory description of conceptual art's aesthetics of paperwork, information hubs and bureaucracy. Most of these friendly exchanges circulated through networks surrounding the independent art spaces – artist-run initiatives such as 1st Floor, or larger venues like 200 Gertrude Street – that these artists exhibited in and operated. Their investment in art networks was thus both administrative and, more importantly, convivial. This communal turn consequently provided an important revaluation of conceptual art's effects on later practice: autobiography could be returned to individual artists' practices and their circulation within art's networks, through indexes (sculptures, photographs and other documentation) of convivial, interpersonal exchange.

More pertinent still were certain effects of postcolonial discourses on localized art practice. In literary and cultural theory, autobiography and identity existed in a tense dialectic. The representation of a stable, coherent "I" was consistently subject to interrogation; revealed as a received linguistic construction, the "I" was also shown to be inherently iterated and interpellated by other (primarily Eurocentric, hegemonic) discourses. For Homi Bhabha and his followers, an "I" could still be critical and deconstructive but only through strategically performative markers of identity. Key amongst these were "sly civility" or the mimicry of hegemonic discourses and representations that, by ambivalently doubling but not quite assimilating into those representations, could "disclos[e] the ambivalence of colonial discourse [and] disrupt ... its authority."²⁶ While autobiography risked re-stabilising the "I" through a cohesive life-narrative, it also provided empirical bases for postcolonial deconstruction. As Masao Miyoshi notes of Edward Said and his writings, Said's anecdotes based on his own exile from Palestine offered specific examples of his "personal commitment to resistance."²⁷ For the literary theorist, Oliver Lovesey, personal stories and accounts parallel and are inscribed with national narratives of decolonization and "postcolonial self-fashioning,"²⁸ while Jane Hiddleston claims that autobiography can "contaminate" and "probe and question" the presumed universality and neutrality of postcolonial philosophy, ensuring that it does not succumb to the same false claims of universality it largely seeks to deconstruct.²⁹ Postcolonial deconstructions of "stable" notions of identity, at least in literary theory, did not discredit autobiography, but frequently relied upon it as the evidentiary source of, and means of articulating, its deconstructive analysis.

The situation in art, however, was noticeably different. Artists with non-Western biographies were, according to Green, often "annexed subjects,"³⁰ reduced to spokespeople for ethnic difference and metonyms for non-Western nations and cultures. The Iranian-born, New York-based artist, Shirin Neshat,

epitomizes this reduction. As Melissa Miles argues, Neshat is “[c]onstructed metonymically as the art world’s essential Iranian woman ... interpellated as a native informant for the culture and society that she is seen to represent.”³¹ In 2001, Neshat was asked by *ArtNews Online* to provide a Muslim woman’s perspective on art-making after the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, as though she could provide the opinions of all Muslim women.³² Her videos and photographs – which are frequently set (if not filmed) in Iran and often present *chador*-clad women in scenarios of implicit hostility³³ – are regularly shown in large-scale international exhibitions, their complicated address of identity largely outweighed by “fantasies of a liberal cultural pluralism [that Western audiences and curators can project] through the consumption [and exhibition] of her art.”³⁴ As with her contemporaries (such as Mona Hatoum and Walid Raad and their exile from Lebanon, or Ilya Kabakov and his migration from Moscow), Neshat’s biography determines her art’s apparently metonymic basis: her birth in Iran, the circumstances of Iran’s Islamic revolution of 1979 that enforced her exile in America and her “rebirth as an artist after her return to Iran in 1990” all establish (at least for her critics) the privileged “authenticity” of her subaltern voice and the *prima facie* critical role played by autobiography in her practice.³⁵

The postcolonial fixation on individual identities and biographies was equally insistent in Australian art. This could be well-meaning, as when the Australian cultural theorist, Nikos Papastergiadis, recalls telling Constanze Zikos to “wog up” one of his flag artworks so as to contextualize it specifically within Zikos’ background as the child of Greek immigrants.³⁶ It could be more insidious and pervasively ignorant: non-urban indigenous artists were usually presented as the lone producers of paintings, an individualization of practice that, while befitting the art markets’ preference for individual signatures, disavowed the more complex proprietorship of the depicted songs and stories according to highly structured kinship relations.³⁷ But it could also depoliticize art’s production and exhibition, as in the case of artists emigrating and exiled from China after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, such as the Sydney-based artist Ah Xian. His 1999 *China China* series of porcelain busts – frequently decorated with what appeared to be Chinese motifs and literally using china as a medium – overtly appealed to viewers’ pre-determined constructs of “Chinese art” and epitomized the delimitation of certain artists to culturally (or even personally) specific themes. As recently as March 2006, in Australia’s leading glossy arts magazine, one writer argued that Ah Xian’s:

displacement, together with his own need to feel pride in where he came from and who he is, brought about his re-engagement with what we may term traditional Chinese culture. But this re-engagement [wa]s conducted on his own terms and happen[ed] in a way that [made] sense of his identity.³⁸

Ah Xian's art thereby provided a therapeutic and expressive counterpoint to his migration, though both were crucial to our (but more precisely, his) understanding of his identity. In other words the personal and the biographical were intrinsic to the reception – and the market success – of art within Australia's (and, as we saw with Shirin Neshat, global) postcolonial conditions.

Three factors therefore stood out as paradigmatic for success and recognition within Australian art markets at the end of the 1990s: the dominance of a postcolonial “radical revisionism” within Australian art criticism; the availability (or, more explicitly, the crux) of autobiography within post-conceptual art networks; and the reification of artists' individual biographies as largely determinative of success within postcolonial art's conventions. The autobiographical aesthetic advanced by emerging Australian (and particularly Melbourne-based) artists was therefore not a retrograde reaction *against* those three factors. Nor was autobiography necessarily a form of hermetic self-expression; it was instead a strategic means to expropriate and exploit art's postcolonial and post-conceptual tropes by generally white, middle-class emerging artists who would not initially seem to “fit” those tropes. In doing this, they reduced the *national-cultural* politics of identity to specific *localities* of inner-city art networks and, even more specifically, to their own lives, engagements and interests within them. Postcolonialism and post-conceptualism combined to create a model of the artist-as-ethnographer – not in the sense raised by Hal Foster, of artists scrounging through archives and critiquing the continued marginalization of cultures by art institutions,³⁹ but in the sense of artists analyzing, indexing and publicizing the micro-details of their lives, of being anthropologists of themselves so as to *enter* art's major institutions and markets.

Swallow was not oblivious to this strategic aesthetic but, like his peers, also sought recognition through combined postcolonial and post-conceptual tropes. Despite the sheer materiality of many of his artistic products and their process of construction, Swallow still invoked conceptual art's (and particularly Joseph Kosuth's) rhetoric that the importance of the idea far outweighed its execution.⁴⁰ Swallow had outsourced the production of his resin sculptures, such as his *iMan Prototypes* (2001), both to replicate the outsourcing of manufacture by corporations such as Apple (which had produced the iMac computer designs on which the *iMan Prototypes* were based) and to continue conceptual art's post-studio, quasi-corporate outsourcing of the execution of ideas. When he did work with other people to carve a sculpture (as during the four months that Michael Conole spent co-carving *Killing Time* in Los Angeles and Sydney), Swallow resolutely rejected the idea that his works were created collaboratively: “I don't consider that any of the works have been made collaboratively,” he argues, because “the idea [of] how I want a work to be and why isn't collaborative,” even if the idea's execution was.⁴¹ Furthermore, the impeccable detail and “finish fetish” of his carved jelutong works – a finish usually associated with the jelutong prototypes for luxury interior and automobile design – was arguably a

means to test whether the impression of machinic production could be replicated by hand without disavowing or drawing attention from the time and skill manifestly required for that manual replication.⁴²

Nor was Swallow ignorant of the crucial role played by postcolonial interpretation in contemporary art's reception. His exploitation of the autobiographical turn that had hitherto underscored much postcolonial theory and practice, was even more extreme than his Australian peers': as outlined earlier, this was figured through the index or "performance" of exhaustive physical labour – up to seven months' duration – that he (and others) spent manufacturing a work, and through the works' signification and reanimation of Swallow's memories and possessions. Other tropes were also at play in certain sculptures. As noted by the Perth-based curator, Robert Cook, Swallow's practice of reanimation entailed a curious form of mimicry,⁴³ one that, through the artist's dual invocation of autobiography, differed from the readymade's detached replication and presentation by "simulation" artists like Jeff Koons.⁴⁴ Swallow's works mimicked cultural markers of identity, not to assert his own national and cultural "marginality" but to signify the "universal" consumption of *mainstream* cultural artefacts, such as Darth Vader or, in the case of *Peugeot Taipan, Commemorative Model (Discontinued Line)* (1999), a BMX bike. Swallow's Australian dealer, Darren Knight, has advocated a third trope as well: that of Swallow as a quasi-anthropologist of European museums, trawling through their collections and seeking outmoded and/or marginalized art practices (such as seventeenth-century wood-carving) which he could transcribe and reframe within contemporary contexts.⁴⁵ This, for Knight, is one of the main conceptual foundations of *Vacated Campers*, for the erosion to the original sneakers' soles was caused by Swallow's many hours of fieldwork research within museums' Old Master collections. The careful transcription of that erosion, made as obvious as possible in the upturned sneaker, foregrounded not just Swallow's technical abilities but also the work's autobiographical and anthropological referent. It was an anthropological trope, we must remember, that, was familiar both from the practices of Swallow's peers and, as Hal Foster suggested in his model of the artist-as-ethnographer, postcolonial artists such as Fred Wilson. Swallow's and Wilson's aims were arguably at odds: whereas Wilson reframed museum collections within contemporary racial discourses for the purposes of critique, Swallow reanimated the past within the contemporary consumption of brands like "Campers" footwear. Nonetheless, Swallow's expropriation of postcolonial models showed the ease – and given Knight's claims, arguably the market importance – of folding mimicry, anthropology and autobiography back into the "mainstream" in the early-2000s.⁴⁶

As this section of the essay has shown, Ricky Swallow's autobiographical aesthetic was neither a form of hermetic neo-expressionism nor a retrograde "neo-medievalism," as Adam Geczy argues. Swallow's aesthetic was more nuanced: it involved a canny reflection and strategic exploitation of the

dominant post-conceptual and postcolonial conventions in localized and international art contexts. These aesthetic strategies should not, however, be seen as determining the rapid rise in Swallow's reputation – art history is, after all, a notoriously poor soothsayer of market success. These strategies do, however, provide important insights into the shift in Swallow's career in 2002: one marked less by autobiography as a means to garner market attention, and more by the sculptural representation of his own death – what theorists in literary studies call autothanatography – as a consequence of market attention on his practice. As Swallow has argued, his 2002 exhibition, *Wooden Problem*, sought a “new beginning” in his career: the key to this was autothanatography as a self-reflexive gesture toward his growing reputation within contemporary art's networks of publicity.

Autothanatography as a Critical Strategy?

Although Swallow's pre-2002 sculptures presented various details of his life as central to his aesthetic, death was never far away either. The childhood BMX of *Peugeot Taipan* or the sneakers in *Vacated Campers* may have been reanimated from the depths of time and memory, but in the process Swallow drained them of colour and use. On one level, this formal evaporation of a “memory's” life or a “possession's” function showed Swallow's acute awareness that artworks enter art institutions to suffer a museal death: they become divorced from the exchanges and contingencies of life, so as to be protected in storage vaults and exhumed whenever needed for display. On another level, Swallow confirmed the claim made by the feminist historian, Nancy K. Miller, that “[e]very autobiography... is also an autothanatography.”⁴⁷ That is, creating a public record of one's existence in a given time and space is an act designed more for posterity than for the present; every representation of one's life is also a representation of, and designed for after, one's death-to-come.⁴⁸

With *Wooden Problem*, his 2002 exhibition in Los Angeles (Fig. 4), Swallow presented another, more strategic consideration of autothanatography. As noted earlier, Swallow's self-portrait bust, *And the Moment Will Come When Composure Returns*, clearly resembled an effigy (or more precisely a half-body cast of an effigy, much like those taken from the effigies atop Plantagenet tombs in Westminster Abbey and now housed in London's National Portrait Gallery). The eyes of Swallow's self-portrait were deliberately closed, both to reinforce its reference to death-masks and to suggest the sculpture's blindness to (and refusal to recognize) adjacent works. This latter impression was particularly directed to a work that hung opposite the bust and which continued Swallow's prior conflation of the “expressive,” the autobiographical and popular culture: the transcription of the mask from film director Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise, in a sculpture suggestively titled *Ask Me About My Feelings* (2002). In Swallow's own words, “if the portrait bust was placed in a room with [other] previously-made sculptures it literally wouldn't see them/acknowledge them.”⁴⁹ Two implications emerged from this relation of refusal between artworks.



Fig. 4 Ricky Swallow
Installation view of
Wooden Problem 2002
Karyn Lovegrove Gallery,
Los Angeles

First, it signified Swallow's desire to dis-identify with his past practice, "to shut my eyes and wait for a new beginning."⁵⁰ The reason for seeking a "new beginning" may seem odd for an artist who had, by 2002, acquired a strong Australian and international reputation because of those "previously made sculptures." Yet as the British critic, Martin Herbert, observes, Swallow had developed such a "discomfort with his burgeoning fame" that he departed Melbourne so as to escape the rapid mythologization of a career that was barely five years old.⁵¹ This was the second implication behind the bust's "refusal": if the first explicit self-portrait in Swallow's career presented him as an effigy, this death could not be divorced from the contexts and dissemination of media avatars and branding that the *Scream* mask signified. This signification was not just about the dissemination of movie franchises and other forms of popular culture, but about Swallow's increasing "name recognition," his own status as a mediatized avatar, within art's networks of publicity. Swallow's perception of his rapidly growing art world celebrity was more than disconcerting; judging by the self-portrait and its autothanatography, it was apparently petrifying.

Swallow's new reflexivity toward his reputation continued in subsequent sculptures. In *Everything is Nothing* (2003, Fig. 5), adidas headwear encases a skull that Swallow based on scans of his own head; one of the skull's front teeth was chipped so as to replicate the chipped tooth that Swallow sports in life. The work's connotation was clear. Swallow's encasement of the self within a signifier of commodity fetishism self-consciously reflected his own status as a fashion item; the hood's overt adidas logo, we must remember, equally branded the forehead of Swallow's skull. Consequently Swallow suggested that, like any other fashionable commodity, he risked imminent obsolescence within contemporary art circles: his recent and rapid transition from "emerging"

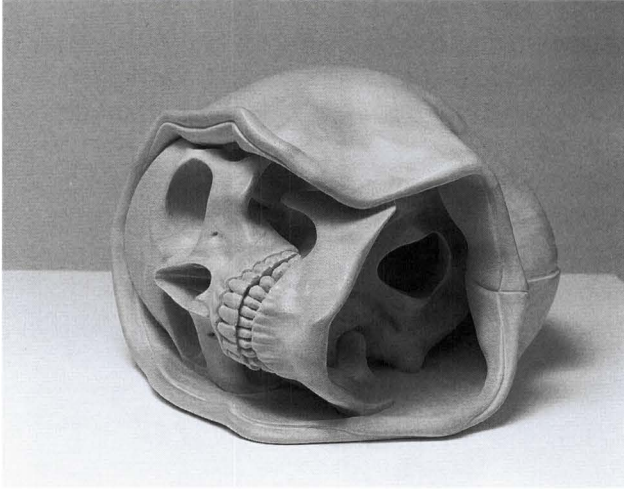


Fig. 5 Ricky Swallow
Everything is Nothing 2003
Laminated jelutong,
milliput
21.6 x 32 x 14 cm
Lindemann Collection,
Miami Beach



Fig. 6 Ricky Swallow
*Flying on the Ground is
Wrong* 2005
Bronze
15 x 4 x 5 cm
Edition of 12 with 5 Artist's
Proofs

to thoroughly established artist was neither unique to him, nor did it prevent the possibility of an equally rapid descent (or, rather, decay) into obscurity. The sculpture thus wryly recognised the precarious conditions of fame and, more importantly, the inextricability of Swallow (both as an artist and a “brand”) from the art world’s fetishism of his practice as its latest fashion.

Swallow’s shift of attention from a canny marketing of the self to its subjection by the market was made most acute, however, in the context of the 2005 Venice Biennale. This was not in the form of the overt (self-)portrait of a skeleton

bearing a staff and a carver's knife (*The Exact Dimensions of Staying Behind* (2005)), but in a small gift provided to (primarily financial) supporters of Swallow's exhibition at the Australian Pavillion. The gift was titled *Flying on the Ground is Wrong* (2005, Fig. 6) and was a bronze multiple of the carved bird – a swallow – that comprised part of *Salad Days* (2005), a sculpture first exhibited in Venice. In *Salad Days*, the swallow mimicked the artist's stance during the sculpture's manufacture: it sat perched at the sculpture's edge, observing the array of dead game that was the work's main subject. In the multiple, however, it lay up-turned, as though killed in the translation from public exhibition to possession by private investors. In other words – and in what could be seen as a deceptively critical form of thanks – the literal avatar of the swallow directly linked autothanatology to art's institutions of financial promotion and media hype, at the apogee of his fame and to the financial backers and art world supporters of his prestigious Venice exhibition.

As these three sculptures demonstrate, *Wooden Problem* marked a significant change in Swallow's practice. Earlier works had seemingly pandered to the art market by exploiting art's dominant conventions in the wake of conceptualism and postcolonialism. Swallow thereby returned the unique and auratic art object, indexicality and autobiography to the "mainstream." After 2002, however, Swallow's practice provided a curious form of institutional critique. This critique was not limited to the physical space of the gallery or its discursive interpellations, as was the case with many post-minimalist artists such as Michael Asher or Richard Serra, or "minority" artists like Fred Wilson; it was instead directed at the more immaterial (and arguably more pressing) institutions of the art market and its commodification of artists and works alike. Nor did Swallow's critique dispose of the art object's physical presence, so as to give the impression that a defetishized, "dematerialized" artwork could resist art's "general commercialization."⁵² As Lucy Lippard observed as early as 1973, it was misguided to believe that a photostat, or a momentary performance remembered only through photographs, was *ontologically* critical of the "tyranny of ... commodity status and market-orientation."⁵³ That "tyranny" comfortably reified and valorized anything, even conceptual "art and artist[s] as] luxuries," because of whatever traces remained of an otherwise immaterial and vaguely remembered work.⁵⁴ Swallow's post-2002 practice can therefore be seen as an inversion of certain conceptual strategies. Rather than believe in art's "inherent" critical resistance to the market and its attendant networks of publicity – a resistance that had proven could be easily reabsorbed by the market – Swallow exaggerated markers of the self, indexicality and the works' material presence so as to critique (or at least give the impression of critiquing) the market to which his works ostensibly and actively appealed.

That critically reflexive strategy was, in part, a familiar one from such post-conceptual practices as Chris Burden's. The comparison is initially surprising, given their works' very different appearances. Nonetheless, both artists shared

an interest in extreme physical activity taking a sculptural form: Swallow through the 12-to-14 hours of work he conducted per day to whittle wood (what he called the “performances” that were still visible behind the works’ forms); Burden through more momentary but arguably more painful processes such as being nailed to a car roof (*Trans-Fixed* (1974)) or being shot in the arm (*Shoot* (1971)), which physical activities he also identified as sculpture.⁵⁵ More pointedly, Burden had also sought to undermine his mediatized representation within post-conceptual networks of publicity. In his 1974 performance/ sculpture, *Back to You*, audience members inserted pins into Burden’s body “as a way of deflating his own myth” within art discourse, according to Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward.⁵⁶ Like Swallow, Burden acquired a strong reputation early in his career (especially after the infamy of *Shoot*); his gesture toward deflating that reputation reflexively identified “institutional critique” as merely incipient if it ignored the institutional marketing and mythification of artists. Burden thereby provided, in Keller and Ward’s account, “a commentary on conditions in the culture industry” and their potentially deleterious effects on young artists’ training and careers.⁵⁷

However, if Burden aimed to provide more than just a “commentary” on the art world – if he wanted to displace the “tyrannical” marketing of emerging artists – then it was an act conducted in vain. Burden’s reputation did not, of course, dwindle in the wake of *Back to You*, but continued into the new century unabated. Critical “commentary” is decidedly not antithetical to art institutions and their markets; as Benjamin Buchloh recognised in his conceptual art essay, the one needs the other to give the impression – the frisson, the image, the spectacle – of a critical stance still being possible *vis-à-vis* virally pervasive capitalism. Indeed, it is precisely this vanity of critique, I would argue, that ultimately underpins Swallow’s autobiographical aesthetic and his autothanatographic turn. Two reasons stand out. First, if Swallow’s works were “commentaries” on commodity fetishism, they were still resolutely commodities. Neither *dematerialized* nor excessively *over-materialized*, as with Serra’s emphatically weighty steel props, Swallow’s personalized “critiques” and forms were instead automatically containable within existing art institutions. Second, and more importantly, Swallow may have “carv[ed] himself out of existence” in his autothanatographic portraits, as Paton claimed,⁵⁸ but he also carved himself back *into* a rarefied, commodifiable existence through the same process. In other words, Swallow may have represented himself as perishing within regimes of commodity fetishism, but his self-portraits still actively and painstakingly aspired to the commodity branding that the adidas logo, the *Scream* mask and international art biennales like Venice signified. He may have represented his frustration with the uncontrollable effects and commitments of celebrity, but (as he claimed of his Venice experience) while those contingencies “still frustrate me... that’s part of the deal.”⁵⁹ His reanimation of *vanitas* symbolism was thus not simply an aesthetic reminder of one’s mortality. It involved a more complex reflection of the vanity of critique (as potentially romanticized, futile

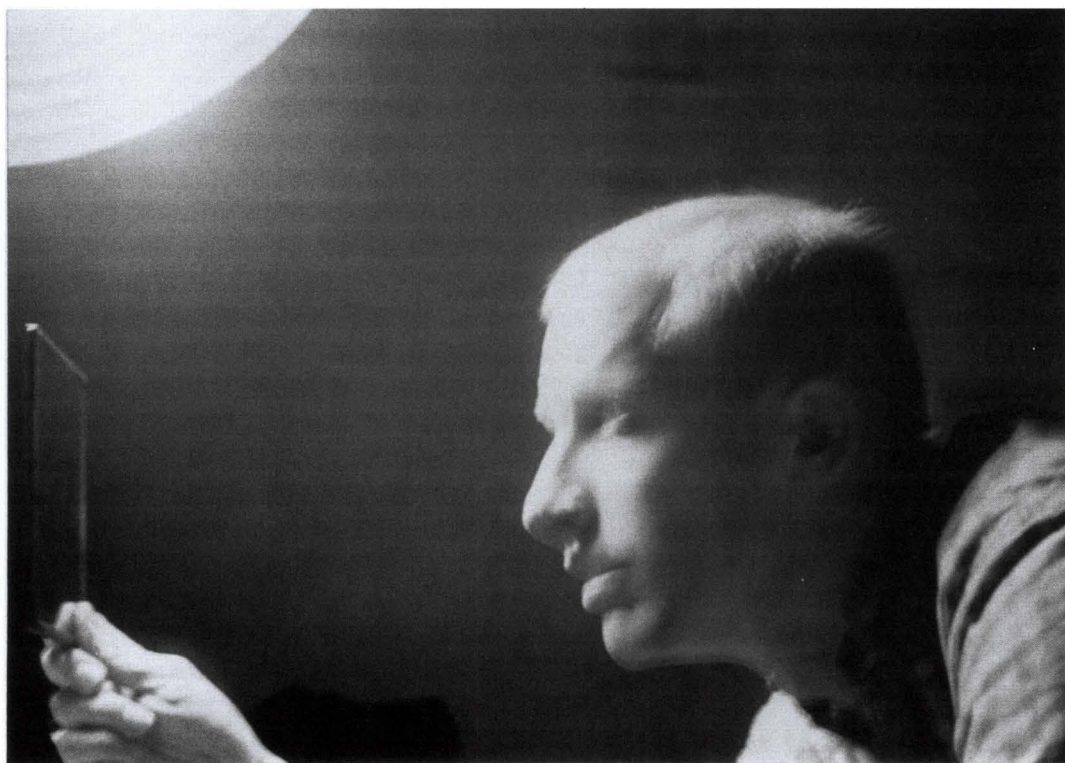
and self-aggrandizing within hyper-capitalized contemporary art markets), as framed within the literal vanity of Swallow's deathly self-portraits-as-fashionable-items.

Nor can his autothanatographic critique be dissociated from his aspiration to further strengthen, and embed himself within, those markets. His emigration from Melbourne was as much a desire to get closer to dominant market hubs – first Los Angeles, then London, then back to Los Angeles – as an expressive “discomfort with his burgeoning fame.”⁶⁰ And while *Flying on the Ground is Wrong* suggested his submission to, and “killing-off” by, financial promotion and media hype, Swallow has also expressed his desire that “[p]eople should ... becom[e] art collectors, then start supporting younger artists/galleries and feeling better about themselves having done so.”⁶¹ This is neither an unreflexive nor naïve disingenuousness on Swallow's part; Swallow has been continually and strategically reflexive toward the artistic conventions and discursive conditions surrounding his practice since the late-1990s. His autothanatographic turn is no different, for it reflects and exploits one of the more disturbing conventions in contemporary (and arguably even earlier) art practice: the inability to separate the “critique” of the art market and its associated institutions, from “complicity” with them. As Swallow's works since 2002 show, however, this predicament is not a sign of artists being “post-critical,” as Rex Butler claims.⁶² Artists still engage in active critical gestures, even directly to the financial backers of their projects. Nor can we follow the American critic, Johanna Drucker, and simply argue that art can still be critical from *within* apparently complicitous relations with contemporary culture industries and their transformation of certain artists into mythologized brands.⁶³ The current situation is more complex, as both reflected and reproduced by Swallow's works: “critique” and “complicity” feed off and into each other to such an extent that they cannot be disentangled. Critiques such as Swallow's (or those of Burden or many other artists) still promote the paramountcy of the market by identifying it as *the* art institution to resist. Conversely, complicity can still be assured by actively exploiting the increasing desire (we could even say the increasing “fashionability”) for critique within the hyper-capitalist field of contemporary art production. This is not to say that critique is dead, either in contemporary art practice generally or Swallow's in particular. What we need to recognize instead is that the complex entanglements of critique and complicity – or, for that matter, those between “commentary” on artistic conventions and their exploitation, autobiography and autothanatography, decay and affirmation – are paradigmatic of art practice after, but to an extent still determined by, conceptual and postcolonial conditions. Indeed, if we are to believe Ricky Swallow's ongoing problematizations, exploitations and reflections of reputation, the attempt to extricate the one from the other may well be a vain exercise.

1. Julia Baird, "A Swallow Might Make a Handy Nest Egg," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2000, 4.
2. Alan Bowness, *The Conditions of Success: How the Modern Artist Rises to Fame* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 11.
3. Exceptions include Charles Green's brief analysis of Swallow's work in his excellent essay for *Meridian*, an exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art: Charles Green, "Empire," in *Meridian: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*, ed. Rachel Kent and Russell Storer, (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2002), 10-15. Rex Butler has also suggested the inclusion of Swallow in his current analysis of "unAustralian" art: Rex Butler, "A Short Introduction to UnAustralian Art," *Broadsheet* 32 no.4 (December 2003-February 2004): 17.
4. Adam Gezcy, "Neo-medievalism," *Art Monthly Australia* 182 (August 2005): 36; for another example of this approach, see also Anthony Gardner, "Historical Nature: Ruin," *Un Magazine* 3 (February 2005): 34-35.
5. See *inter alia* George Alexander, "Killing Time: Ricky Swallow," *Art Asia Pacific* 45 (Summer 2005): 59; Martin Herbert, "Bone Idol: Killing Time with Ricky Swallow," *Modern Painters* (May 2005): 70. Other examples of these tropes can be found in Damiano Bertoli, "The Sounds of Silence," *Artlink* 25 no.1 (2005): 12-14; and Justin Paton, *Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings* (Melbourne: Craftsman House, 2004).
6. Paton, 91. The work referred to is *Sleeping Range* (2002).
7. For example, the discussions of childhood memories and their evocation in *Killing Time* in Klaus Biesenbach, "Panem et Circenses: Ricky Swallow in Venice," *Art and Australia* 42 no.4 (Winter 2005): 579; Alexander, 60; Herbert, 70-1. The apparent centrality of a CD player's presence in Swallow's studio can be found in Bertoli, 13 and most explicitly in Justin Paton's provision of four lines from a song "on high rotate on the studio CD player" while Swallow worked: Paton, 98.
8. As, for example, in the unpublished interview between Swallow and Pilar Arevalo, conducted for Arevalo's article "Personal History," *Oyster* 51 (April-May 2004) and archived at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney. In relation to *Killing Time*, Swallow claims that: "I remember crayfishing for a summer with my older brother pierre [sic] and the excitement that never altered when we would haul up a pot and see that orange and maroon shape snap into focus as a crayfish revealed itself. And when I was carving the piece the whole time it was like, oh you again, because the things, their form, seemed so familiar."
9. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 16 August 2006.
10. Charlotte Day, "An Interview with Ricky Swallow," in *This Time Another Year*, ed. Day, (Sydney: Australia Council, 2005), 45.
11. Swallow cited in Alexander, 58-9.
12. Rex Butler's anthology continues to be the definitive text on postmodern Australian art and art writing: *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the '80s and '90s*, ed. Rex Butler (Brisbane and Sydney: IMA and Power, 1996).
13. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 18 July 2006.
14. *Ibid.*
15. It should be noted that Swallow does not shy away from the nostalgic impetus underpinning his works. As he argues elsewhere, "those objects have universal appeal and generational nostalgia for a bunch of people." Swallow and Arevalo, np.
16. Paton, 74; compared with Gezcy, 34-5. While Gezcy refers explicitly to the writings of John Berger, his point is clearly Benjaminian in origin, from Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction," (1936) *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 226.
17. Rex Butler, "Introduction," *Radical Revisionism: An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art* (Brisbane: IMA, 2005), 7-36.
18. John Howard, Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture, 5 July 1996, cited in Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 1.
19. See, for example, Geoffrey Blainey, "Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of Our History," *Quadrant*, 37 no.7-8 (July-August 1993): 10-15; and Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002). Blainey was responding in particular to two circumstances: Henry Reynolds' historical analyses of territorial, cultural and other dispossessions under the colonial principle of *terra nullius* (for example, Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1987)); and the use of Reynolds' research by Justices Deane, Gaudron, Dawson and Toohey as a basis for their decisions in the groundbreaking High Court of Australia case, *Mabo & Ors v Queensland (No. 2)* (1992) 175 CLR 1.
20. See, for example, Macintyre and Clark, 191-215; and Uros Cvoro, *Multiculturalism and Museology in the National Museum of Australia*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Sydney: College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales, 2005).
21. Many other young artists could equally fit this explicit turn to the individual, the personal and the autobiographical: most notably Lisa Roet, Christian Bamurra Thompson, Brendan Lee, Adam Cullen, David Noonan and Tony Garifalakis.
22. See *inter alia* Butler, *What is Appropriation?* and Paul Taylor, *Popism* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1982).
23. Green, 11.
24. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 40-1; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 140.
25. Buchloh, 140.
26. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 126; Bhabha's expositions of "sly civility" and "mimicry" can be found in Bhabha, 132-144 and 121-131 respectively.
27. Masao Miyoshi, "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State," *Critical Inquiry* 19 no.4 (Summer 1993): 727.
28. Oliver Lovesey, "Postcolonial Self-Fashioning" in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32 no.2 (1997): 35-50.
29. Jane Hiddleston, "Derrida, Autobiography and Postcoloniality," *French Cultural Studies* 16 no.3 (2005): 293, 295, 303.
30. Green, 12.
31. Melissa Miles, "Shirin Neshat and the Limits of Authenticity," *Southern Review* 37 no.1 (2004): 5.
32. See Barbara Pollack, "How Can You Think About Making Art at a Time Like This: Artists Respond to the World Trade Center Tragedy," *ArtNews Online*, 2001, cited in Miles, 7.
33. Such as *Turbulent* (1998), a two-screen video projection in which the performer Sussan Deyhim (dressed in a black *chador* and filmed in relative darkness) sings alone but implicitly to the image projected on the second screen: a light-filled auditorium filled with men (many of whom have their arms crossed as though in judgment); or especially *Tooba* (2004) in which men approach a hilltop from all directions and surround a walled-off enclosure protecting a tree and the woman

- standing beneath it.
34. Miles, 7.
 35. Miles, 6-8.
 36. Nikos Papastergiadis, *Metaphor and Tension: On Collaboration and its Discontents* (Sydney: Artspace, 2004), 25.
 37. The most pertinent example in the mid- to late-1990s involved the Anmatyerr artist, Kathleen Petyarre. Her painting *Storm in Atnangkere Country II* (1996) was the overall winner of the 13th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award; in 1997, her former (non-indigenous) partner, Ray Beamish, announced that he had collaborated with Petyarre in making the work. The ensuing debates about the painting's "rightful" authorship (and its threatened disqualification from the Award) largely ignored the complex epistemological bases and equivalents to "collaboration" and proprietorship within Anmatyerr art production. The Western market for "recognizable," individualized signatures effectively trumped the (in this case) very different Anmatyerr conceptualization of art production. As both Christine Nicholls and Elizabeth Burns Coleman note, "authenticity"—as determined on Western epistemological grounds—was one of the primary issues surrounding both the painting's creation and, as though the two were conflated, the painting's creator: see Christine Nicholls, "Genius of Place: The Life and Art of Kathleen Petyarre," in Christine Nicholls et al, *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2001), 6-32; Elizabeth Burns Coleman, "Aboriginal Painting: Identity and Authenticity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 no.4 (Fall 2001): 388-9. Of course, not all non-urban indigenous artists become celebrated through individualized practice: a clear case in point is *The Aboriginal Memorial* (1988) created jointly by numerous Ramingining artists and on permanent exhibition at Canberra's National Gallery of Australia. Nonetheless, the art market focused overwhelmingly on individualized artists at the expense of other (and frequently, more culturally relevant) understandings of art production.
 38. Claire Roberts, "The Slow Art of Ah Xian," *Art and Australia* 43 no.3 (Autumn 2006): 393.
 39. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 171-203.
 40. As Kosuth argued in, for example, John Chandler, "The Last Word in Graphic Art," *Art International* 12.9 (November 1968): 26, cited in Alberro, 39.
 41. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 18 July 2006. Swallow's assertion contradicts, in part, Conole's own claims that he had "worked together with" Swallow in the collaborative creation of a number of sculptures, including *Killing Time*. Discussion between Michael Conole and the author, 13 November 2004.
 42. Many thanks to Huw Hallam for bringing this point to my attention. We consequently need to recognize, as this point asserts, that Swallow's use of jelutong was also strategic given the material's use in machine-based manufacture. As Swallow has argued: "With jelutong I was also attracted to it's [sic] use conceptually as a medium for pattern makers to turn machine parts for sand casting in steel-aluminium...it's an early stage material associated with the translation of ideas into form." Swallow and Arevalo, np.
 43. Robert Cook, "Ghost of a Two-Wheeled Decoy: Peugeot Taipan, Commemorative Model (Discontinued Line)," in Jenepher Duncan ed., *Ricky Swallow: The Past Sure is Tense* (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2006), 11-2.
 44. Swallow's own explanation of the difference is that "if my subjects were strewn into the gallery as readymades this persistence of a performance behind their forms wouldn't be present." email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 18 July 2006.
 45. Discussion between Darren Knight and the author, 7 July 2006.
 46. The Art Gallery of Western Australia curator, Jenepher Duncan, has also considered some of Swallow's works in relation to Wilson's installations and Foster's model of the artist-as-ethnographer – another sign, perhaps, of the drive to reframe contemporary Australian practice within certain postcolonial paradigms: see Jenepher Duncan, in "World within World: Ricky Swallow," ed. Duncan, 21-2, 30.
 47. Nancy K. Miller, "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6 no.1 (Spring 1994): 12.
 48. This is, of course, also central to one of the most famous analyses of the entanglement of life and death within visual culture: Roland Barthes' understanding of the *noème* of photography, its "that-has-been" tense in which the photographed moment of life equally encapsulates the death of the present and of the presences – the figures, the settings, the actions – within that present: Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).
 49. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 17 August 2006.
 50. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 17 August 2006.
 51. Herbert, 71.
 52. The term is Lucy Lippard's, from Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997 (1973)), 263.
 53. Lippard, 263.
 54. *Ibid.*
 55. Chris Burden (trans.), "Interview with Jose Antonio Sarmiento: 'Hacer Arte es Verdaderamente una Actividad Subversiva,'" *Sin Titulo* 3 (September 1996): 58, cited in Alexandra Keller and Frazer Ward, "Matthew Barney and the Paradox of the Neo-Avant-Garde Blockbuster," *Cinema Journal* 45/2 (Winter 2006): 5.
 56. Keller and Ward, 6.
 57. *Ibid.* See also Ian Burn, "The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation," in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 154-5 —a text first published in *Artforum* in 1975 and in which Burn similarly expresses anxiety about the effects of market success on emerging artists.
 58. Paton, 9.
 59. Email from Ricky Swallow to the author, 17 August 2006.
 60. Herbert, 71.
 61. Ricky Swallow, in an unpublished interview with Sophie Pike for *CAT Magazine*, archived at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney.
 62. Rex Butler, "The Curse of the Contemporary," in Russell Storer (curator), *Interesting Times: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art* (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 20.
 63. Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially 239 where Drucker claims that "[c]omplicity is not the dead end of art but, rather, the condition of its self-conscious transformation."

Fig.1 Billy Apple
*Billy Apple Bleaching with
Lady Clairol Instant Crème
Whip November 1962*
Black and white
photograph
Collection of the artist
Photo: Richard Smith



Who is Billy Apple? The Artist after the Death of the Subject

Christina Barton

Autobiography belongs to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis ... [it is] rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name.

–Paul de Man¹

I am very aware that everything I do may be possibly an art work.

–Billy Apple²

The facts go like this: in London in late November 1962 the young New Zealand artist Barrie Bates changed his name to Billy Apple. He had recently completed his studies in Graphic Design at the Royal College of Art, and was thinking about what to do next. To make a living, he was preparing to find a way into London's advertising industry as a freelance designer and art director. And, in terms of his career as an artist, he was imagining ways to expose audiences to the kind of work he had produced at the College which allied him with his "pop" colleagues, David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Peter Phillips, and others. He was staying at the time with the slightly older artist, Richard Smith – also a graduate of the College and already established as an abstract painter with a talent for incorporating motifs from the everyday environment into his paintings – in Smith's warehouse studio in Bath Street, Clerkenwell. Apparently, Bates and Smith played around with various names before settling on "Billy Apple", they then marked the change by bleaching Bates' hair and eyebrows with Lady Clairol Instant Crème Whip and photographing the transformation.

Soon after Bates (now Apple), still sporting his bleached hair, had himself photographed by the professional photographer Robert Freeman. Freeman's deadpan, head-and-shoulder portrait shots, which show the artist full face and from the back, were printed as offset lithographs on 12 identical primed canvases and included in his first solo exhibition staged at Gallery One, Victor Musgrave's gallery in Grovesnor Square, in April 1963. These, together

with several painted bronze sculptures, mixed media assemblages and printed canvases that replicated fruit (apples in particular), other edible commodities, body fragments, and elements of language, some of which he had produced in his final year at the RCA, formed the bulk of the *Live Stills* included in *Apple Sees Red*: the exhibition the artist used to launch his new identity. It was the major branding exercise that cemented Bates's decision to re-invent himself. The show worked hand-in-hand with other efforts to shuck his old self. These included refusing to respond to anything but his new name, cutting himself off from old friends, and even suspending all communications with his family back in New Zealand.

My essay focuses on this moment in Billy Apple's life and tries to make sense of it. It offers readings of various artefacts that were produced in this moment and draws some conclusions about its consequences in terms of the artist's contribution to contemporary art discourse. While this may sound like straight-forward art history, whereby the facts of the artist's life are fed irresistibly into the interpretation of his work, or equally, where works are read as reflections of and on the life, my aim is to show how Apple invalidates this process. My contention is that something happened when Apple changed his name that had dire consequences for the subject and our understanding of "him", and that this was effected by, and is visible in, the work that survives. His example is a test case of the fundamental changes the figure of "the artist" underwent in the 1960s, changes we are still coming to terms with in the present.

Apple's (we'll call him Apple from now on) story is worth repeating for three interconnected reasons. Firstly, his name change troubles the smooth telling of the artist's auto/biography. Apple upsets the literal specificity of the genre by presenting us with a conundrum: at a certain point in his career he abandoned his birth name and adopted another, not as a professional moniker behind which Bates continued to exist, but as Bates' radical displacement. This action poses critical questions for auto/biography, which assumes as its focus a singular subject whose identity is contained by a proper name. Is Billy Apple just a name, an arbitrary designation of an absent subject? Or does Bates actually become Apple in some deeper sense, as if a name bears with it associational meanings: the force of personality? To what extent is a name definitional of its subject? Is it merely a sound, a sequence of graphic marks, a "token" as Rosalind Krauss calls it, connected to the person it describes only because of its denotational function?³ Such questions turn attention away from the mimetic capabilities of reference to the productive potential of signification, we realize that without a name one is in danger of failing signification, in other words, of disappearing.⁴ And even if a name does no more than label its object, it is essential to auto/biography's seamless narrative. "Bates" and "Apple" may be identical, but time breaks into a "before" and "after", linear progression is disrupted at the very point where the name of the artist bifurcates. In such a scenario, reasons for Apple's decision must be found

and consequences weighed, which gives a new and different charge to the task of retelling.

Secondly, if, as Griselda Pollock attests, art history's mission is to find artistic subjects for works of art, then a name change can have fateful consequences in terms of the history of art.⁵ The discipline assumes the task of securing singular authors whose attributes can be identified in and through the works they produce. Of course this has been severely tested in various ways over the course of the last 100 years, by artists seeking to challenge assumptions that underpin the *modus operandi* of art: inconsistencies of style, denial of facture, mechanical reproduction, dematerialization, pastiche and quotation, the adoption of pseudonyms and collaborative production have all taken their toll. Regardless of the ubiquity of such strategies, however, Apple's example retains its interest on two counts. On the one hand, the artist's name change has had a negative impact in terms of his career. Not only are estimations of his success qualified by vestigial suspicion about his seriousness as an artist (somehow, even after more than 40 years of sustained practice, "Billy Apple" still seems a con), but his decision to change his name has thrown the historical account into disarray, especially in terms of that moment in the early 1960s when he could and should have found a place in the annals of pop art history. This offers a sobering parable for the discipline, exposing its adherence to old models of authorship and its inbuilt exclusions. And on the other hand, the artist's adopted name has continued to condition his practice, indeed to a considerable extent it remains the subject of his work. But "Apple" is hardly a subject in any familiar humanist sense. Indeed one wonders if "he" is a self that can be expressed or produced at all. This too presents a conundrum with which art history must contend.

Thirdly, right from its inception, Apple's action, even as it drew on the promotional strategies of advertising and popular culture, was thought of by the artist as a work of art. His desire to treat himself as a subject fatally blurred distinctions between the artist and his medium, thus collapsing that distance so necessary to modernist subjectivity, and brought into play a host of venal associations. Such a collapse disavowed art's claims to autonomy and transcendence, just as it put the artist into circulation in new non-reified ways. More than merely being a prescient example of a widespread trend that swept the art world in the 1960s, which saw artists turning away from the aesthetic manipulation of sanctioned media to focus instead on the body, language and the myriad contexts and materials of everyday life, in a sustained refusal of formalist and expressive pretensions, Apple's transformation, and his ongoing performance as a "brand", continues to fascinate as a reminder of what has become of the artist in an era of mass-consumption.

What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question ... I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. –Jacques Lacan⁶

Let's begin again, this time with an image (Fig 1). Here is a photograph of the artist looking at himself in a mirror after he has bleached his hair on the evening he decided to change his name in Richard Smith's warehouse studio in East London. It is one of a number taken by Smith that documented events that night. It has the quality of a snapshot, candidly recording the moment with little attention to the formalities of portraiture or the technical niceties of the photographic medium. Apple is caught in the glare of a light that illuminates his head and face, which also catches the glinting edge of the mirror held by a hand that is likewise spotlighted. The camera seems to be focused on Apple's left shoulder so his face and hair are slightly blurred, as if the action has not been perfectly captured. The artist appears completely absorbed in looking, transfixed by his reflection in the mirror. The intensity of this gaze is reinforced by the tight focus; there is little in the way of background or context, no distracting details, just the light, the mirror, a hand and the artist's face in profile, his hunched shoulders and upper arms abruptly cut well above the elbow. I am fascinated by this photograph, I keep returning to it, puzzling over its meaning. It seems to me to hold the key to everything. The more I look, however, the more complex things become, especially given the fate of this image, the place it now occupies in the artist's oeuvre.

In biographical terms this image serves documentary purposes. It proves the veracity of Apple's story, for here is the evidence that shows what happened that night. In this sense it is transparent, it takes us to the action, by means of its agency we can be witnesses. Apple sensibly has kept the original colour slide in his archive where it performs a conventional function as raw material for the historical reconstruction of his life. In these terms it is the ideal tool of the biographer and the art historian and indeed has served as such in various accounts of the artist's practice. Two examples will suffice. The image first appeared as one of two black and white illustrations (the other showed the artist in the process of bleaching his hair and smiling directly at the camera) in the catalogue to the artist's first major retrospective exhibition, *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple*, staged at the Serpentine Gallery in 1974. The two images were placed on a double-page spread at the end of the section devoted to Barrie Bates, together with a text-piece that functioned graphically as Bates' epitaph and a statement by the artist explaining the events surrounding his name change and its significance to his continuing practice. Their status as artworks is somewhat ambivalent. While clearly presented as the products of Bates the images and their captions lack the kind of detail one would expect from a catalogue entry, as a result, the reader is unsure whether these are illustrations supporting the facts described in the written explanation or reproductions of absent photographic originals. And again, in 2005, the image appeared as the frontispiece to an essay I wrote for the publication that accompanied the exhibition, *The Expatriates: Frances Hodgkins and Barrie Bates*, at the Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, where, despite now also being listed in the catalogue as a bona fide work of art, it was designed to

key readers to the narrative thrust of the text, the title of which was “Becoming Billy Apple”.⁷

In each case the image was used to authenticate and lend significance to a vital moment in the artist’s life, indeed to reinforce the conceptual impetus of both exhibitions. By such means a private act is turned into a key work, which then becomes the fulcrum around which the subsequent career unfolds. This is the purpose and achievement of the art historian, and probably where most would leave it. But Apple will not let us, and this is where the photograph begins to get really interesting. Perhaps there was a time when the slide, the only residue of that absent gesture, did simply lie around as evidence to support Apple’s name change, but, by 1974, the artist had reinvented it as supporting documentation of a live action, and more recently he has presented it as a discrete, framed work of art. This folds the photograph into the frame of Apple’s art in a process that connects the artist in newly critical ways to his objects, at the same time as it dislodges him as a living entity who can be distinguished from his work. It now strangely binds him to the discursive frames, collapsing the necessary distance that would enable him to be a discrete object of interpretation.

To treat one’s own body as medium was a precocious move in 1962. Apple was self-conscious about his action, talking about his name change and the accompanying physical transformation as a process of “recreation” that was in itself an artwork.⁸ Thus the events that took place on that evening in November 1962 can be deemed an early example of performance art, and the photographs that accompany it proto-conceptual photo-documentation. Now, the photograph serves not only as documentary evidence but as an indexical trace of that original gesture, and therefore can be reconstituted as part of the “art”, its critical complement. What happens here is that the traditional locus of value is shifted from the original object (the body of the artist) to its supporting documentation, or perhaps more truthfully, is left somewhere in-between so that the distinction between performance and photograph, art work and illustration, original and copy no longer holds.⁹ Art’s locus therefore shifts from expressions of presence to negotiations of absence, where a primary event (with its links to an actual person) is dispersed into its multiple re-presentations (where it appears as one image amongst others surrounded by text).¹⁰

This is exactly how the image operates in the Serpentine catalogue. Unlike the other reproductions that are more obviously credited as works of art, this image refuses to occupy the neutral position of either “mere” illustration or stand-in for absent artwork. It therefore actively unsettles photography’s status as art history’s handmaiden, to infiltrate an artistic act that will not settle. At the same time, it seamlessly effects the transformation of the “real” artist into his representation. What happens here on the page is an uncanny complement to the “live” action; the photograph functions as the performer’s

double rather than his mere description, which proves the constitutive function of discourse rather than the formative will of its creator.

Apple's self-conscious reformulation of the status of this photograph does not stop there. Since its publication in 1974, Apple has reprinted the image as a fine print, matting and framing it and giving it a title: *Billy Apple Bleaching with Lady Clairol Instant Crème Whip, November 1962*. As such the work is no longer secondary documentation but an artwork in its own right. Here the artist would appear to be doing two things. Firstly, it seems that Apple is putting new space between representation and event to reverse the photograph's original claims. This is art now, not life, and within this frame the artist is utterly suspended. Secondly, Apple appears to be taking over and subverting the role of the historian/biographer, granting significance to an event by elevating its factual representation to the status of art, to lay claim to the mythologizing process that has ensured the artist's name change signifies as a crucial event. Now the creation of "Billy Apple" is shown to be not just the work of the artist but also the product of an historical process that, with hindsight, can grant significance.

But before this is construed as pure "self"-promotion, there remains the perplexing problem of authorship. While the work has been signed as a recent product of the artist Billy Apple, it has also been exhibited as the work of Barrie Bates¹¹ and, if this is not sufficiently confusing, in both instances Richard Smith is credited as photographer. Such confusion confirms the troubling position of the work in the artist's oeuvre and its problematic status for the discipline. It remains a vital clue to Apple's challenge to art's formalist and expressive claims.

To strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilised – that is, already a picture. –Craig Owens¹²

So far we have seen how Apple has treated this photograph as a material artefact, redefining it by turns as documentary record, illustration, and artwork, to unsettle established relations between art and life, and the subject who connects them. As an image the work also functions critically to dislodge the artist, most particularly by refusing the conditions of self-portraiture, which in some sense could be construed as visual art's equivalent to the literary genre of autobiography. According to Joanna Woodall, the self portrait "deploys material technology and artfulness to create lifelikeness, characterises the named subject as an artist and employs the mirror as both a practical device and a metaphor for self-reflection".¹³ What such imagery relies upon is a belief in an intrinsic connection between appearance and identity and trust in the mimetic capabilities of visual representation, with its privileged relation to resemblance. If we accept this as a definition, how does Apple's photograph conform to the genre?

One might presume that a photograph, which enables the mechanical reproduction of visible appearance, fulfils Woodall's condition of lifelikeness. Certainly, we see the features of the person we know as Billy Apple, and he is looking in a mirror according to accepted convention. Further, the work is titled in such a way that the artist is named and his handiwork (bleaching) identified. But here the similarities end. For a start, traditional self-portraits mostly have the artist looking out at the viewer, meeting our eyes to confirm their existence. As T. J. Clark has put it, "what we are shown is consciousness directed to that exotic entity, its own outside, its 'appearance'", which proposes the "dream of a sufficiency of self to self with looking as the means".¹⁴ Appearance is deemed sufficient because what we see, in the manner it is shown, is understood to truly reveal the subject. This is the portrait's metaphysical claim, which is confirmed by the presence of the mirror, that traditional vehicle by which means distinctions between interior self and exterior appearance are metaphorically adjudicated. But Apple does not meet our gaze; he appears transfixed by his reflection, caught "in" the picture in a solipsistic exchange with himself. Indeed, this absorption is rendered uneasy because his presence is not reinforced by his reappearance in the mirror. From our angle the mirror is empty; and so, it would seem, representation's fundamental mimetic tool has let us (and him) down. This shakes any trust in the relation between seeing and knowing, unsettling the portrait's traditional claims.

If Apple is caught within the picture between his image and its (missing) reflection, he is also split by the camera, which shows him in profile, an impossible viewpoint in conventional self-portraiture. By the artist's account, this photograph shows Bates after his transformation into Apple; he describes it as Bates' last work, thus effecting a split between Bates and Apple that refuses any coherence between himself (the author) and his depiction. We are led to believe that the maker of the work is not the person we see in the image exactly because the visual codes that structure the self-portrait have been disabled. Subject and object are not connected by means of their reciprocal looking; Apple is therefore an object split from the self who created him. He is transfixed, in turn, by his own reflection, captured by pure appearance.

The fiction of this image is of course sustained by the fact that the photograph is not taken by Bates/Apple. This is the photograph's third displacement. There is another person in the picture, though they are not visible. This is Richard Smith, the friend and fellow artist holding the camera. Apple fails the genre in this further sense by refusing to be his portrait's author. Much has been made of the fact that with traditional self-portraiture the artist not only presents themselves as an image, but they are also responsible for the work's material production.¹⁵ The artist is therefore doubly present because we not only see them but we treat the image as the artist's material trace: they are "there" in this multiple sense. This may be less the case with a photograph, but even here it is possible to control the look of the image, determine when to press the shutter, how to light the shot and fill the frame, so that the instant caught is the one

intended. Apple instead defers to another, let's them determine the decisive moment. He seems happy to become their object.

What matters here is that this is far from accidental in terms of the artist's wider practice. Even as a student at the RCA, Apple had used others to fabricate his work, believing that craft was not essential to the definition of art. Indeed, this attitude underpins his acceptance of photography as a valid medium, despite (or perhaps because of) the low regard in which it was held at the time. Apple's belief in the primacy of the idea over its material realization and his willingness to make use of debased modes of mechanical reproduction not only place him historically at the brink of conceptualism but, more importantly in this context, enable the artist to appropriate a documentary photograph taken by someone else as his own. Thus, the attribution of the photograph is rendered external to its maker; space is put between self and image, so what we see lacks expression just as who we look at is denied an interior.

Now, the photograph serves as visual adjunct to a wilful act of re-signification whereby the artist assumes a new identity not in relation to some alteration of his inner being but by something as simple as giving himself a new name and changing the colour of his hair. This is strikingly akin to an earlier move by Robert Rauschenberg that Benjamin H.D. Buchloh locates as "one of the first moves of post-war conceptual art".¹⁶ This is when Rauschenberg sent a telegram to his dealer in Paris in 1961 which stated: "this is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so", which Buchloh maintains "fully shifts the representation of subjectivity into the register of the performative declaration" and thus "asserts subjectivity as a concept of instantiation and iteration, as a continuous process rather than a status, as a performative rather than a representable object condition".¹⁷ This is equally applicable to Apple who, one year later, in an even more far-reaching gambit, initiated an "art action" that he continues to maintain as a "life situation".¹⁸ Both lay the ground for a thorough redefinition of how the subject comes into being, not as an essence to be revealed but as a living entity whose identity is constructed in ongoing and embedded acts of signification.

It is no longer the fact which is transformed into an image (which is, strictly speaking, the movement of metaphor, out of which humanity has made poetry for centuries), it is the image which becomes a fact.
–Roland Barthes¹⁹

To the very extent that subjectivity is now universally transferred in the condition of reification onto the object itself, and that subjectivity is destroyed systematically in the daily practices of consumption, it will have to become spectacular in its residual forms as grotesque or it will have to be represented in a condition of objecthood. –Benjamin H.D. Buchloh²⁰

Such radical objectification must have a cause. This will not be found in terms of artistic intention, because, as we have seen, the image lacks all such traces, but rather in external circumstances to which the artist was both consciously and unconsciously prey. This photograph, most especially because of its duplicitous status as both document and artwork, signature piece and second-hand representation, is a telling indicator of that moment in the 1960s when new artistic moves were formulated to parody and undermine the idea of the artist as visionary genius, a notion by then thoroughly compromised by its commodification as a marketable cliché within both high and mass culture. Apple's image shows us the subject alienated from himself and turned into an object of now narcissistic fascination. He is the nervous effect of post-war consumer culture; atomised further by being the traumatized outsider in post-colonial Britain.

Amelia Jones has described narcissism as “endemic to late capitalist commodity culture” which, she maintains, “requires the ‘manufacture’ of desire and the simultaneous turning outward of the self towards commodities and obsessive self-absorption, in a ‘disturbance’ of the oedipal structures by which subjects (and male subjects in particular) have long attempted to project themselves into coherent selfhood”.²¹ She links the emergence of body art to this situation specifically because the immanent body (unlike the transcendent mind) is part of the world, connected to it via its material, social, and cultural specificity. Apple, an artist with one foot in the world of advertising, was particularly attuned to the pressures of the market as it was emerging in the first phase of consumer expansion in early 1960s Britain. His name change and his physical transformations are a canny co-option of the tactics of corporate branding and commercial display, which he had learnt from leading American admen like Herb Lubalin and Bob Gill,²² whereby a simple idea (all that is fresh and tempting which is conjured by the word for and image of “apple”) is linked to an entity (the artist), by which means the qualities of the sign are transferred to the product. This has nothing to do with the artist's innate character, but everything to do with reconfiguring himself in line with a set of pre-existing codes and putting himself into circulation in the marketplace as free-floating signifier.

Further, the object in an era of mass consumption is no longer unique and connected to a maker via handicraft. Produced en masse to fulfil the demands of unseen and uncontrollable economic forces, it presents a new threat to the modern artist. As historians of 1960s art have shown, pop art, minimalism, body art, and more, are artistic responses to this condition. Apple is no exception, but where his art has a special charge is in the fact that he turns himself into a commodity, to insert himself into the system. He manifests here in multiple guises, not via the single image on an original canvas. This is true of his *Live Stills*, those 12 diptych self-portraits Apple presented in his Gallery One exhibition which immediately follow on from his name change (Fig.2). These took Robert Freeman's photographs of the artist and reproduced them life size

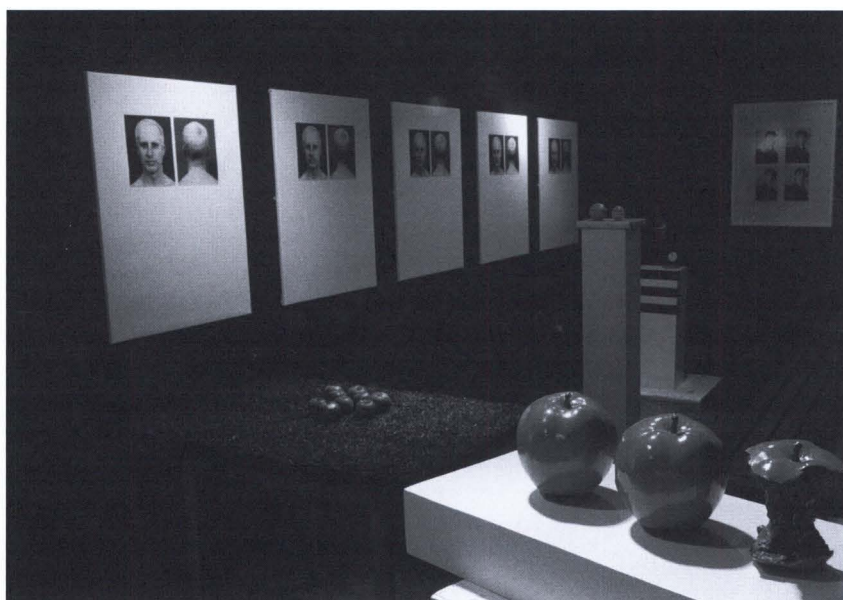


Fig.2 Billy Apple
Apple Sees Red
 Installation view Gallery
 One, London, April 1963
 Apple's self-portraits can
 be seen in the distance:
Live Stills 1962–63
 in the foreground:
2 minutes, 33 seconds (Red)
 1962
 Courtesy of Billy Apple
 Archive

on multiple canvases hung at head height in a line down one wall of the gallery. Apple's image here is by turns disturbing and compelling. Unlike the original photograph, it shows him staring out at the viewer, his mouth very slightly open in an almost seductive embrace of the camera. But this frontal view is paired with a picture of the back of his head. This is a viewpoint the artist can never know. It negates any presence, turning him into an object, specifically for our delectation. Further, his image is set against red and green backgrounds, colour keying him to his new identity to reinforce his new brand. According to Roland Barthes, "by multiplying the same image, pop art rediscovers the theme of the double, of the *Doppelgänger*", but now without its original mythic or magical power, it is no more than a flat copy, what he calls "insignificant, irreligious".²³ He goes on to state: "repetition of the portrait induces an adulteration of the person ... no more soul, nothing but an imaginary status". But although all that is left is the residue of a subtraction, pop art does not render the subject anonymous. Quite the reverse in fact, it produces a "world of identities".²⁴ This is who Billy Apple is, the "residue of a subtraction", an empty identity, whose image or material trace can now proliferate.²⁵

Apple's objectification is obvious in these portraits but it is equally evident in the sculptural objects that were manufactured at the time, many of which were included in his Gallery One exhibition. Importantly, like his self images, the cast bronzes (of apples, oranges, bananas, a slice of watermelon and a scattering of French fries, for example, but also of a section of his throat: *Billy's Apple*) were life-size and available as multiple editions. Transfigured rather than created

they are the “real’s” mortified double. *2 minutes, 33 seconds* (Fig.2) is particularly chilling. It consists of three painted bronze casts of a single apple at various stages of being eaten. These are lined up in sequence as permanent reminders of the duration of a single action. But, given that the artist and the object are synonymous, what we see is his auto-destruction, the dreaded outcome of narcissistic obsession. A glossy product is desired and consumed by an absent subject who already knows what it feels like to be seen and admired (think of the gaze that consumes the artist in *Billy Apple Bleaching*).

Apple Sees Red was heralded as the first solo exhibition of work in England to have an “affinity with the ‘common object’ artists from America” (Dine, Oldenburg, Warhol, Wesselman, Segal and others).²⁶ Reviewers of the show found it “odd”, even “silly”, feeling discomfort at the fine line drawn between the everyday nature of Apple’s source material, with its links back to Duchamp, and his obvious fascination for the techniques of advertising, which to them seemed compromising (one even called it “billboard art”).²⁷ However, what is more interesting is the unease it provoked amongst writers who sought to account for Apple’s particular take on “reality”. Struggling to find terms to understand the work, they connected it to the tradition of still-life painting, that much-maligned genre that Norman Bryson has more recently described as an alternative to art in the service of classical humanism.²⁸ Getting so close to the real provoked in these writers an unconscious frisson that went right to the heart of the matter: their fear of the deadly effects of representation. Norbert Lynton, for example, described the works as “frightening”, suggesting that his self portraits rendered explicit the “*memento mori* impulse that hides behind all art”.²⁹ While Edward Lucie-Smith found the works’ immaculate resemblance an unsettling “embarrassment”, linking them to an older still-life tradition, the theme of which was “mortality and otherness”.³⁰ And, finally, a commentator in *The Times* thought them “chilling”, writing: “what impresses is their sudden remoteness from us ... Painted to kill, they are so obviously the inhabitants of another dimension”.³¹ These reactions are hardly mild. They show that Apple’s strategies evoked anxieties because his realism unmasked a deeper emptiness at the root of representation that spelt the “end” of art just as it documented the “death” of this particular author.

Performance is not acting but a repetition of (dis)empowered acts.
 –Judith Butler³²

Given the press the exhibition garnered, it seems a shame that Apple’s efforts have not been acknowledged in histories of British pop. As I argued in *The Expatriates*, he may have received attention at the time, but he appears now as little more than a footnote.³³ My argument there was that the New Zealand artist’s decision to change his name was in part fatal for his reputation, given the reliance of the discipline on identifying individuals and weaving narratives around them. But I also proposed that the artist’s decision, and the works that

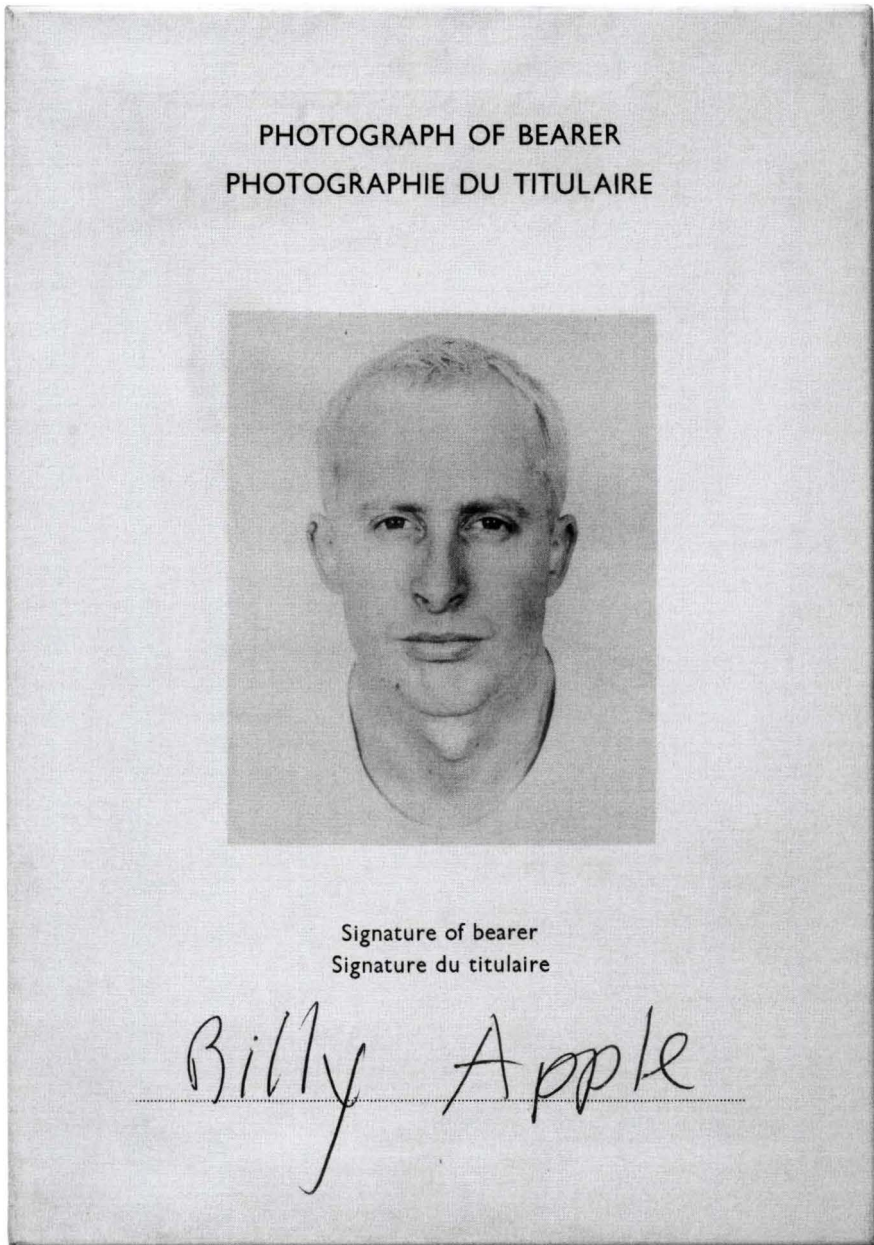
surround it, could be viewed as dramatizations of the expatriate's desire to "lose himself" in the metropolis, to both overcome his sense of subservience to the centre and compensate for his displacement. This was designed to rethink how the artist could be understood against the terms of a centre-periphery politics that has relegated him – because he left Britain and, after a long career in New York (1964-90), now lives back in New Zealand – to the margins of mainstream art history. But it also signals how the work might be thought of as a site where power relations can be detected. Might Apple's name change, and the work it produced, leave some trace of the differential position he occupied as an artist from one of Britain's farthest flung ex-colonies? Could it perform as a situated challenge to the authority of modernism, making visible the lineaments of its power-base to discredit its claims to universalism?

Apple maintains that he was "born" in Britain. This may be true if we accept what happened that night in 1962,³⁴ but more importantly it proves that he was intensely aware of the politics of his situation. If his decision to change his name and alter his appearance – which locates identity on the outside, in language and the visible – can be construed as a direct riposte to modernist interiority, then it might also be thought of as a nervous reminder of Apple's position, literally, as an outsider. Here inside and outside are coded differently as spatial locations and cultural dividers. Even as an extreme act of deferral, this gesture has its charge, for it demonstrates, in an active, embodied sense, the effects of power.³⁵

Jane Blocker, writing about exiled Cuban artist Ana Mendieta, sees a similar process at work in her site-related performances and their photographic documentation, in which her identity was produced as "performative" actions, which were "derived from and can be plotted within a grid of power relationships".³⁶ The identity produced in such circumstances, she writes, is characteristically, "not homogenous, stable, essential and unified", indeed, it occupies the very edges of legibility, for while not false, it "challenge[s] the coherence of the presumed real".³⁷ This is true of Apple who occupied a liminal space whilst living in Britain and reinvented himself in ways that effected his disappearance. The fact that he is not generally acknowledged by British historians, and that I am writing this, as an art historian in New Zealand, in a sense extends the performative dimension of the work, demonstrating how borders continue to be policed and disciplinary categories negotiated, well after the artist's original efforts.

Let me end with one last work that speaks to this condition. *Signature Piece* (Fig.3) resembles a massive blow-up of a page from a passport. It shows a pale and ghostly portrait of the artist, with his signature still hesitantly finding its shape. Here we see Apple laying claim to the apparatuses of the state to grant himself citizenship. The artist's presumptuous move has a special force, given that it was only the previous year, 1962, that Britain's new immigration laws had come into force which rescinded right of entry for immigrants from

Fig 3 Billy Apple
Signature Piece, 1962-3,
Offset lithograph on canvas
73 x 50.8 cm
Courtesy of Sue Crockford
Gallery, Auckland



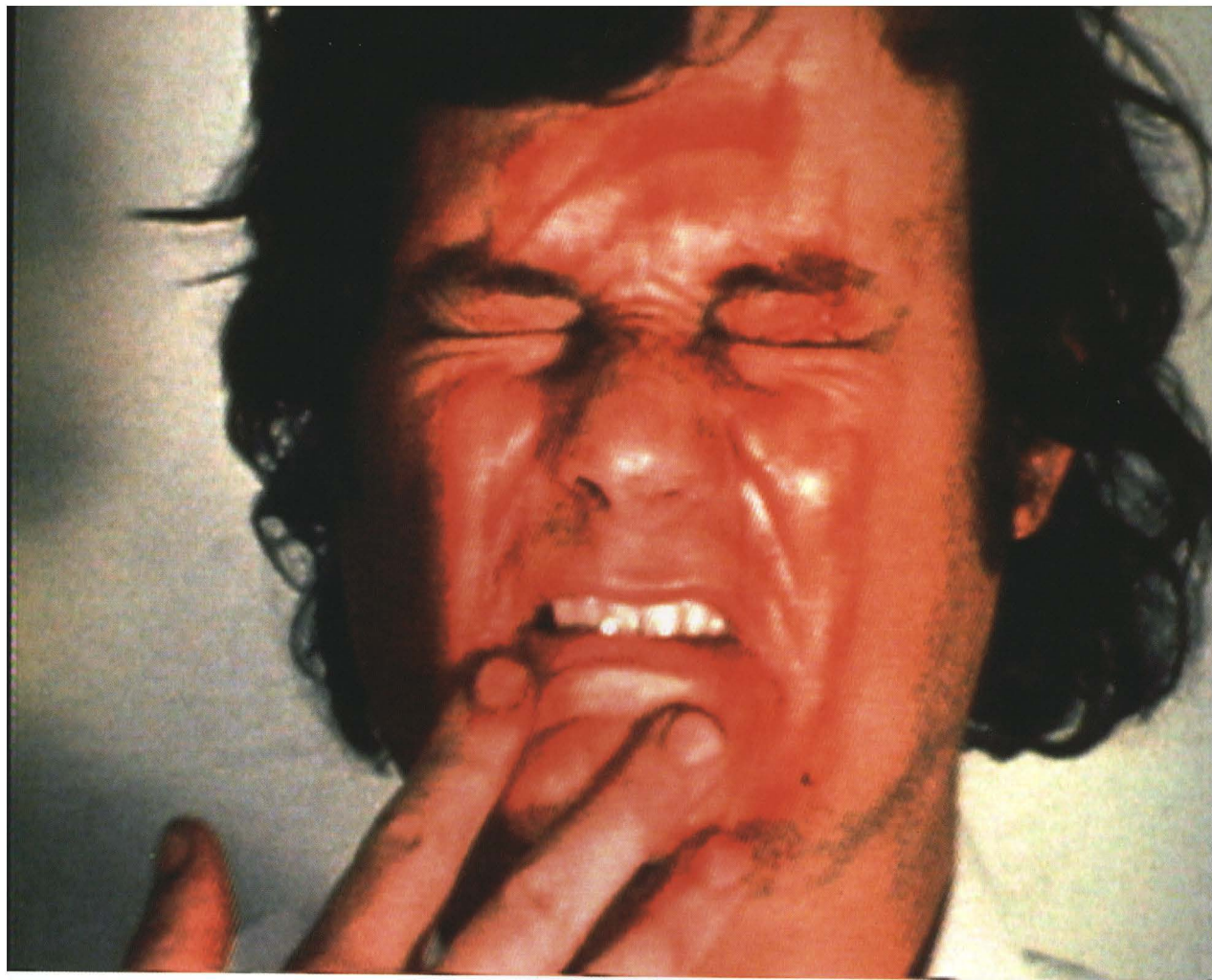
Britain's former colonies, despite their status as British subjects, bringing to an end the largest mass migration in modern British history (that was itself consequent upon the processes of decolonization). This document draws attention to that history just as it stakes the artist's right of access. But the image has a strange ethereality. He is not the fixed entity who can be easily found a home, nor is he the model citizen who bows to external authority, though he gestures towards that in a pointed gesture of mock deferral. He is, if we return to earlier descriptions, a floating sign, poised for circulation in a world that is no longer fixed according to linear trajectories, a world on the brink of passage to a global era of rampant consumerism. Apple's gaze is now fixed outwards; he seems to be leaning slightly forward, as if in anticipation.

1. Paul de Man, "Autobiography as de-facement" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 68.
2. Billy Apple, extract from handwritten text dated 23 June 1972, *Life and Art Activities*, text-based documentation, illustrated in *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1974), 47.
3. See Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso", in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985). Krauss writes: "A proper name, we could say, is a token without a type. Not transferable and not reusable, it applies only to me. And I am its complete significance" (26).
4. This is borne out in Apple's case when his parents, worried by his failure to make contact, called the Metropolitan Police to help them locate him.
5. See Griselda Pollock, "Artists, Mythologies and Media Genius, Madness and Art History", *Screen*, 21, no.3 (Fall 1980): 58.
6. Jacques Lacan quoted by Amelia Jones in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 42.
7. See Christina Barton, *The Expatriates: Frances Hodgkins and Barrie Bates* (Wellington: Victoria University, Adam Art Gallery, 2005). While this is the most recent appearance of the image, it is also worth noting a third and intervening moment when the photograph was used as the invitation to an exhibition of Apple's early self portraits: *Self-Portraits 1962-1976*, curated by Wytan Curnow for Artspace, Auckland in 1997.
8. See Billy Apple, "Bleaching with Lady Clairol Instant Crème Whip", artist's statement in *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1974), 11.
9. Martha Buskirk considers the implications of the blurring of boundaries between original and copy as something with which historians of contemporary art must contend in the introduction to her book, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 11-18.
10. This suggestion draws on the similar case study David Campany maps in "Conceptual Art History or, a Home for Homes for America", in eds Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion), 123-139.
11. In *The Expatriates* it was described as Bates' last work, a culminating point in the narrative of the fate of the young New Zealand artist, the ultimate product of his exposure to metropolitan culture in Britain. See Barton, "Becoming Billy Apple" in *The Expatriates*, esp. 12-13.
12. Craig Owens, "The Medusa Effect or the Spectacular Ruse", *Art in America* (January 1984) quoted by Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-garde since 1970* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 53.
13. Joanna Wooddall, "Every Painter Paints Himself: Self Portraiture and Creativity", in Joanna Wooddall and Anthony Bond, *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary* (London: National Portrait Gallery, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005), 18.
14. T.J. Clark, "The Look of Self Portraiture" in *Self Portrait*, 59.
15. For a critical example, see Louis Marin, "Topics and Figures of Enunciation: it is Myself that Paints" in eds Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, *Vision and Textuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 195-214.
16. Buchloh, 59.
17. Ibid.
18. Billy Apple, artist's statement in *From Barrie Bates to Billy Apple*, 11.
19. Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing Art...", in ed. Paul Taylor *Post-Pop Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 26.
20. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture" in *Face Off: the Portrait in Recent Art* (University of Pennsylvania, Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994), 58-9.
21. Jones, 48.
22. For a fuller discussion of Apple's connections to the world of advertising see Erl Chesterman, "Billy Apple: the Connections Between Advertising and his Art. Whose Line is it Anyway?", unpublished MA Thesis (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1999).
23. Barthes, 24.
24. Ibid.
25. Hal Foster makes a similar point in relation to Andy Warhol's use of repetition, which he describes in Lacanian terms as registering a "missed encounter with the real" (132) and coins the term "traumatic realism" to describe his work of the early 1960s. See Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 127-144.
26. See the Gallery One press release, "Billy Apple at Gallery One", photocopy of typescript, Billy Apple Archive.
27. See for example, Our Art Critic, "Finding Answers to Duchamp", *The Times*, Wednesday April 17, 1963: 14; and Pierre Jeanneret, "Art", *Daily Mail*, Tuesday April 2, 1963.
28. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, (London: Reaktion, 1990).
29. Norbert Lynton, "London Letter", *Art International*, 7, no. 5, May 25, 1963: 60.
30. Edward Lucie-Smith, "Round the galleries: 'Smile, slim, we're having our photo taken'", *The Listener*, April 4, 1963: 602.
31. From a Correspondent, "Things seen: live stills and still lives", *The Times*, May 7, 1963.
32. Judith Butler, paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, quoted by Jane Blocker in *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 24.
33. See Barton, "Becoming Billy Apple", 19-22.
34. Interestingly, however, Apple did not become a British subject. He has retained his New Zealand passport and is a US citizen.
35. I think it significant that Apple was helped in his transformation by other men (Richard Smith and Robert Freeman) whose status in the British art scene was more established than his, which doubly demonstrates his dependency.
36. Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta*, 24
37. Blocker, 25.



the undeceived are mistaken...

Mike Parr



This spread and previous page:
*Slash Your Arm Smear The Blood
On Your Face (Wound By
Measurement)* 1974
16mm film
Performance at Central Street,
Sydney
Photographer / Cinematographer
Ian Stocks
Collection of Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney



My moving beyond painting doesn't mean painting has been left behind or escaped, because I am always thinking of painting without doing it. Yesterday Adam Geczy and I were talking about flag desecration. I began to talk about finger-painting an Australian flag with my own blood. I got quite excited. Two images kept intruding. The deep cut into the vein in my thumb and the wiping down of the blood to make a crude image. Geczy found this idea very disturbing but I realised that I was enjoying doing a painting in my mind. I am continually thinking about painting in this regressive way, painting compounded beyond the normal reception of painting.

Umbrella Of Glass
[Fading] 1981-93
Nos 6, 7, 8, 9 from 10
Cibachrome photographs
Each 184 x 127 cm

In 1980 I went to Oslo to see the Edvard Munch museum. I was galvanized by the way Munch redid his paintings. Paintings were copied again and again, as if trying to expel an aura. This is the problem of the “auratic” *avant le lettre* and very voluble as a particular kind of distress! A peculiar, exact, somnambulistic difference. I realised that printmaking was Munch’s way of thinking about something that the paintings could only repeat. This was extraordinarily interesting for me, because it suggested that the act of printing, the act of mechanical reproduction, produced a crucial sort of incompleteness.



I cannot dispossess the viewer of ordinary habits of sentimental identification, but I can delay and puzzle that level of reception by setting up divisions within the representation that confound the coherence that such identification normally induces. David Bromfield wanted to suggest that surrealist methods of defamiliarization could be applied to my conception of the image, but I resist this kind of translation, because surrealism tries to picture the unconscious as a “flamboyant invention”, while I am much more interested in the structure of the disorder.

Best Man 2006
Colour photograph
189 x 129.5 cm
Collection of Art Gallery of
New South Wales, Sydney

Following page:
College Of Cardinals 2005
Colour photograph
186.5 x 126 cm

I was thinking about the Judith and Holofernes / John the Baptist pictorial tradition and I wanted to divert the excruciating psychodrama of the picture in that direction, because I wanted to make a kind of comedic connection between beheading and castration. There are many ways in which you can think about this. Its iconic range seems to well up under the pressure of the uncanny.

Mike Parr's texts were adapted from a series of mini-essays he wrote in 2005 in response to provocations by Ross Woodrow.

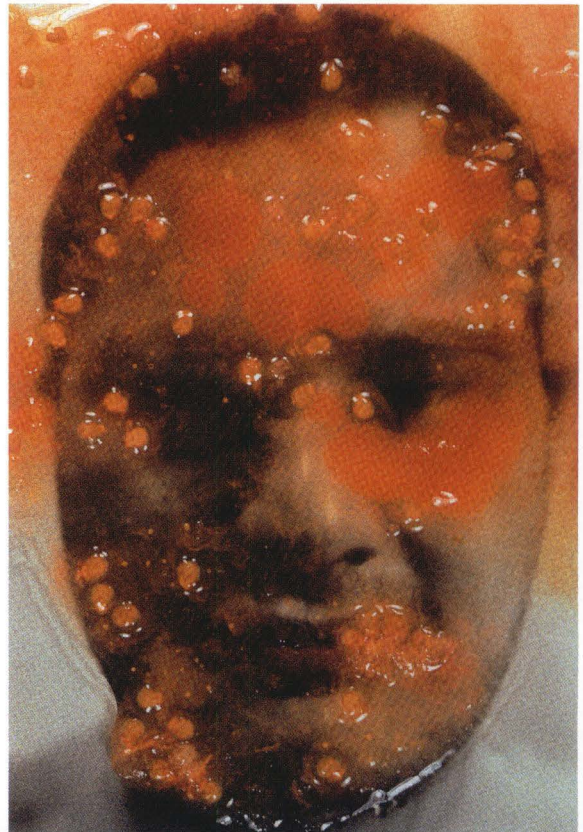
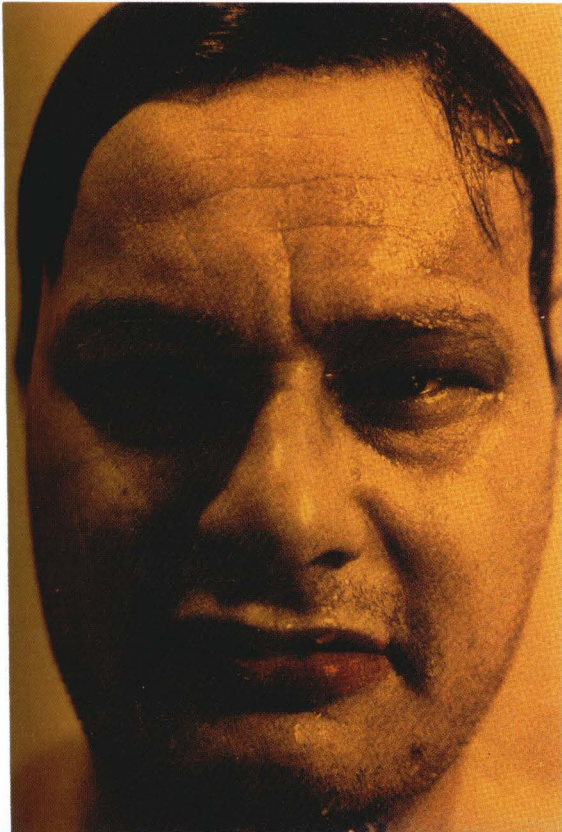
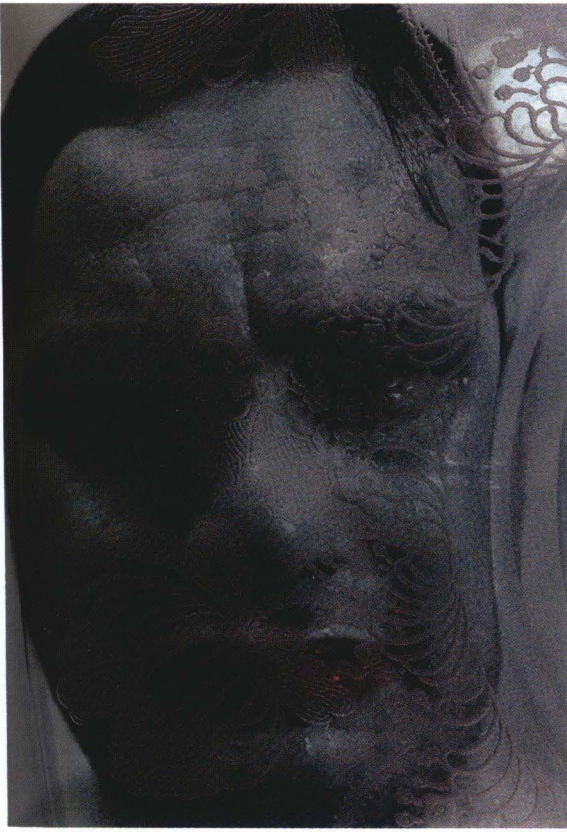
Mike Parr is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

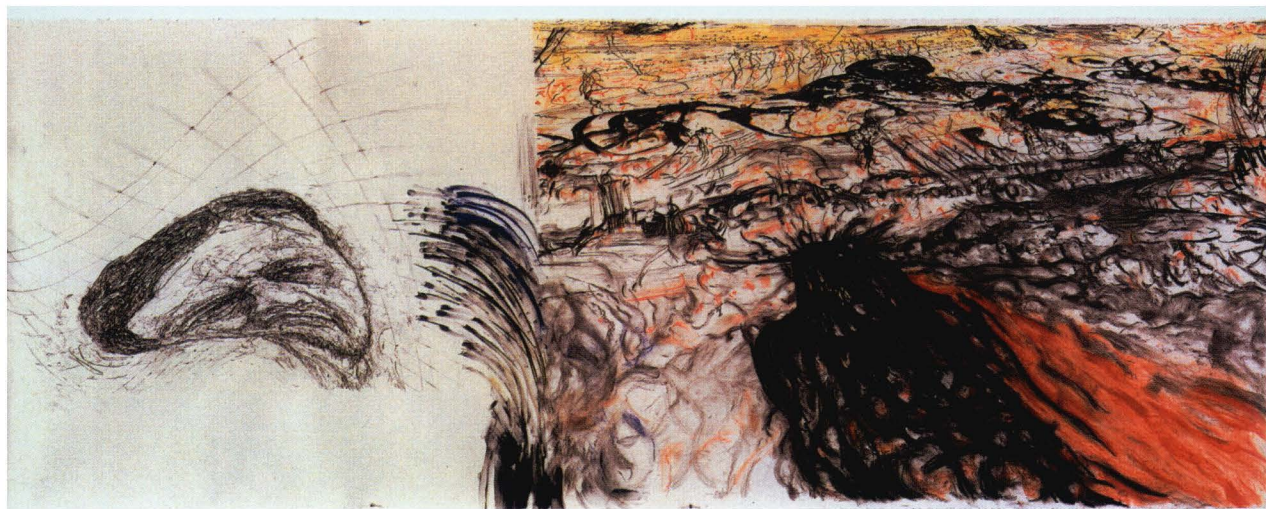




Murder Without Adjectives
2005
Nos. 1 and 24, from 27
Digital prints
Each 98 x 73.5 cm

Murder Without Adjectives features life-size black-and-white digital photographs of the 27 coats in my wardrobe. To get this Imelda Marcos-like obsession in perspective I might add that I own five or six pairs of trousers! Each coat is displayed with the left sleeve tucked into the pocket and all the coats have been primitively Photoshopped, so that parts are moved around, holes appear, and some coats writhe in hallucination.





Braalaag Hoick ("The Invasion of Compulsory Sex Morality" or Perspective as Vanishing Point) 1983-4 (7) Ablaut Self Portrait 1984
Charcoal and pastel on Stonehenge paper
127 x 335 cm
Collection of Australian National Gallery, Canberra

Facing Page:
Braalaag Hoick ("The Invasion of Compulsory Sex Morality" or Perspective as Vanishing Point) 1983-4 (8) Ablepsia Self Portrait 1984
Charcoal and pastel on Stonehenge paper
127 x 335 cm
Collection of Australian National Gallery, Canberra

In my early self-portrait drawings, it took a long time and great concentration to copy my image from photographs via a grid. It was only later that I noticed all the drawings were accompanied by patches of "dirt", clouds of graphite transferred in fact from the stump of my left arm. My first thought was to rub this stuff out, but I began to think about the contrast between the "hygiene" and exemplary precision of the drawings and the patches of soiling.



There's systematic rigour in the form or procedure on the one hand, and random disorder in the details on the other. The technical word is "stochastic", in the sense that contemporary composers let the detail of sound accumulate randomly within an overall, conceptually determined framework. The essence of my marks is their inadvertence, their uncanny addition or surplus to the picture.

My self-portraits depend on the mark in a peculiar way. They conspicuously recount the marks from which they are constituted as marks “of a kind”. Therefore, I often characterise them as Conceptual Expressionism, which is a logical non-sequitur, but one which defines well the enigma of their reception.

I appear to impose myself on the world of Australian printmaking only because I am so much outside it. Once I complete a print I lose interest in it, so institutional endorsement is not such a problem. But psychological, physical struggle is a very important aspect of making the prints and a successful print comes to expel me in a strange sort of way. Expulsion is my measure of completion. The Edenic garden is really a hothouse!

Femalias (12 Untitled Self-Portraits), Set 5 1992
No. 8 from 12
Drypoint and liftground
aquatint from copper
107 x 78 cm
Printer John Loane
Viridian Press, Melbourne;
and the artist



Incompleteness has always fascinated me.

Portrait of M & F invites uncontrollable impulsive projection. There is a homologous exchange between two bodies that establishes a strong feeling of symbiotic empathy, equality. It has a quiet centredness and even a feeling of defiance. I needed a particular kind of bourgeois interior, one that was not obviously domestic in the tell-tale reassuring sense. It needed to have a slight feeling of impermanence and impersonal order, and to be carefully coded to embrace constraints of class and taste. The rooms in the old Ritz Hotel in Double Bay, with their sense of ordered privacy, discretion, seemed just right.

Portrait of M & F 1996
Black and white
photograph
80 x 64 cm
Photo Paul Green
Collection of Art Gallery
of New South Wales,
Sydney; and Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tamaki





“ADMIT ONE”: Presenting Adrian Reginald Hall Auckland, 1971

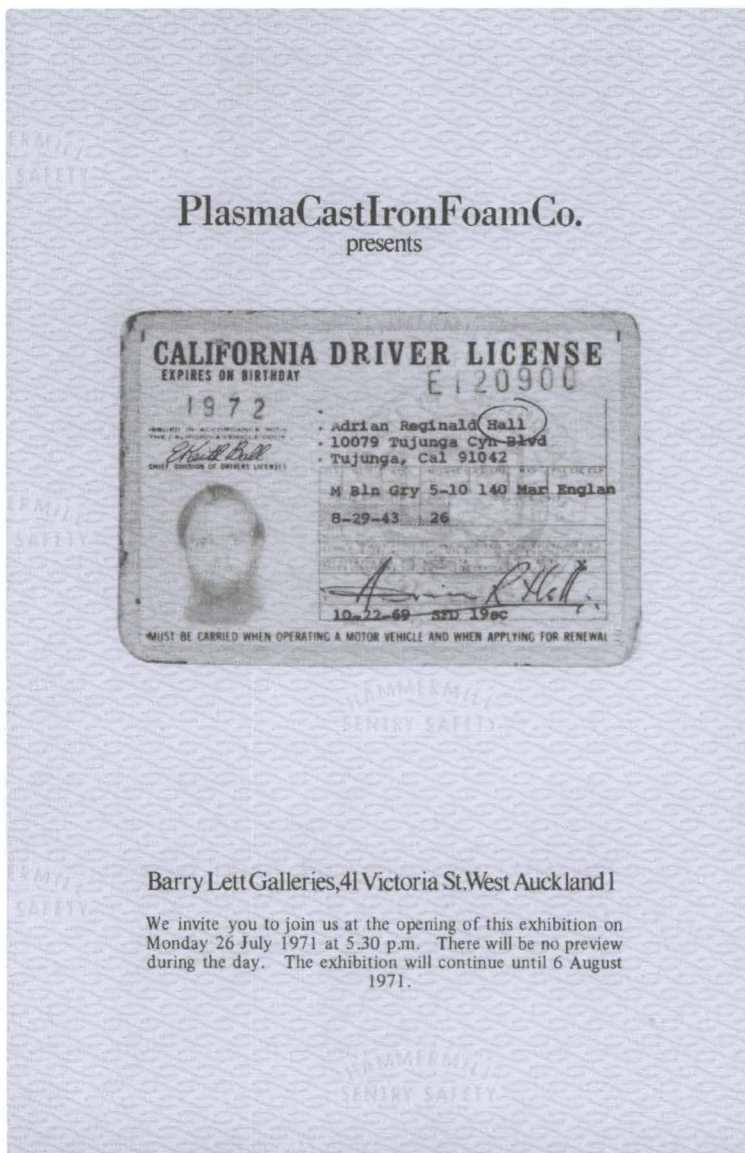
Marcus Moore

The *Plasma Cast Iron Foam Company Presents Adrian Reginald Hall* (PCIFCo) opened at Barry Lett Galleries, Auckland, New Zealand on Monday 26 July 1971.¹ The exhibition was hailed as “the wittiest and also the most seriously uncompromising to be seen in Auckland for some time,” and has been claimed “one of the most audacious, unexpected and influential” shows of the 1970s.² I suggest that it is an acute marker in a wider history of modernity, not least because it proposed a new model for artistic practice and behaviour in what, for Hall, was a new situation in Auckland in 1971.

This essay considers the PCIFCo exhibition as a platform for the presentation of a new kind of artist – not the expressive individual who is bound to their culture – but someone who registers the workings of global systems. Hall’s exhibition has consequences for New Zealand art in the 1970s as a ground-breaking conceptualist project that used the gallery as an active space to present documents and objects which framed the self in new ways. PCIFCo in name and as an event turned the artist into a manufactured product, a corporate entity, testing the boundaries between art and commodity, self and sign, process and product.

Born in Cornwell in 1943, Hall attended the Plymouth College of Art and Design in Devon, before studying at the Royal College of Art in London between 1964 and 1967.³ In London during the 1960s he was one part of *AMM Music*, becoming a friend of Cornelius Cardew, who later founded the Scratch Orchestra. Neo-Dada and Fluxus events in London in this period would have formed a strong impression on Hall, including the important *Destruction in Art Symposium* (DIAS) that Hall attended in September 1966. Like many artists in the period, he would have inherited from Dada the view that art has the capacity to challenge and assault authority. In London Hall worked with Yoko Ono (who contributed to DIAS) on her performance-based events and was technician for her historic solo exhibition at Indica Gallery in 1966. Not only would Ono’s

Fig. 1
Adrian Hall
Catalogue cover *Plasma
Cast Iron Foam Company
Presents Adrian Reginald
Hall 1971*
Embossed ink proof paper
Barry Lett Galleries,
Auckland
Courtesy of the artist



work have demonstrated to Hall the different personae of the artist gained in and through performance and other identity based works, but it was Ono who encouraged Hall to head to Yale in 1968 to study with Donald Judd and see firsthand the (post-) minimal and conceptual work being made by such artists as Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Richard Serra.

Hall's ability to quickly assimilate ideas, and the fact that he was living in London and New York where he was exposed to the latest shifts in art, enabled him to move away from formalist sculpture to ideas-based conceptualism. His progress can be traced from his interests in Le Corbusier's influential modular theory and the "primary structures"⁴ of contemporary sculpture at the Royal College, to a practice that, by 1970, had become highly conceptual in its scope. By this date, Hall had assimilated the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and was working through his own solution to minimalist and conceptual practices.⁵ By then too, Hall's daily existence had become the subject of his art.

In 1970 Hall was appointed a Lecturer in Design at U.C.L.A. at the height of student unrest and rioting (a legacy of the anti-war movement), activism that was met head-on by the forces of state authority. Here Hall made use of his knowledge of the Fluxus scene in London, as well as his understandings of John Cage's pedagogical approaches and Allan Kaprow's "happenings", to manage a class of 400 students two-days of every week. He used key strategies developed by these artists: playing with chance, the givens of his situation, and the ephemeral, to instil in his students a sense of the currency of his ideas.⁶ It was knowledge of such strategies that Hall brought to Auckland, helping to cement avantgardism in this local scene.⁷

Hall moved to New Zealand largely as a result of meeting Jim Allen, then Head of Sculpture at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland (Elam) in 1968.⁸ Allen's invitation to come to Auckland as part of a residency programme, gave Hall the impetus to change his situation and led to new thoughts about representing the self in and through his art. Hall therefore offers a nuanced contribution to the history of conceptual art, by responding to the new conditions of nomadic globalism that are characteristic of the period.

Leaving Los Angeles on 31 December 1970, Hall travelled across the Pacific to the bottom of the world with very little: some books, a passport, a case holding personal items and documents, and a California driver's licence that was no good for driving on New Zealand roads. His residency at Elam began in late February and four months later PCIFCo opened. To me this suggests adeptness on Hall's part to work economically and quickly with the "givens" of his situation. It is significant those few items Hall brought with him found their way into the exhibition. These were everyday personal documents used to signal Adrian Reginald Hall as a subject, without revealing inner expressive qualities. They included: his California driver's licence; a 1965 reference from

Plymouth College of Arts and Crafts that attested to Hall's skill as a draughtsman; a small rubber stamp cut with the artist's signature; and a cache of used cheques that had been signed by the artist between 1968 and 1970 for the exchange of goods and services whilst he was resident in New Haven. One other document included in the exhibition was a sworn statement (a rectified artist's statement) titled: "Statement of Tentative Establishment of Self Identity," legitimised by a Justice of the Peace on 15 January 1971, two weeks after Hall arrived in Auckland. This statement did not confer any personal commentary or reflection on the works but was an irreverent declaration: "I, the undersigned, being of SOUND MIND and BODY, confidently declare, without ANY DOUBTS to the contrary, THAT I am indeed: ADRIAN HALL – native of planet EARTH." Debunking any claims to the hegemony of America, Hall repositioned himself as a global citizen.

Inclusion of personal documents suggests a new model for art-making where the everyday can be drawn directly into the art situation without the transformations normally associated with artistic practice. Most especially, and the first focus of my argument, Hall used those personal documents as artworks in ways that refused their status as autobiographical trace and signifier, but instead positioned him as a social being conditioned by institutional, economic and political systems. Hall's itinerancy as an artist meant that he could not accumulate objects or materials as a traditional sculptor might.⁹ Instead he used documents to situate himself in an increasingly mobile and internationalist arena using these to shift away from object making, in line with contemporary conceptualist thinking.¹⁰

Travelling light with documents is not without precedent. Duchamp's itinerancy is legendary and vital to an understanding of his legacy for conceptualism. Duchamp's use of the case as a means to transport ideas foreshadows the later movement of concepts and practices in the key period for conceptual art between 1964–74. The need or desire to move provoked in Duchamp the necessary requirement to package his practice. The most widely known and referenced example is the *Boîte-en-valise* (Duchamp's portable museum). Duchamp worked on the first production edition between 1936 and 1941, which he carried to New York when escaping occupied France in 1941.¹¹ But other telling examples are found earlier in 1915 and 1918 where Duchamp found ways to transport works in various stages of completeness, including notations for subsequent development in a new situation.¹² What is important to note for this essay, is that the facts of Duchamp's life were intertwined with his work; such economy is linked to the demands of travelling and to the business of an artist's creative process. Thus, and henceforth, travel and its constituent elements – transit, delay, departure, portability, distance and arrival – had their effect on modes of artistic production.

Between 1968 and 1974 Adrian Hall travelled from London to New York to Los Angeles to Auckland to Belfast. These travels do not amount to a nomadic



Fig. 2
Detail
Adrian Hall
Cheque Piece 1971
3800 approx. x 1800 mm
Barry Lett Galleries,
Auckland
Courtesy of the artist

existence, but they meant Hall was not bound to a single place. By not being bound, the artist is not fixed within the frame of any particular culture. Given that the unique subject is the principal focus of national art histories this has important consequences. In Hall's case, subjectivity is both conditioned and formed via movement and mobility. There is some attempt made to re-invent himself in each and every new location, freeing the artist from the provincialism of one place. Yet the self who travels is still subject to regulation and it is this that Hall makes the subject of his artistic investigations.

Hall could not use his California driver's licence on New Zealand roads, so he used it in his art. It appears as the cover of the catalogue printed in a limited edition as one component of his exhibition (Fig. 1), and is the first instance of the artist re-visioning his self portrait under new conditions. Unlike the expressive portrait, the photo ID is utterly standardized. The photograph on a driver's licence must conform to a set format; the subject must be positioned frontally, looking straight at the camera, with a neutral expression and mouth closed. The subject must be outwardly identifiable but lacking in any inner character or quality. Here the image is matched with routine identificatory information: date of birth, eye colour, height and the subject's signature.¹³ Hall offers us this photographic identification in lieu of a self portrait to reveal how the portrait can be regulated by bureaucratic systems as well as to subvert our curiosity to know the individual behind the artwork. Here a universally accepted mode of representation is used for iconoclastic effect. The driver's license is made defunct not just as a reproduction of the real thing, but because the authority that granted Hall's permission to drive a vehicle no longer held him within its jurisdiction. Here Hall exposed the limits of the State of California, treating the art context as a free space within which to test that authority's reach. As the front page to his exhibition catalogue this signals the prospect of further exhibitionary ploys – its purpose: to show the face of counter-culture to test the founding of truths or fallacy through language, signs and systems.



Fig. 3
Adrian Hall
ORIGINAL 1971
Reproduction on ink proof
paper stamped with the
artist's signature
Barry Lett Galleries,
Auckland
Courtesy of the artist


Hall's appropriation of his driver's licence is one instance of how the itinerant artist evades attachments to place to operate outside the prevailing discourses of authority, bureaucracy and power. Yet at the same time as draw attention to bureaucratic systems he shifts attention from himself to those larger forces. This is borne out in *Check Piece* (Fig. 2) a work consisting of over 100 personal cheques Hall made out in New York between 1968 and 1970 and retained by the artist because U.S. banks followed a protocol at the time to stamp and return processed cheques to the account holder along with monthly statements. The cheques were presented between two sheets of transparent plastic and hung in the exhibition space. In this form they operated as a sequence and as a collection.¹⁴ This method also meant that both the front and back of each cheque was visible, so that both the financial details (payee, account holder, sum) and the bank's corporate logos stamped on the back to declare the cheque valid and the transaction complete could be seen. Also titled "Two Years of Fiscal Autobiography,"¹⁵ these documents are a critical means to reference the artistic subject without recourse to conventional depiction.

As a record of weekly expenditure these cheques chronicle a period in Hall's life. They trace a history that speaks volumes about his activities. We can see what Hall purchased: sundries and substances; cars and petrol; affiliations (one cheque is made out to the Black Panthers); as well as payments for foodstuffs, rent, electricity; payments made to survive in moderate security and comfort. If by extension a cheque tells us something about the self, it does so as a factor that resides within much larger bureaucratic and financial systems. In this, Hall's display of his expenditure links consumer culture to conceptualism in telling ways. As a form of credit, a cheque is a promissory note that renders exchange conceptual – no longer actual goods or even hard cash change hands, rather an arbitrary substitute validated by an absent system serves as legal tender. The cheque functions by a process of delay, linking two or more people or parties through mediation: for only once it has been processed by the system can its monetary value be realised. This delay is the kind of spacing that takes

place in many conceptual art practices which employ systems and documents as ironic replicas of real world bureaucracy.¹⁶

A cheque only operates when it has been signed. Hall gains traction with this fact to secure a critical agency for the subject. Without authorisation a transaction cannot be negotiated as it requires the hand to complete the contract. Hall's fascination with the way in which he can grant meaning to a slip of paper by the addition of his signature – that literally enables him to live – becomes his subject in the art gallery setting.¹⁷ The legitimacy that a signature gives the individual work of art is signalled, reminding us that art is another form of capital investment: cultural capital not hard cash.

If the personal cheque could also make a point about the status of the work of art, its monetary and cultural value, the relationship was further tested with the production of a range of works where Hall included his signature as a fake. One example is *Edition* a single sheet printed with the word "ORIGINAL" inserted within his exhibition catalogue in a limited edition of 200 copies (Fig. 3).¹⁸ In this work the word "ORIGINAL" is used as a particular mode of language – branded like the non-negotiable bar found across a cheque – above what appears to be an authentic signature. This is, in fact, a fake signature produced by a rubber stamp. The charge of this work is heightened by the fact that both the term and signature are printed on non-forgable paper stock – much the same as cheque paper and other financial stationery that are assisted with embossed corporate water-marks.¹⁹

The catalyst for this counterfeit came from a curio he found in a flea market in New Haven in 1968: the serendipitous find of a small stamp that bore the name Carl A. Mears. Happening upon this in a consumer site of second hand mass-production gave Hall the idea to adopt Mears as a pseudonym (a second name) and led him to have his own stamp made with his signature cut into rubber: , a perfect instance of portable reproduction.²⁰ In Auckland, Hall used his signature stamp on a number of documents, drawings and artworks in the period 1971-74. With his readymade autograph, Hall challenged traditional investments in the authority and authenticity of the signature; identification therefore becomes something no longer hand-made, but an entity that can be manufactured and multiplied. This sustains Rosalind Krauss's contention that replication and reproducibility are core concepts when coming to an understanding of the challenges of 1960s art practice to modernist notions of authorship.²¹ Hall's contestation of the original and his willingness to exploit the readymade and multiple is a key to his contribution to a conceptualist re-definition of the expressive subject.

This concept lent itself not only to the "ORIGINAL" multiple, but to other multiples including stamped short lengths of timber which were sold for 50 cents as exhibition souvenirs on opening night. The exhibition catalogue was

printed as a limited edition of 200 and given away at the opening, as were a limited edition run of PCIFCo badges that could be pinned and worn on items of clothing. The letters PCIFCo similarly appeared as a logo on T-shirts, and later, as postage stamps and on stationery items sent in response to invitations to participate in mail-art events. PCIFCo had a Plasma Gazette and a C.I.F Newsheet that could be subscribed to by filling out an order form – which doubled as the back page to the exhibition catalogue – and sending it to the PCIFCo address listed at 40 Northboro Rd, Takapuna Auckland 9. So there is a prescient grasp here of the marketability of a brand and the commercial potential of the artist's signature – Hall exposed the fate of the artist in a consumer-driven culture, mimicking its terms to undermine them.

As an event *Plasma Cast Iron Foam Company Presents Adrian Hall* reinforces Hall's investigation of the fate of art in consumer society. The title complicates questions of authorship, enabling a slippage between company entity and individual subject, just as it turns his self-presentation into a self-conscious "act". The opening lent to the event a certain razzmatazz not seen before in Auckland. Visitors to the gallery were permitted entry with an "ADMIT ONE" ticket (the type then used in movie theatres), a number of Hall's students were employed to help out on the night. They were attired in PCIFCo branded T-shirts, as were Rodney Kirk Smith and Barry Lett, the Gallery's directors. Rock music blared from concealed speakers. Plans to serve toast and jam, thus creating an atmosphere of conviviality as well as manifesting a small production-line work ethic, did not eventuate (the toaster did not work). These ploys, and the creation of limited edition multiples for the occasion, demonstrate how Hall used the wiles of corporate marketing, as well as redefined the traditional etiquette of gallery functions. Through these activities Hall was positioned as crass salesman and canny entrepreneur, product of a clever marketing plan. Performing as Adrian Reginald Hall, under the aegis of the Plasma Cast Iron Foam Company, he presented a persona that had little to do with conventional notions of the singular creative subject.

The bulk of works in PCIFCo were not based on personal documents alone. This brings me to the second major theme of the event. PCIFCo provided the setting for a range of sculptural works made from materials readily available in Auckland. This is the complementary trait of the show – to draw attention to and make work from the "givens" of the artist's situation. In all there were 15 components arranged throughout the space. From the outset one encountered a work anchored directly inside the entrance to the Barry Lett Galleries. Like a line with a weight at one end, this was pitched by the artist to lure people into the attraction upstairs by following a string-line (like those used in marking out a building site) under tension up the stairs, into and across to the far side of the main gallery space.²² Titled *Plumb Rite*, the pun played on the practical purposes of the line and its function as accompaniment to the process of entry as a rite of passage. As such the string served not only as a guide into the show

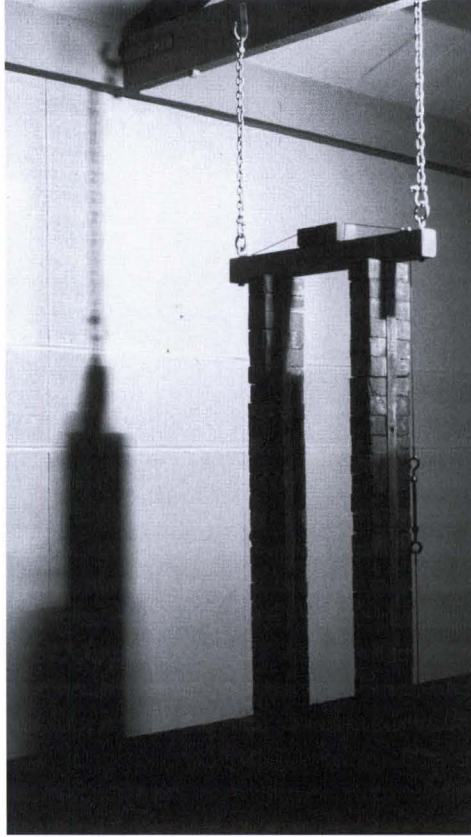


Fig. 4
 Adrian Hall
Life Size, 1971
 Construction site bricks,
 tension cable, and wooden
 support
 18200 x 550 x 280 mm
 Barry Lett Galleries,
 Auckland
 Courtesy of the artist

but as sculpture demarcating a line through space. Here an everyday trade material was redeployed to perform as part of a new sculptural syntax.

The show's title also invokes a new material language. Three different material states: plasma, cast iron and foam are together an ambiguous entity. Plasma alludes to temporal efficiency; its application for industrial metals' fabrication meant faster cutting processes with greatly reduced waste material thus enabling economies of production. Iron is one of the original materials used in the first phase of the Industrial Revolution. In its solidity and weight it radically contrasts with the indeterminacy of the other two materials. Foam (rubber) is a newer ingredient especially used in mass-consumer commodity production and, for this reason, taken up by British pop artists in the 1960s. With this trio Hall demonstrated his commitment to using materials and processes as aesthetic and political tools. Headlined in the title of the exhibition, they prove that Hall was concerned to shift attention away from the artist and towards his materials. They return in the exhibition as processed goods used in the making of a number of the sculptural works.

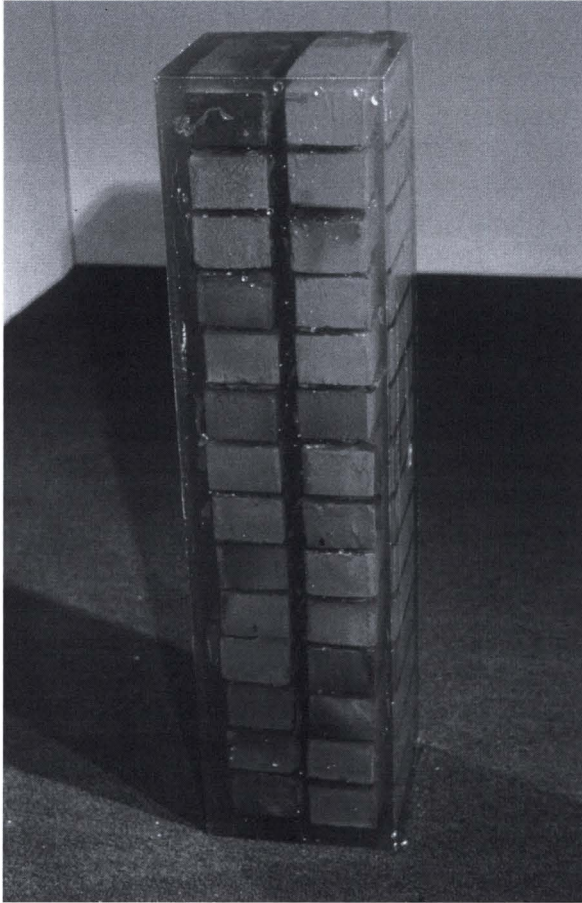


Fig. 5
Adrian Hall
Bricks in Aspic, 1971
Construction site bricks,
embedding resin
1220 x 310 x 310 mm
Barry Lett Galleries,
Auckland
Courtesy of the artist

Hall has commented about his title that he “wanted the density of something sculptural and the speed of something time-based.”²³ Hall did not go so far as to use super-8 film, video, sound or performance in the exhibition, but time is invoked both by Hall drawing attention to the processes he used in the construction of his works and by activating the space so that the viewer’s bodily movement through the space became a positive ingredient. This is in line with Robert Morris who writes: “[t]he body’s manipulation of things or the identifiable extension of its work potentialities by simple technologies – intersected with actual space, time and gravity to expand definitions for self-regulating and self-competing making systems.”²⁴ By invoking the procedures and materials associated with trade work, Hall positions PCIFCo specifically between the specialized terrain of art practice – which fetishises the “hand” of the artist – and the dehumanized realm of (mass) production, which effectively downgrades the individual skills of the worker. In every instance in PCIFCo materials

and processes are used honestly, construction techniques are replicated and Hall aligns himself with the routines of living by presenting himself as a worker/artist under the banner of a "construction" company.

One work took this further, by not only being assembled according to the procedures of stacking as they are utilized in hardware stores and on building sites, but by also referencing the measurements of the artist's body. *Life Size* (Fig. 4) was made from bricks taken from an Auckland construction site. Used to construct two columns secured in place with a beam and tension cables, they framed an empty space with the exact dimensions of Hall's body. Here sculpture performs as an empty frame, shifting attention away from the object as discrete form onto the surroundings; opening the work up to enable a consideration of this presence to take hold. This is significant because the absent space indexed to the artist's body then became an access point for other visitors to the gallery – the frame fixed in *Life Size* was one all could pass through. As the trace of the artist disappears so the work is rendered permeable – *Life Size* rendered form liminal.²⁵

Take as a further example *Bricks in Aspic* (Fig. 5). This was a uniform structure in which red bricks were cast in resin, a transparent liquid-based material that hardens over time. Spaces between bricks were filled by a translucent substitute for mortar so that the casting process gave the work its form and meaning. Resin seals and solidifies, whilst still enabling the viewer to see what is inside; it therefore draws attention to process just as it separates things in the world from their usual function. This was especially poignant when Hall soaked the mattress from his bed with resin and hung it on the wall of the gallery in *Foam Slab*. In *Silent Wall* trade skills were transferred directly into the work. Here, Hall built a wall-frame in the gallery which he filled with industrial-foam then stopped and gibbed on both sides. Manual labour and working processes were applied to make the seamless white modernist surface. The void created between these walls was captured and then filled-in, using sound-proofing insulation, a trade material that supplied the linguistic leverage of the work's title.

By referring to and making use of the practical skills and equipment – jigs, templates, clamps, bracing, and stringlines – more usual to a building site, Hall turned the gallery into a site of improvised construction.²⁶ His reactive process also suggests a blurring of boundaries between idea and situation that shifts the artist further into the realm of actual experience. Hall's practical skills and his deployment of relatively affordable and readily available materials were one reason why he could complete the exhibition so soon after arriving in Auckland, but it also served as a pointed celebration of labour now relocated within the art gallery as a re-contextualized site of production. This makes implicit Hall's redefinition of art away from romantic investments in expression and creativity to the more mundane and everyday realities of life and work.

Hall's presence in Auckland offered a timely parallel to social critique that was very much in keeping with international trends at this time. While there was nothing comparable in New Zealand, Hall brought with him knowledge of collectives like the Art Workers Coalition; the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union which was inspired by the Black Panthers (as mentioned, an organization Hall actively supported); and the Artist Placement Group (APG), which had redefined artistic practice to align more closely with the situations of work and trade. The objective of the APG, for example, was "to place artists on forms of secondment in industrial and commercial organizations, on the assumption that the perceptions and projects of the artist as "incidental persons" in such contexts, would result in forms of mutual critical benefit."²⁷ Here, the artist was not isolated in the studio, but sited *beyond it*, to allude to Daniel Buren's terms,²⁸ becoming embedded in lived social environments and situations, the experiences of which were hoped to make the social conscience of the artist become more clearly understood, or at least known.

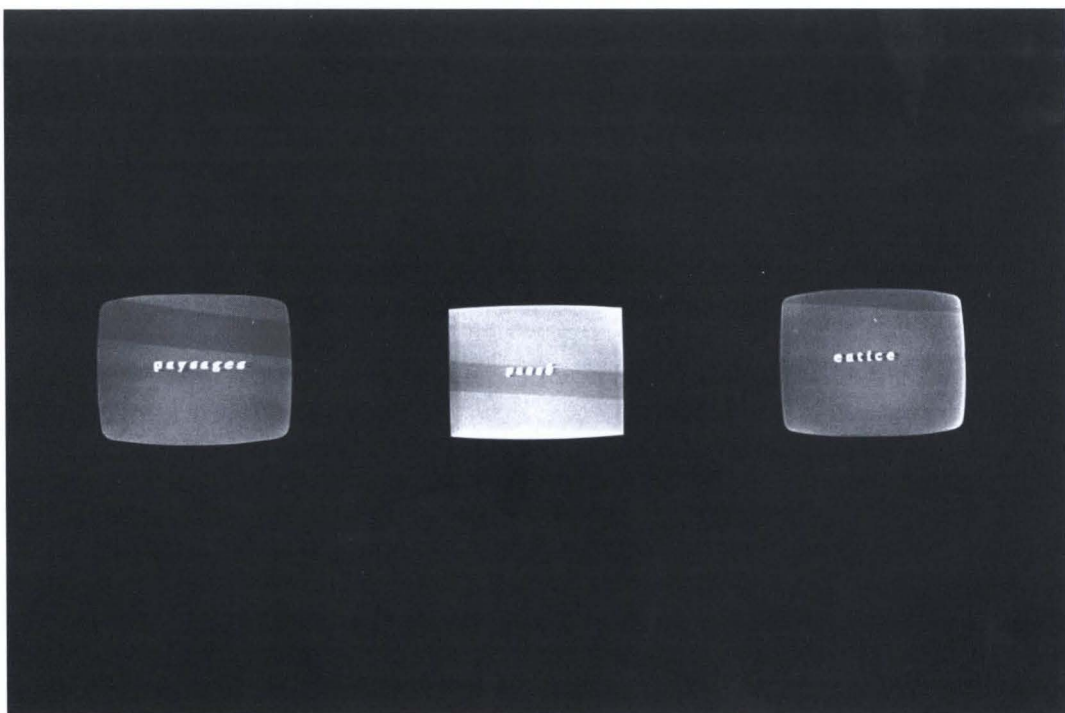
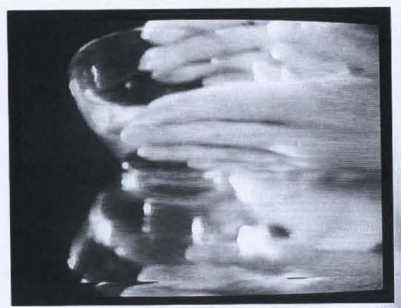
Hall had worked on building and construction sites, and his strategy was to bring methods and materials from life into the gallery. But his strategy was not motivated by a desire to reveal his biography, or to invest in his materials traces of his life. His purpose was to broaden the language of sculpture and invest it with social purpose by being honest about mundane reality. Because materials were not transformed by the hand of a unique master, they could not be invested with expressive intent, so Hall absented himself from the scene. And yet, he was still there in multiple and fragmentary traces: proposed through personal documents or remembered via the mechanics of constructed form. A photo ID on the cover of a catalogue, a signature or its simulacrum, the space between two columns of bricks, a precisely placed piece of string or hand-smoothed surface of plaster, the indentation on a mattress, a transaction recorded on a cheque, these are all that is left of the artist. Cannily, and this is PCIFCo's achievement, Hall left it to the viewer to reconstruct what one could of the artist from these myriad fragments. Absent sign or material trace, Hall proves his grasp of post-medium didactics. In Auckland in 1971 he registers a telling shift away from the modernist concept of artist/author.²⁹

1. I acknowledge Adrian Hall who assisted me in the early stages of my research, and who has re-documented examples of his work for this publication. I also acknowledge Christina Barton, my principal supervisor at Victoria University of Wellington, who has helped me instill accuracy into my account.
2. Cited in the comprehensive review of the exhibition by Tony Green where he writes: "[a]s a show it is the wittiest and also the most seriously uncompromising to be seen in Auckland for some time and also the most exciting flow of ideas into Auckland." *Arts and Community* 7, no. 8 (September 1971): 11-12. The second quotation included is cited in Wystan Curnow and Robert Leonard, "Bricks in Aspic," *Art New Zealand* 90 (Autumn 1999): 34-39.
3. In his final year Hall showed in the *Young Contemporaries* exhibition, Tate Gallery, 1967.
4. On primary structures Hall writes: "They were paintings that were not paintings; objects which were not objects – they were experiential." Curnow and Leonard, 35.
5. *The Almost Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, the 1966 retrospective at the Tate, seen by Hall, was a seminal experience for a new generation of British artists, who, as with their contemporaries elsewhere, picked up on Duchamp anew.
6. Hall writes, "The atmosphere was pregnant with fear, anger and indeed loathing." His term for control and instilling currency was "group synergistic projects." Curnow and Leonard, 36.
7. Wystan Curnow writes that through Hall the Auckland scene "felt for the first time the full force of American modernism in its most contemporary form." Wystan Curnow, "Aspects of New Zealand Sculpture 9. – Recent Developments: 2" in *Education* 26, no. 10 (1977): 20. The avantgarde is identified by Terry Smith as the first of

- three different ways conceptualism took hold in this region. Smith writes, "Conceptualism was one of the defining elements of the shift within the region from a locally focused to internationalist, specifically late modernist, orientation toward practice." See, "Peripheries in Motion: Conceptualism and Conceptual Art in Australia and New Zealand" in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 88-89.
8. Adrian Hall was arguably the most influential of international artists to take up residency under Jim Allen's tenure. John Panting and Steve Furlonger had come prior to Hall, and Kieran Lyons and Ti Parks would follow. Certainly what struck Maree Horner, a student of Hall's in 1971-72, was that Hall had a "different energy to John Panting and Steve Furlonger, and he had an ability to enthuse people with a whole range of current ideas." Thanks to Maree Horner who has also provided me with perspectives on PCIFCo's opening night events. Email correspondence with author, 29 July 2006.
 9. On the New Zealand context, Christina Barton writes that the itinerant artist's practice "transcends boundaries, crosses borders and flows easily between locations." See, "David Tremlett at Artspace – A Model for Cultural Exchange." *Art New Zealand* 65 (Summer 1992/93): 60-63.
 10. A period impacted on by advanced globalization, brought about by increasing modernization in air travel and in communications technologies.
 11. The first *Boîte-en-valise* was a deluxe suite of 20 units assembled by Duchamp in 1934 and gifted to family, friends and associates. For a full inventory on Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* refer to Ecke Bonk, *The Portable Museum – The Making of the Boîte-en-valise de ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Selavy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989).
 12. Duchamp traveled with preliminary notes for *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bacheors, Even* (1915-23) as early as his 1913 trip to Herne Bay (English coast). This foreshadows the important episode when Duchamp expatriated himself from Paris deciding not to leave this centre but to "go to New York" arriving in June 1915, carrying with him on board the *S.S. Rochambeau* notations, drawings and the small preparatory glass *The Nine Malic Molds*. It might be said that on this trans-Atlantic crossing Duchamp carried a form of conceptualism in a state of delay: between the mind, notations, drawing and two sheets of glass. These were destined for Duchamp to take up in a future situation. And in 1918, Duchamp traveled from New York to Buenos Aires with parts of another small glass in readiness for construction. He assembled it in transit on the balcony of his hotel room, this small glass was to be titled: *To Be Looked At, (From the Other Side) with One Eye, Close To, for Almost An Hour*.
 13. Essentially the representation of these details on the licence is matched to the subject for purposes of scrutiny and passage by authority.
 14. The first cheque signed by Hall was to U.S. customs for a change to his visa when he first arrived in New Haven from London in 1968. The last was signed to a courier firm for the transport of Hall's belongings upon leaving New York State for Los Angeles in 1970.
 15. In his exhibition catalogue Hall writes "a financio [sic.] auto-biography". Tony Green also made the association in 1971. See Green, 11.
 16. Similarity may be drawn to works by Robert Morris's such as *Card File* (1963), an early example of conceptualism's critique of categorization, collections and display.
 17. I note that the name Margaret A. Hall, Hall's wife at the time, also appears as an account holder on these cheques.
 18. *Edition* was originally reproduced as a silk screen print in 1970 in Los Angeles, a medium used widely in conceptual ways in pop art.
 19. Hall used the stationery of corporate entity for his PCIFCo exhibition catalogue which was also printed on this type of paper.
 20. This might also be viewed in light of the legacy of Duchamp, who with a pen in hand signed editions of his readymades and other items in various global locations throughout the 1960s. Items that subsequently became works in Duchamp's oeuvre.
 21. An historical significance of conceptualism is the re-birth of the readymade paradigm in the 1960s as a condition based on replication (of 3-dimensional objects) and reproducibility (of 2-dimensional items). According to Rosalind Krauss, the concept of the reproduced form – "the multiple without an original" – is of critical importance when considering modernism. Cited in, de Duve, Thierry (ed.) *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), 179.
 22. Thanks to Tony Green for the accurate details of this work.
 23. Adrian Hall, interview with author. Aramoa, Otago Peninsula, 22 January 2006.
 24. Robert Morris, "Some Splashes in the Ebb Tide" in *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1999), 129.
 25. Liminal is frequently used to mean "the space between", or precisely "occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold." Refer, *Oxford English Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, New 1st Edition, 1998), 1070. In architectural theory objects such as doorways and door-frames, windows and window-frames have been considered as liminal – that is they are objects located between, or on both sides of, the boundary to interior and exterior sites.
 26. Hall also re-conceived drawing as a materialist tool. Rather than an expressive device or a preliminary stage, Hall treats drawing as an extension from the page to "drawing" in space, enabling drawing processes to become responsive to site. Hall used the techniques and marks from mechanical drawing and draughtsmanship – systems, notation and measurement – directly in the gallery.
 27. Paul Wood and others, eds., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, London, 1993), 217.
 28. In 1970-71 Daniel Buren wrote a treatise based on his ideas of the "inversion of the artist's studio" where the implications of the artist working in situ, not in studio, are considered. Cited in Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio" in ed. Claire Doherty, *From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), 16-23.
 29. *Parallels may be drawn here to Studio Souvenir* (Super-8 film, 13 minutes, 1971-72). Begun following the PCIFCo exhibition this short film is an important record made by Hall of his studio while in residency at Elam School of Fine Arts. Apart from a fleeting appearance, Hall is absent from the studio in this film. Traces are evident of Hall (past work, documents and photographs from London, Yale and New York appear in the film as they were located in his studio), and students and staff who became familiar to Hall in 1971-72 also appear momentarily in the film. Like PCIFCo, *Studio Souvenir* has no apparent focus, there is no centrally placed easel, no singular object under construction as one would expect of a traditional artist. Rather, materials and the devices that Hall used as a conceptualist appear in fragmentary fashion and Hall uses the inherent "elasticity" of the film medium to edit the work in non-linear fashion. Therefore if *Studio Souvenir* is more than a record, operates as a work in its own right, then we are witness, in ways equal to my account of the works in PCIFCo, to the manner in which a document can function in art practice of the period: compiled before Hall's tenure at Elam ended, a moment in 1971-72 before Adrian Reginald Hall moved on.

Fig. 1
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Re Dis Appearing 1977
Video still
University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum
Gift of the Theresa Hak
Kyung Cha Memorial
Foundation

Fig. 2
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Passages, Paysages 1978
Video stills
University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum
Gift of the Theresa Hak
Kyung Cha Memorial
Foundation



Personal Experience and Impersonal Aesthetics: The Video Work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982)

Susan Best

If we recall that one's unconscious does not wholly belong to the individual, we might grasp Cha's approach. Her use of language and images evokes a sense of impersonality, because they seem not to derive from or pertain to a knowable individual subject with whom we may readily identify. Yet from within this disorder or mystery, we experience her writing and art as powerfully resonant. –Juliana Chang¹

In late-modern and postmodern art, there is an obvious and much discussed shift away from an aesthetic of expressivity; to describe this in terms of what it achieves rather than what it eschews one could say an ethic of impersonality dominates. That is, artists in this period frequently expressed a concern with the audience and reception, as well as an awareness of the interpretative horizons within which their work might be read. Such art, in other words, is other-oriented, rather than being conceived as being solely about the expression of the self. The Korean American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, broadly adheres to this ethic while also maintaining a link to what might be regarded as personal concerns, namely the experience of displacement (she left her native Korea in 1963 aged 12) and her existence between, or better still, across several languages – Korean, English and French. In particular, her work addresses the displacement of the subject in and by language, the instability of language itself, and the way in which the entry into language creates a residue or incommunicable core at the heart of experience. This brings it close to some of the key theoretical issues of French Freudianism, but in another vein, also in line with what Jean-François Lyotard has called the high modernist concern with representing the unrepresentable.²

This positioning in relation to high modernism, at first glance, might seem at variance with Cha's clear adherence to a restrained impersonal mode of address. Certainly, Margaret Iverson has argued that Lyotard's reinvigoration of the

sublime resuscitates heroic modernism and is thereby opposed to what she aptly terms the deflationary impulse in late-modern and postmodern art.³ She sees the anti-aesthetic as an antidote to, or deflation of romantic notions of the artist as an inspired, special person and art as either expressive or transcendent. But, one of my aims is to re-examine how this anti-aesthetic tradition is nuanced by an artist like Cha, and in particular to think about the role of feeling in art that ostensibly eschews such subjective aesthetic concerns.

The target of the deflationary impulse is, of course, primarily abstract expressionism, and certain versions of formalist criticism that argue for the instant (if not universal) recognition of artistic quality.⁴ The idea of universal or “objective taste,” as Clement Greenberg puts it, is often assumed to be underpinned by Kantian aesthetics, whereas in actual fact judgments of taste are first and foremost subjective in Kant’s aesthetics.⁵ For Kant, judgments of taste are described as having subjective universality only when they are impelled by a strong conviction that our judgment and attendant feelings of pleasure or displeasure are shared. Kant describes this at one point as a kind of obligation: “he judges not just for himself but for everyone”.⁶ For Kant, however, the central problem, or antinomy, of taste is that we act *as if* everyone should agree with our taste (universal voice), despite the fact that we also know there can be no agreement about taste as it is not based upon concepts. As he says “the universal voice is only an idea.”⁷ It is, then, this *ideal* of the “universal voice” that is at the heart of judgment, not some facile assumption of its attainability. It is something like this ideal of shared communication of both ideas and feelings that guides the practice of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. In other words, an ethics of impersonality takes this intersubjective ideal into account at the level of production.

It is around the communication of feeling that Cha’s work most obviously departs from the typical understandings of impersonality in art. Impersonality is usually understood to mean an absence of feeling; the touchstone for this account is of course Marcel Duchamp’s famous declaration that his selection of the urinal for his infamous “readymade” work of art: “was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste. . . in fact a complete anaesthesia.”⁸ It is the revival of this affectively cool or anaesthetic sensibility in the late 1950s and 1960s that Frederic Jameson correlates with the end of the modern movement and which he argues is characterized by a “waning of affect.”⁹ Minimalism and conceptual art are routinely interpreted as further entrenching this deflationary impulse and its rejection of feeling. Minimalism can be understood as concerned with the literal object unencumbered by feeling, a visual counterpart to the philosopher Edmund Husserl’s famous clarion call “return to things themselves.” The stark encounter of beholder and barely crafted object is intended to force an embodied engagement with what is there, the literal object rather than its associations or possible meanings. In the case of conceptual art, as Sol Le Witt puts it, art

addresses “the mind rather than the eye or the emotions.”¹⁰ So the artist became like a detached functionary, a “clerk cataloguing” the results of a premise or proposition, to further invoke the thoughts of Le Witt, and the viewer was to respond in an equally dispassionate and cerebral manner.¹¹

A similar anti-psychological impulse informed the film theory of the 1970s developed by the group of writers involved with the British journal *Screen*. In that case, the work of Bertolt Brecht was crucial and in particular his idea of distancing the audience through what he termed the alienation effect, which rejects crude empathy. This idea is crystallized for feminist film theory in the work of Laura Mulvey and her seminal critique of identification in film. The rejection of visual pleasure she outlines, reiterates the anti-retinal, anti-expressive tendencies in structural film, minimal and conceptual art.¹²

However, since the heydays of such readings of Brecht in the 1970s, the strong case against visual pleasure mounted by Mulvey has been much discussed. For example, Griselda Pollock has contributed a more nuanced account of feminist uses of visual pleasure, indicating that passive absorption was not the only source of viewing pleasure. She argues that feminist artists opposed conventional regimes of pleasure, but promulgated what she termed “emancipatory pleasures.”¹³ These included: “the possibilities of new pleasures in deconstruction, in producing new knowledge, in appreciating the significance of representation itself, in offering new patterns of identification for women spectators.”¹⁴ Similarly, Sylvia Harvey has noted that in the European reception of Brecht in the 1970s, his ideas about pleasure and lightness of touch had been ignored.¹⁵ What has also escaped close scrutiny is Brecht’s attitude to emotion. Crucially, Brecht distinguished between the rejection of empathy and the rejection of emotions. As he put it “The rejection of empathy is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to such. The crude aesthetic thesis that emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong.”¹⁶ He does caution however “none the less a non-aristotelian dramaturgy has to apply a cautious criticism to the emotions which it aims at and incorporates.”¹⁷ It is precisely this nuanced reconsideration of feeling that might help us to situate the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in relation to the anti-aesthetic tradition.

Cha is a difficult artist to place. Her practice spans object making, postal art, performance, video, film, and experimental fiction. To date it is her experimental novel *Dictée* that has received the most attention.¹⁸ In the visual arts, she has been recuperated for the expanded account of conceptualism initiated by the exhibition *Global Conceptualism*, and her work usually features in accounts of conceptual art in the San Francisco Bay area, perhaps because, here, performance is integrated into conceptualist history, in marked contrast to east coast accounts where body-based practices are most often studied separately.¹⁹ Cha’s work certainly conforms to conceptual art in terms of her concern with language. Indeed she stated: “The main body of my work is with language, ‘looking

for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue.”²⁰ But her investigations of language are guided by semiotics and psychoanalysis, rather than the Anglo-American analytic philosophy which informed the work of other conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth and the British Art & Language group.²¹

Cha (b.1951) is slightly younger than other women artists who have been rescued for the history of women’s contribution to conceptual art, like Joan Jonas (b. 1936), Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934), Eleanor Antin (b.1935), Mary Kelly (b. 1941) and Martha Rosler (b. 1943), and died prematurely at 31. Her nearest contemporary, Adrian Piper (b.1948) has been more consistently recuperated than Cha. Cha however can be linked to the history of San Francisco Bay area conceptualism of the 1970s. As Lawrence Rinder notes, work here “tended to invest conceptual forms with personal and physical qualities.”²² Another important part of this context that Rinder identifies is the conceptual art group known as Photography and Language which took a semiotic approach to language. According to Rinder, Cha’s work, like her friends and contemporaries Judith Barry and Yong Soon Min, reflects this historical context while introducing an “entirely individual approach to language and cultural complexity.”²³ She can also be linked with feminist postmodernist practice, especially with artists such as Mary Kelly, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler, who seek to destabilize or demystify certain accounts of subjectivity. Her video installation, *Passages Paysages*, was in fact included in the exhibition, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York in 1985. This exhibition, which included the work of Barbara Kruger, Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler, Sherrie Levine and Silvia Kolbowski, is understood to signal a shift in feminist thinking that reframed identity as “a cultural construction” rather than a “biological truth,” and hence able to be changed and challenged.²⁴

But if Cha’s work can be included in this shift, her manner of destabilizing identity owes little to the deconstructive strategy commonly deployed for this purpose. In a sense her allegiance is to what came to be called postmodern theory, rather than postmodern practice, that is Lacanian psychoanalysis and its investigations in French film theory. Cha first became acquainted with these ideas as an undergraduate student at Berkeley when she studied semiotics and film theory with Bertrand Augst. In 1976, she studied with some of the key figures in French film theory – Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Thierry Kuntzel – at the Centre d’Etude Américain du Cinéma in Paris. In that same year she refers specifically to her desire to put this theory into practice in actual works, her term is “the ‘realization’ of theory in practice.”²⁵ Cha’s advocacy of these ideas is also indicated by her edited collection, *Apparatus*. Cha is well known in film theory circles as the editor of this important collection of essays on apparatus theory published in 1980, which introduced many English speakers to this area of French film theory.²⁶

What could be said to distinguish Cha's practice from the more common deconstructive approach to identity is that she creates an experience of the decentred subject, rather than making work about it. That is, her work conveys a strong sense of being disoriented by language as well as being interpellated by it. And it is this disorientation, this experience of language which exceeds meaning, that recalls Lyotard's notion of the sublime. There is an abiding sense in Cha's work of experience that cannot be put into words that is nonetheless conveyed by words. In relation to Cha's novel *Dictée*, Min Jung Lee has called this a commitment to communicating the "untransmittable, whether it is the translation of one culture to another, one telling of history to another or one media to another."²⁷ This description highlights the way in which Lyotard's sublime has pertinence for thinking about cross-cultural representation. Indeed thinking about the unrepresentable as operating between and within cultures broadens how we might think about the limits of reason that both aesthetics and psychoanalysis address.

In a sense both psychoanalysis and aesthetics are interested in the failures of reason. Psychoanalysis is attuned to the eruption of primary unconscious processes in secondary processes, that is what the subject wishes but does not intend to say. Similarly, aesthetics addresses not just the transcendental subject and its purported freedom but also its limits. Lyotard's reinterpretation of Kant makes this explicit. For Lyotard avant-garde art is the exploration of the limits of thought. Lyotard transforms Kant's sublime from the exhibition of an indeterminate concept of reason to the stronger claim that the aim of avant-garde art is to investigate what is not demonstrable, and to bear "witness to the inexpressible."²⁸

There are aspects of Kant's two accounts of the sublime that are especially useful for interpreting Cha's work. First, in his account of the mathematical sublime, there is a description of the failure of imagination in its synthesizing capacity – imagination strives to put perceptions together, expands to its limit and then falls back on itself, rather than feeling defeated it experiences a liking that is an emotion.²⁹ The dynamic sublime similarly charts the finding of courage in the face of the threat of nature; it has a peculiarly moral role in that it is supposed to assure us that we could similarly retain our moral principles in the face of an overwhelming threat.³⁰ In a sense both accounts counsel a kind of openness to what exceeds, overwhelms or frightens which it could be argued can provide a kind of guide for attitudes to otherness. The idea that these kinds of experiences, which push past our capacities, or experiences can be pleasurable is something that is particularly pertinent to Cha's work.

I want to turn now to a key video installation of Cha's, *Passages Paysages*, to exemplify these points. This three-monitor video work of approximately 11 minutes duration was first exhibited in her MFA show of 1978 at the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley. The following

year it was shown at the San Francisco Institute of Art, both venues were important for fostering conceptual art in the San Francisco Bay area.

The title of the work with its almost homonym-like doubling signals the play with language and with similarity and difference that are the hallmarks of this work. The instability of language is already evident in the title, for example the second unambiguously French word meaning landscapes, “paysages,” retroacts on the first word, “passages,” casting its Englishness into doubt. The opening sequence on the left hand monitor reinforces this capacity for transformation, a lap dissolve takes us from the word “Passages” to “Paysages”: with the change of one letter we move from one word to another, one language to another.

This movement between languages is also evident in two early single monitor video works, *Vidéoème* (1976, b & w, sound, 4 min 30 sec) and *Re Dis Appearing* (1977, b & w, sound, 2 min 20 sec). Both works were made during Cha’s decade of study at the University of California, Berkeley (1968-78) during which time she completed two bachelor degrees and two masters degrees. *Re Dis Appearing* was first screened for Cha’s MA exhibition at the Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley in 1977, and was later shown in Australia in 1979 as part of the exhibition *Videotapes by Women from the Los Angeles Women’s Video Center* at Ewing and George Paton Gallery in Melbourne.

In *Re Dis Appearing* the voice-over overlaps and intertwines French and English words – “un bol de thé, a bowl of tea, tea bowl” – which in turn sometimes describes objects shown in the video and at other times takes a more poetic turn – “thé au sommeil, tea of sleep” (Fig. 1). *Vidéoème* – a video poem about the word itself – works with the etymology of the word “video” (from the Latin *videre*, to see, with an added “o” to match the word “audio”) as well as bringing to bear the further associations when the word is considered in French. The short video is constructed of white words on a black background and uses dissolves and fades to black between shots. The sound track consists of single words spoken in English. As Lawrence Rinder notes, Cha builds up the word vidéoème from smaller words: “vidé” (French for emptied), “vidé o” (emptied + zero and video), then “o ème” (very least).³¹ The English associations from the Latin and French are then rendered: the word “sound” appears in white on black, then “see,” then the word “empty” appears, contrasted visually and aurally with the word “see.”

Rinder has pointed out that Cha’s method of creating neologisms is very close to Freud’s account of invented or overlapping words in his discussion of jokes and their relation to the unconscious.³² In his book on jokes, Freud transposes terms he previously used to describe the ways in which unconscious ideas are concealed in dreams. *Vidéoème* uses two of the psychic mechanisms which, according to Freud, are more often deployed to disguise unconscious wishes or ideas: condensation and displacement. Condensation literally condenses two or more words and ideas, for example vidéoème is formed from video + poem.

Displacement, on the other hand, represents a kind of diversion usually of affect to another less potent idea, but it can also describe a kind of associational axis that works through contiguity, hence the chain of associations: vidé, empty, zero and so forth. In *Vidéoème* we can see very clearly the work of condensation; the extent of the harboured words is expanded by having recourse to two languages. And this recourse to two languages facilitates displacement as the uncovered French word “vidé” allows a completely different avenue of unnoticed or unintended meaning to open up.

This way of working with language is characterized by Freud in his account of jokes as giving free play to the unconscious modes of primary process thinking, where language becomes polysemic, slippery and associational in contrast to secondary processes which are more typical of everyday language and logic.³³ In jokes, unlike dreams, these mechanisms are deployed for amusement, but the joke, nonetheless, liberates this doubled and dense mode of thinking characteristic of the unconscious. Lacan calls this unconscious underlying stratum of language, “lalangue”. This neologism, which telescopes the French feminine definite article “la” with the word for tongue “langue,” is described by Russell Griggs as a kind of stutter, a fracturing of language which exceeds and disrupts communication.³⁴ It is this non-communicational aspect of language that Cha identifies as central to her work, she states: “As a foreigner, learning a new language extended beyond its basic function of communication, as it is generally for a native speaker, to consciously imposed detachment that allowed analysis and experimentation with other relationships of language.”³⁵

The sliding of language, or ramifying of its associations, is also a feature of the way in which Cha uses images in *Passages Paysages*. Rather like Chris Marker’s comment that for him the image is the Proustian madeleine of film, Cha similarly uses images to evoke associations in the viewer.³⁶ She explained that: “The images and language emerge from sources that are highly personal in that they are accounts from memory. These given instances in time attempt as catalysts to evoke other moments in the viewer’s memory, that bridges the viewer and myself in dialogue.”³⁷ The highly personal memory interestingly is presumed to be able to touch the viewer, to provoke their associations. The personally significant is certainly not presented as something particular or meaningful only to the artist. Here we see the traces of Kant’s ideal of the universal voice, Cha assumes the charge of highly personal memories is communicable. Such an affective charge, like Marker’s Proustian madeleine, sets off associations and reminiscences in the viewer.

The visual track of the video is largely comprised of black and white still images, apart from a small section of super 8 film shown on the central monitor at the very beginning which spells out the title of the work letter by letter. Movement occurs only between the frozen moments of the shots, and across the monitors as images migrate left and right. These movements and migrations of

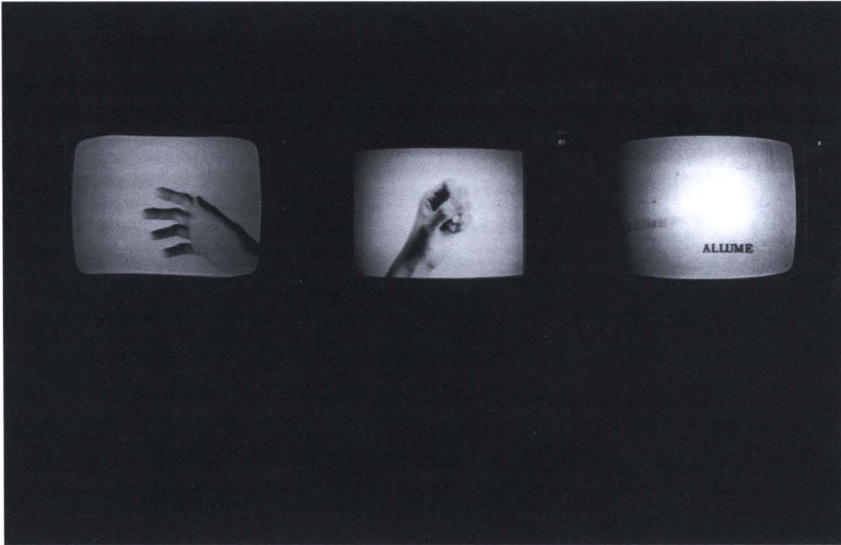


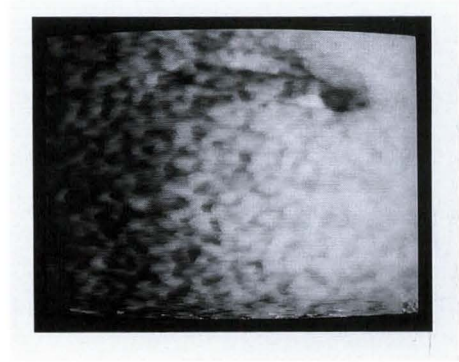
Fig. 3
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Passages, Paysages 1978
Video stills
University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum
Gift of the Theresa Hak
Kyung Cha Memorial
Foundation

images, which are all quite slow and gradual, produce a kind of intensification through reduction, as though one becomes more acutely aware of what subsists of the moving image when it has been so deliberately minimized.

The images include photographs, a painting, and French and English words hand written and in typescript – which use all the possibilities of placement opened up by Mallarmé. The photographic images are austere beautiful, deliberately nostalgic and evocative. The images of words punctuate the visual track dividing it very roughly into three sequences (Fig. 2). The first sequence of images shows an empty bed with rumpled white sheets, followed by close-ups of pillows and sheets rendered abstract through raking light and deep shadows. The second sequence is dominated by hands opening and closing (Fig. 3). The final sequence begins with bundles of letters, suggestive of an absent correspondent, the theme of absence is further underscored by a photograph of an empty room with a bay window. That some of the images here are noticeably “Asian” charges this absence with personal force, especially when we realize that a photograph of a mother and child, is of Cha and her own mother.³⁸

Cha deploys stills as a way of casting the time of the film in a kind of doubled past: the time of the images does not correlate with the time of the video recording or the time of the voice-over, thus pointing not only to the lessons of structural film, but also to the theme of memory. This can be seen in early works like *Permutations* (1976, 16mm film, b & w, silent, 11 min 20 sec) and *Mouth to Mouth* (1975, b & w video, sound, 7 min 40 sec). *Permutations* for example makes evident the flicker effect by quickly juxtaposing a series of photographs of Cha’s sister, with her eyes opened and closed and facing forwards and backwards, with

Fig. 4
 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Mouth to Mouth 1975
 Video still
 University of California,
 Berkeley Art Museum
 Gift of the Theresa Hak
 Kyung Cha Memorial
 Foundation



sections of white and black film.³⁹ Here the flickering stills refuse the seamless-ness of projected film, but they also signal the persistence of vision, through the uncanny effects of the ghostly afterimages that appear on the blank film. Similarly, *Mouth to Mouth* takes the materialist concerns of structural film to video by using aural and visual static to convey both the sound of rain and the image of water pouring into a disembodied mouth enunciating Korean vowels in the centre of the screen (Fig. 4).

With *Passages* one can see the effects of this apprenticeship, but also the emergence of a more nuanced and purposeful use of film history and theory to create her own idiom. Each image, because it is a still operating in two-dimensions not in terms of filmic illusion, wavers between presence and absence: that is, the frozen moments are set before us but the time of their making is not. The pastness of the images is thus emphasized rather than the film medium; and the camera is recast as an apparatus of memory, recalling or recollecting images rather than simply recording them.⁴⁰ The complicated sense of time conveyed by the still images is intensified by the soundtrack; it deals, like Proust, with lost time, remembering and forgetting. The very first word of the voice-over is “gone,” this is then modified “not yet, not gone not yet, a few remaining moments.” This is fairly typical of the voice-over, a kind of fragmentary, often incantatory, elliptical, recursive kind of speech. We don’t know what is gone, and nor do we ever discover what it is that has gone or remains. The temporal shifts are also marked here: past tense “gone”, then future anterior “not yet gone,” then to the present – “a few remaining moments.” This kind of shuffling of time puts the work almost into the realm of timelessness; language certainly does not provide a secure point of anchorage for the viewer. The voice over

constantly shifts tenses and persons, for example, “Remember just the other day, I’m closing my eyes, do you remember me closing my eyes the other day.” “I have forgotten, that is what she will say, that she has forgotten.” This recursive undoing of what has been said, creates not only a strong sense of the instability of meaning but also shifts the listener/viewer into a kind of dream-like space where such shifts and contradictions can, as it were, live peacefully. The untransmittable is thus not only a kind of unnameable loss around which the work circulates, but also an excess of meaning that outstrips our perceptual capacities. This accommodation of the impossible is sustained by the reassuring rhythm of Cha’s voice-over which is incantatory, very distinct and measured, at once calming, almost lulling. And yet her tone is wistful and with a very slight edge of urgency. The timing of the image track also has a reassuring slow rhythm: images change slowly, fades are used frequently to ease the transitions between shots and there are many visual pauses comprised of blank sections of black and grey. These devices create an overall continuity despite the fact that the images themselves are disconnected suggestive fragments.

Only at one point do the photographic images and sound track converge, when a male voice begins “Dear Theresa,” only to be shadowed by another voice speaking in French, and a bundle of letters appears. Two very precise dates are given 31 July 1972 and 20 June 1974; and between these two is a snatch of dialogue saying, “hardly let anyone out.” After the second date the language switches to Korean and then Korean music is played. The event between these dates may be the imposition of martial law in October 1972 in South Korea. The images certainly seem to shift after this point to more distinctly Asian images – the landscapes of the title, represented by both painting and photography. Historical moments, actual geographical locations and biographical elements are suggestively woven into the flux of word and image, registered as definite temporal and spatial anchorage points, but not emphasized.

In addition to the complex weaving of word and image, the work marshals and deploys the contrasts that are the basis of meaning – the pictorial means of light/dark, reiterated by the French words *enteindre/allumer*, past/present, remembered/forgotten, gone/not gone, word/image. These contrasts are intertwined rather than obeying the law of mutual exclusion. Min Jung Lee has argued that it is in “the pause or silent middle between oppositions that Cha must form her subjecthood.”⁴¹ While in the literary discussions of *Dictée* there is an emphasis on her particular identity formation between cultures, in *Passages* what lies between the organising oppositions of reason is the other scene where identity is undone. Certainly this is how her friend and contemporary Judith Barry presents Cha’s project, she describes Cha’s work as showing “how language structures the unconscious by destroying conventions about what constitutes her/our symbolic order, a radical reordering of not only her identity as Asian, as non-native anywhere – and her place in that identity as a woman, but which also deeply subvert notions about how time and space and light might produce meaning.”⁴²

This undoing can be understood as a kind of feminist action. However, with Cha's work there is a dream-like quality induced by the ramifying associations that makes undoing pleasurable and moving. In other words rather than being made more conscious of our determinations by culture, or of the contingency of these constructions, Cha's work makes us aware of our fundamental contingency, that our certainties about time, space and language are not the only reality. Or to put this another way, her work mobilizes the features and processes at work in the dream and the other scene of the unconscious. Indeed her stated aim for one of her performances was to be "the dream of the audience."⁴³ This intriguing phrase, which begins an artist's statement from 1975, is an early indication of the register of experience Cha aimed to emulate and to induce in her audience. The dream, of course, is also one of the key metaphors for the cinematic experience used by film theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry. He argues there that the film apparatus mimics the psychic apparatus during sleep: separation from the outside world, inhibition of mobility, a confusion of representation and perception.⁴⁴

In *Passages Paysages*, there are other analogies with the psychoanalytic understanding of the dream. For example, without a fixed point of enunciation, *Passages Paysages* has the character Lacan describes as the impersonal form of the dream. According to Lacan a feature of all dreams is this strange sliding away of the subject, that is, rather than the dreamer actively looking, it is the dream that "shows."⁴⁵ In other words, agency shifts away from the dreamer; he or she is displaced and pacified. The ethic of impersonality is thus doubly inscribed here. At the level of production, Cha cedes the role of the expressive subject to make way for the dream of the audience, and at the level of reception, the beholder is displaced by the impersonal dream-like form of the work. And the dreamer/viewer is pacified despite the fact that they are not able to synthesise or position themselves in relation to the complex temporal and spatial shifts of the work, because the dream-like quality of the work brings with it the reduction of emotional intensity characteristic of the dream. In *Passages* the pervading feeling of melancholy is present, but attenuated or dissipated by the ramifying associations.

Attenuation of feeling, rather than its absence, suggests another way of thinking about the anaesthetic sensibility. In many respects the work accords with the anaesthetic sensibility insofar as there is no clear place of anchorage or identification for the beholder, however, the beholder is not alienated by the work, or made more conscious of it. One is not led to a more reflexive kind of viewing, the work is too complicated to facilitate that kind of mastery, rather the impersonal form of the work allows feeling to be registered but contained. Viewing then is not traumatising, nor redemptive, rather it has the effect, as one critic put it, of suspending the beholder "between consciousness and unconscious,"⁴⁶ or as Cha's close friend and colleague, Yong Soon Min has said, "they sort of lower your blood pressure and put you into this very tranquil, meditative state of mind."⁴⁷ In *Passages* there is a sense of pleasurable reverie

induced by the work as well as an abiding sense of loss, transience, “passager,” or fleeting beauty, to invoke the French word which seems to present itself as the third term of the title that might unite the previous two. Cha’s work is thus able to demonstrate what is lost and gained by displacement. Without anchorage the viewing subject is at once disoriented but also opened to another more associational relationship to words and images.

Work like Cha’s, guided by the personal experience of what could be called “secondary” trauma – her cultural displacement or exile – makes apparent the founding trauma of subjectivity that is for the most part repressed and occluded.⁴⁸ What her work communicates, however, is a highly unusual approach to traumatic experience, one that seeks to intertwine loss and gain, pleasure and pain. In aesthetics, this peculiar set of conjunctions, as we have already seen, goes by the name of the sublime. Cha’s work quite remarkably refigures how we might understand the meaning of the untransmittable or the unrepresentable, linking it to subjective concerns. In particular, she shows how an ethics of impersonality allows, and in fact enables, personal experience and feeling to be expressed in unconventional and non-autobiographical ways.

1. Juliana Chang, “Recit: Previously Unpublished Works by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,” *Fence* 4 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002): 82.
2. Jean-François Lyotard, “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime,” *Artforum* 20 no. 8 (April 1982): 64-9.
3. Margaret Iverson, “The Deflationary Impulse: Postmodernism, Feminism and the Anti-Aesthetic,” *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991), 84.
4. Michael Fried, for example, argues strongly for what he terms “presentness,” the work of art that manifests this quality gives one an experience of “a kind of instantaneousness.” He also describes this in spatial terms “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.” “Art and Objecthood,” (1967) *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 167.
5. “Objective taste” is Clement Greenberg’s term. He assumes Kant believed in such a thing, which was underpinned by a shared sense or faculty, *sensus communis*. He accuses Kant of failing to show how “this universal faculty could be invoked to settle disagreements of taste.” Clement Greenberg, “Can Taste be Objective?” *Homemade Aesthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21.
6. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indiana: Hackett, 1987), 55.
7. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 60.
8. Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” (1961) *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 819.
9. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (July-August, 1984): 61.
10. Le Witt cited in Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 49.
11. Sol Le Witt, “Serial Project No.1 (ABCD),” (1966), *Minimalism*, ed. James Meyer, (London: Phaidon, 2000), 226.
12. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 no. 3 (Autumn 1975).
13. Griselda Pollock, “Theory and Pleasure,” *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985*, ed. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (London: Pandora, 1987), 245.
14. Pollock, “Theory and Pleasure,” 248. See also Pollock “Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice—a Brechtian Perspective,” *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 179-81.
15. Sylvia Harvey, “Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties,” *Screen* (May-June 1982): 53-4.
16. Bertolt Brecht (1940) “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect,” *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 101.
17. Brecht, “Short Description,” 101.
18. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (1982) (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995).
19. See Suzanne Foley, *Space Time Sound. Conceptual Art in the San Francisco Bay Area: The 1970s*, exhbn. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1981). Benjamin Buchloh has recently noted the consistent omission in the histories of the 1960s and 70s, his own included, of women’s body-based practices. He argues insufficient attention has been paid to how these practices operate as “counter-activities” to the main practices art history has used to characterise the period, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, et al. “The Reception of the Sixties,” *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 18-19.

20. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, artist statement, after 1976, cited in Lawrence R. Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances, the Opening of Networks, the Infinity of Languages," *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982)*, exhbn. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, University of California Berkeley Art Museum, 2001), 19-20.
21. For a discussion of the influence of analytic philosophy on conceptual art see Peter Osborne, "Conceptual Art and/as Philosophy," *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion, 1999), 47-65.
22. Lawrence Rinder, *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard*, Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art, New American Film and Video Series 69, December 23, 1992—January 31, 1993, n.p.
23. Rinder, *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Other Things Seen*, n.p.
24. These are the curator, Kate Linker's terms, see Kate Linker, *Forward, Difference: On Representation and Sexuality (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985)*, 5.
25. Cha, Artist Statement, 1976 cited in Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances," 23.
26. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, ed., *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings* (Tanam: New York, 1980).
27. Min Jung Lee, "Baring the Apparatus: Dictée's Speaking Subject writes a Response," *Hitting Critical Mass* 6 no. 1 (Fall 1999): 38.
28. Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoff Bennington and Marian Hobson, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 199.
29. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 109.
30. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 121.
31. Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances," 22.
32. Rinder, "The Plurality of Entrances," 21-23.
33. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). Freud refers to the "comic effect of giving free play to the unconscious mode of thought", 266.
34. Russell Grigg cited by Bruce Fink in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Book XX Encore 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. with notes Bruce Fink, (New York: Norton, 1998), 44 fn 15.
35. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Pause Still*, 80 Langton St, San Francisco, CA, performance notes, March 24, 1979, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archives, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.
36. Marker said, "I claim for the image the powers of the *Madeleine*." Marker cited in Uriel Orlow, "Chris Marker: The Archival Power of the Image," *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Toronto: Alphabet City Media, 2002), 440.
37. Cha, *Pause Still*, performance notes.
38. Susan Woolf indicates that the image is of Cha as a child. Susan Wolf, "Theresa Cha: Recalling Telling ReTelling," *Afterimage* 14 no. 1 (Summer 1986): 12. Rinder also indicates that an old family photograph is used in this work. Lawrence Rinder, "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Passages Paysages," *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art. In, Of, and From the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher, exhbn. cat. (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 361.
39. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 408. Sitney refers to structural cinema as "cinema of the mind rather than the eye" (408). The obvious links to conceptual art are noted by Peter Wollen. He draws attention to the fact that conceptual art and structural film are rarely discussed together despite being closely related. He attributes this to the strict division of labour between the art historian and the film historian, neither of whom take into account the work of the other. Peter Wollen, "Global Conceptualism and North American Conceptual Art," *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, exhbn. cat. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 84.
40. Cha was very conscious of the effects of using still images, she said of her use of projection in performance that "a direct interaction with the audience in the same space and time is achieved as well as uniting the spectator with the 'Absent' where and 'Absent' when the images and words were first made." Cha "Artist's Statement," (1978) *Der Traum des Publikums: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. The Dream of the Audience*, English publication ed. Constance M. Lewallen, extended German/English publication ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Cologne: Walter König, Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2004), 80.
41. Min Jung Lee, "Baring the Apparatus," 42.
42. Barry cited by Constance M. Lewallen, "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—Her time and Place," *The Dream of the Audience*, 10.
43. This statement by Cha refers to her performance *A Ble Wail* (1975). Cha quoted in Lewallen, "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—Her time and Place," 3.
44. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Apparatus*, ed. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, 41-62.
45. Jacques Lacan, "Of the Gaze As *Objet Petit a*," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 75.
46. Robert Atkins' 1978 unpublished review of Cha's performance *Other Things Seen Other Things Heard (Ailleurs)* for *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* cited by Katherine Russell Bond, "Exile and the Maiden: The Performance Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha," *Korean Culture* (Summer 1986): 17.
47. Min cited in Bond, "Exile and the Maiden," 17.
48. For a concise explanation of this idea see Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche," *Postmodern Culture* 11.2 (2001): 1-12.

Fig. 1
Marcel Duchamp
*Etant Donnés: 1° La Chute
d'eau 2° Le Gaz d'éclairage*
(Given: 1° The Waterfall 2°
The Illuminating Gas)
1946-66
Mixed-media assemblage
242.6 x 177.8 cm
Philadelphia Museum of
Art
© Marcel Duchamp
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Duchamp: Creativity is a Form of Onanism

Andrew McNamara

For most of his life, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) maintained an antagonistic attitude to what he regarded as the prevailing dictate within modernism, its “retinal obsession.” “By retinal,” he states in his 1961 Philadelphia lecture, “I mean that the aesthetic pleasure depends almost entirely on the impression on the retina, without appealing to any auxiliary interpretation.”¹ The retinal focus defined the modern painter primarily as a sensuous being, if not an aesthetic child, a figure governed by feeling and rarely by thought. Duchamp resisted the retinal-formal definition of modernism, but not modernism per se. Rather Duchamp simply questioned why modernism and the retinal-sensuous emphasis should be regarded as synonymous, as most art-historical literature has tended to assume.

Not surprisingly, Duchamp’s practice held an awkward place in mid-century accounts of modernism, which were indeed largely predicated upon the retinal-sensual understanding of modernism. According to these predominantly formalist interpretations of modernism, Duchamp’s arduous practice constituted a departure from the script, a detour resulting in a dead-end. Yet in the last decade of Duchamp’s life (from the late 1950s and into the 1960s) the creative climate began to shift: through pop, minimalism and subsequently conceptual art, Duchamp’s work was rehabilitated and appropriated by a new generation of artists, critics and writers as a beacon of a new approach to art.² At the same time, the multi-disciplinary nature of much inter-war modernism was re-emerging on the art-historical radar; the Russian constructivists were being rediscovered; Lissitzky’s *Proun Room* and Schwitters’ *Merzbau* were reconstructed in Europe during the 1960s. As far as Duchamp himself is concerned, some key, but contrary markers highlight this re-evaluation. First, the best-known formalist art critic, Clement Greenberg, begins to pay serious attention to Duchamp – for virtually the first time in his career – essentially to warn of the menace of Duchamp’s legacy (Greenberg would not remain alone on that score). Second, Duchamp himself goes public

with a series of important utterances – talks, interviews and lectures – offering biographical and artistic reflections, which while they appear whimsical and diffident, also hint at an alternative formulation of the modernist artistic endeavour.

Another factor to consider is Duchamp's grand finale, *Etant Donnés: 1° La Chute d'eau 2° Le Gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1° The Waterfall 2° The Illuminating Gas) (1946-66) (Fig.1). It has been suggested that *Etant Donnés* is perverse because it actively seeks to confound the positive reappraisal of Duchamp's work during the last decade of his life. According to this interpretation, the work Duchamp held secret for so long – it was made public after his death in 1969 – upsets the predominantly “conceptual” understanding of his practice due to its graphic realism and the positioning of its viewer in an explicitly voyeuristic act of looking. Read this way the work parodies Renaissance painting conventions, particularly perspective, because the purportedly “disinterested” status of the observer is therefore muddled and shown to be far too “interested.” Detached “opticality” is rendered sordidly carnal and, according to this reading, the work initiates the period of the “institutional critique” as it is a work that lies “within the very citadel of the museum itself,” going “to the heart of the aesthetic paradigm, critiquing it, demystifying it, deconstructing it.”³ The virtue of this reading is that it complicates a certain post-minimalist and conceptual orthodoxy that overly determines Duchamp's art in the direction of the “conceptual” and a detached didacticism, thus depicting it as consumed with ontological puzzles over the status of art. The drawback of this critique, however, is also its didacticism: all is explained by asserting that Duchamp devised *Etant Donnés* in order to reprimand a viewer for displaying any interest at all. In other words, one views the work in order to be chastised and Duchamp ends up sounding like a prurient priest.

Despite the deceptive evasiveness of many of his utterances, Duchamp is clearly fascinated by the prospect of aesthetic pleasure, but the result is much more complex than this critique accompanying *Etant Donnés* permits. Duchamp's notion of aesthetic pleasure is discovered in the “auxiliary interpretation” that exceeds the boundaries of the retinal circumscription and which does indeed cross over into an eroticized reading of art as well as of its reception. It is just that for Duchamp the “dynamics” of masturbation and narcissism constitute the primary triggers of this eroticized model of modernism. The analysis that follows will seek to show how the usual set of antithetical readings associated with Duchamp's practice, such as the aesthetic versus the “conceptual,” are not helpful in grasping this pivotal aspect of his art. They are particularly unhelpful when it comes to discerning how a work like *Etant Donnés* develops and extends these well-established preoccupations of Duchamp's oeuvre. With onanism and narcissism as primary triggers, Duchamp advances his peculiarly incisive alternative to the retinal-formal definition, which offers a perplexing insight into the nature of modernistic artistic ambition and its analysis.

Coming Full Circle

Long before the Australian artist and writer, Ian Burn posed his polemic question, “is art history any use to artists?”, the circular and narcissistic impetus of such a proposition had intrigued Duchamp.⁴ For him, the circuit and the rendezvous amounted to its most compelling creative-critical models because they suggest a confirmation of their starting places. What would be an art history *only* of benefit to artists? Critical orthodoxy largely presents Duchamp as the figurehead of an “anti-aesthetic” stance, of an art preoccupied with endgame scenarios, or otherwise as the sardonic nihilist happily disposing of everything fundamental to genuinely sincere aesthetic inquiry. Yet Duchamp’s fascination rested firmly with central, even “mainstream,” aesthetic considerations, even though he explored them through the incongruous, even seemingly disparaging lens of narcissism and onanism. These are terms that underscore and amplify the circular validation of art.

When asked by Pierre Cabanne in their intriguing interviews of the mid-1960s how he regards the evolution of art, Duchamp responds that he doesn’t see any evolution at all. Art has one consistent feature: “Man invented art.” Art primarily reveals something about how we think “about ourselves” and thus “about our own satisfaction.” “We created it for our sole and unique use; it’s a little like masturbation. I don’t believe in the essential aspect of art.”⁵ While it reads like an iconoclastic statement, the remark can be interpreted as simply an argument for a social-contextual understanding of art. Such an understanding asserts that art possesses no trans-historical consistency. Rather it proposes that art differs according to varying uses and interpretations, in different historical circumstances and according to different social systems. In any case, this is not an audacious claim because the proposition that art or culture is “man-made” rather than divine – and thereby something capable of being challenged as well as of being re-made – is a basic axiom of modernist culture.⁶

Also in saying art is “a little like masturbation,” Duchamp does not necessarily imply a criticism. He doesn’t say he abhors masturbation; instead he is rather happy to acknowledge this onanistic impulse. He famously reports that the provocation to make the work that followed in the footsteps of *Coffee Mill* of 1911 – *Chocolate Grinder (No.1)* of 1913; followed by *(No.2)* in 1914 (Fig.2) – occurred after seeing such a machine operating in the window of a confectionary store in Rouen (while he was visiting his parents). Duchamp recalls being transfixed by the endless rotation of this chocolate grinder with its chambers fixed in a ponderously relentless rhythm, which finally yielded a smooth paste of chocolate. In retrospect, it struck him as the apogee of the onanistic impulse:

Always there has been a necessity for circles in my life, for ... rotation. It is a kind of narcissism, this self-sufficiency, a kind of onanism. The machine goes around and by some miraculous process that I have always found fascinating, produces chocolate.⁷

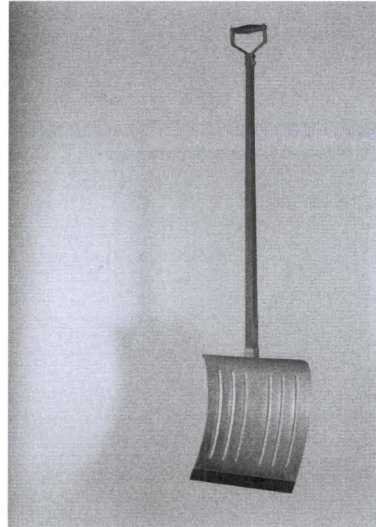
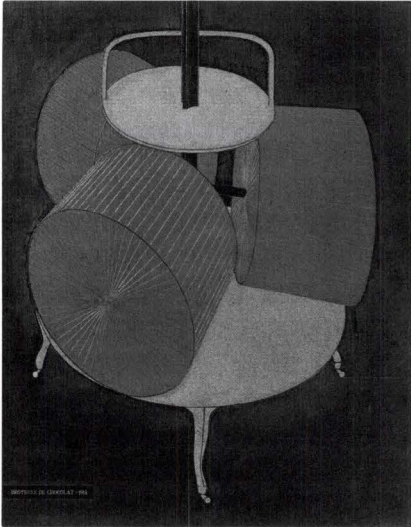


Fig. 2
 Marcel Duchamp
Chocolate Grinder (No.2)
 1914
 Oil and thread on canvas
 65 x 54 cm
 Philadelphia Museum of
 Art
 © Marcel Duchamp
 Licensed by VISCOPY,
 Australia, 2007

Fig. 3
 Marcel Duchamp
*In Advance of the Broken
 Arm* 1915/64
 Ready-made, wood and
 galvanized-iron
 132 x 35 cm
 Centre Pompidou, Paris
 © Marcel Duchamp
 Licensed by VISCOPY,
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Duchamp reveals that onanism presents an inescapable compulsion for him personally – artistically speaking, of course! The impervious movements of the chocolate grinder suggested a superb model of individual sovereignty – and Duchamp readily admits his deep attachment to this aspiration, even while maintaining an ironic outlook on its expected dividends. For him, the quaint drum-like mechanism of the chocolate grinder evokes the machinery of cultural production particularly well: it pursues its course in a splendidly oblivious circular operation, like a machine busily grinding away at its raw material, going nowhere, except where it started, accumulating nothing, a little like masturbation, and a little like art – the human-based activity that is redeemed by confirming humanity’s as well as the artist’s self-image.

Yet when Cabanne reminds Duchamp that he once referred to the readymades as “a sort of rendezvous” and asks if he would have been enticed to make the rendezvous a focus of his work, Duchamp replies, no, “I would have been embarrassed by it.” He admits, however, that he did entertain “the idea of doing a certain thing in advance, of declaring ‘at such and such an hour I’ll do this,’” only to think better of it.⁸ Still he did create a work that includes “in advance” in its title, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915/64) (Fig.3), the snow shovel, a ready-made, which reveals an ironic attitude to the prospect of the rendezvous. Indeed, according to some interpretations, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* betrays biting sarcasm about the pretensions of scientific management and the presumed predictability of its remorseless biomechanical ambitions. In Duchamp’s wry presentation, the “scientific” approach to labour does not result in ever greater efficiency – the dogmatic insistence of industrial (and post-industrial) societies – but instead awaits a rendezvous with incapacity, whether as a failure to perform or as severe injury. The black humour implies not a harmonious

rendezvous, but a modernism at odds with governing axioms of modernity. The intent is clear; it implies the presence of an aberrant cultural circuit revolving erroneously within the governing economic and technological parameters.

Duchamp's accentuation of this ironic aberrance challenges the conventional wisdom that regards modernism as the cultural reflection of modernity, its industrial-technological-bureaucratic counterpart. Duchamp's reticence toward the rendezvous as an ideal may be explained by his reticence about presuming that reflection ought to be the sole source of satisfaction art can offer. Yet, if there is a vague analogy to Taylorism and to scientific management conveyed by *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, then the focus on segmentation pointedly recalls Duchamp's own earlier interest in chronophotography, discovered in the books of Etienne Jules Marey, as well as his own (once in-)famous painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), which all display a fascination with the breakdown of human actions into component parts. The snow shovel is, however, by comparison the implement without the accompanying action (both literally and metaphorically, it is just a plain snow shovel suspended by a mock-humorous title). Alternatively, it is the tool that clears an impasse – an allusion provocatively reinforced by Duchamp's 1957 proclamation that the artist is a “mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.”⁹ Yet *In Advance of the Broken Arm* hints darkly that the very act of forging this clearing proves disabling. Ultimately, such ambivalent outcomes prove decisive to his practice. Referring satirically to conscription in his *The 1914 Box*, Duchamp parodies the effort to dismantle and reshape the body in the cause of greater efficiency by suggesting instead a dissembling disassembly: “Against compulsory military service: a ‘deferment’ of each limb, of the heart and the other anatomical parts; each soldier being already unable to put his uniform on again, his heart feeding *telephonically*, a deferred arm, etc. Then, no more feeding; each ‘deferee’ isolating himself. Finally a Regulation of regrets from one ‘deferee’ to another.”¹⁰

Duchamp's reticence concerning the rendezvous as a creative-critical prospect does not amount to a straightforward rebuke of the aspirations it represents – quite the opposite. He strove to articulate this aspiration for fulfilment in a particularly evocative, though often incongruously deadpan manner. Duchamp felt that the privileged aesthetic-artistic form of circular justification was at once (unusually) impossible and inevitable – and it is this peculiarly contrary dynamic of an impossible motivation propelled by an inevitable compulsion that reveals much about the creative act and its reception.

Detours and Delays in Processing the Raw Material called Art

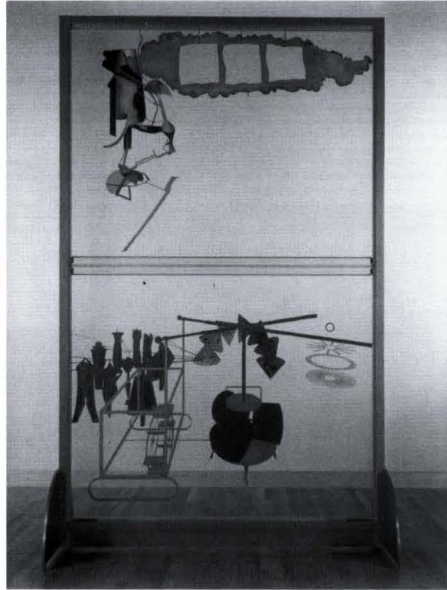
Why shouldn't art history meet the desire of artists and confirm their own ends? Duchamp's response is perfunctory: “the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius,” but the crucial thing is the verdict of the spectator or of “posterity.” The artist is condemned “to wait for the verdict of the spectator in

order that his declarations take a social value and that, finally, posterity includes him in the primers of Art History.”¹¹ Reception is triggered by the work, yet it in turn it triggers the work by conferring its status as a work of art. It at once validates the artist as an artist and simultaneously derails the artist from their ideal, self-fulfilling justification – the art history aimed only at the artist. Duchamp develops a rather perplexing aesthetic terminology to explain how he envisages the contrary alignment of artistic autonomy and the reception of art. Into a classical-Romantic aesthetic vocabulary replete with axioms of self-sufficiency and fulfilment, he favours an array of contrary terms such as “deferral,” “stoppage” as well as “delay.” Duchamp pointedly referred to the *Large Glass, The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23) (Fig.4) as a delay rather than a painting or a picture. By this, he meant a *delay* in the “most general way possible,” as he declares in his “commentary,” *The Green Box* of 1934, thus not delay in terms of the dictionary definition of the word, but more to hint at “their indecisive reunion ‘delay’ – /a delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver.”¹²

Duchamp seems to suggest that the modernist emphasis on aesthetic autonomy went too far in the direction of sovereignty. This is not to say that he refuted aesthetic autonomy. Duchamp was in fact an arch-modernist in many of his cultural assumptions. For instance, he dismissed taste as a mundane propensity because it fortified mere habit and thus perpetuated well-worn conventions.¹³ Taste is stale. True innovation is difficult to achieve, even more impossible to sustain, but repetition perpetuates the comfortable emptiness of taste. In a revealing comment to Cabanne about his motivations in regard to the *Large Glass*, Duchamp confesses: “I have had an obsession about not using the same things. One has to be on guard because, despite oneself, one can become invaded by things of the past. Without wanting to, one puts in some detail. There, it was a constant battle to make an exact and complete break.”¹⁴

Duchamp was no postmodernist before the fact; he certainly did not harbour the ambition to eliminate originality or innovation as viable aspirations. At the same time, Duchamp readily confounds such aspirations. His characterization of the artist as a “mediumistic being” is telling in this regard, especially when one recalls that Duchamp’s privileged figures or analogies for art and the artist derived from an odd amalgam of sexual, mechanical and biological-cultural references – primarily narcissism and onanism, but also farming, coitus interruptus, sexual congress and reproduction, or some combination of these examples. In “The Creative Act,” Duchamp refers to “personal expression” as simply the raw material, art “à l’état brut,” “which must be ‘refined’ as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator.”¹⁵ The quote confirms his opinion of the centrality of reception, though the association seeks further evocative resonances. Duchamp often mentions sugar and coffee as examples of primary products that yield an extra spark or charge as a consequence of their “refinement.” Agricultural metaphors evoke “culture,” or cultural activities in the most

Fig. 4
 Marcel Duchamp
*The Bride Stripped Bare by
 Her Bachelors, Even (The
 Large Glass)* 1915-23
 Replica made by Richard
 Hamilton 1965-6
 Oil, lead, dust and varnish
 on glass
 2775 x 1759 mm
 Tate, London
 © Marcel Duchamp
 Licensed by VISCOPY,
 Australia, 2007



elementary sense. As Raymond Williams notes in his *Keywords*, “culture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals.”¹⁶ Interestingly, Duchamp offered such an explanation of the *Large Glass* (one explanation among a plethora, it must be said) by analogy to agricultural machinery: “Apparatus, instrument for farming.” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 44)

The *Coffee Mill* of 1911 was Duchamp’s first machine image. It is reminiscent of harvesting machines to the extent that the painting outlines the machine’s actions in producing coffee – that is, in the act of grinding – and thus it insinuates a kinetic sensation by depicting the rotation of the handle in several positions simultaneously.¹⁷ These grinding analogies refer to a range of associations – sexual, artistic-cultural and production techniques (whether primary or industrial). The processes of refinement that Duchamp alludes to elicit a peculiar type of percolating fuel, which others feed off and seek to embellish – hence confirming the idea of the artist as a “mediumistic” being. Reception is an unfortunate, circuitous necessity because its role is to refine that which Duchamp refers to variously as the artwork (the personal “art coefficient”) and as the raw material (art “à l’état brut”) by performing an act of “actual transubstantiation.”¹⁸ Emerging as he does from a Catholic culture, Duchamp could not be considered naïve in enlisting the analogy of transubstantiation. By developing its sexual, mechanical, religious and biological-cultural affinities, however, Duchamp offers a profane explanation of cultural modes of embellishment. This treatment is especially notable in regard to one of the pillars of aesthetic inquiry, aesthetic pleasure.

Doing the Rounds with Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder*: Aesthetic Pleasure Reconsidered

Duchamp admits to two obsessions: “an obsession about not using the same things” (in regard to the *Large Glass*) and an obsession with circular aesthetic justifications (which he also appears to ridicule). But if art is a man-made obsession, meaning that it has been traditionally justified only to the extent that art serves to satisfy a desire for identification – thus fulfilling a satisfaction (whether of self-representation, self-understanding or self-acknowledgment), then how does this expectation accord with the modernist imperative to avoid being, as Duchamp puts it, “invaded by things of the past,” to strive to “make an exact and complete break”? It is far from clear that Duchamp ever felt the need to mediate this tension; rather his fascination was captured by the contrariness of such impulses. By accentuating a contrary dynamic, Duchamp exposed the oddly disjunctive tensions within the modernist aesthetic framework, which he tended to view as the triggers driving a peculiarly rickety contraption.

Take the example of the deadpan *Chocolate Grinder (No.1)* of 1913, and the *Chocolate Grinder (No.2)* of 1914, which we have seen carry these social-cultural and sexualized references for Duchamp. With both versions, he abstracted from an actual chocolate making machine in order to accentuate the circular motion of the central mechanism depicted, which is mounted on a round platform rather than a tray or container for mixing and holding chocolate. Actual chocolate grinders in Duchamp's youth tended to employ two rollers; the introduction of an addition roller in his works emphasizes the circularity of the action devoid of functional outcome. As Juan Antonio Ramírez notes, “there is no bucket, so that the hypothetically milled chocolate will be deposited inexorably on the ground.” The male masturbatory suggestion is explicit, but more subtle is the blending of prosaic office furniture with mechanical references: “the base consists of a small table with Louis XV feet, each supported on its own little wheel with a revolving rod, similar to the chairs found in many offices; above is a kind of circular platform (the ‘necktie’) and a vertical pole (bayonet) on which rest blades or scissors.”¹⁹

Conveying the erotic through ordinary everyday devices and implements remains in keeping with a central tenet of Duchamp's thinking on art. He postulated that eroticism could be an alternative modernist “ism.” Eroticism is not only, according to Duchamp, “a rather widespread thing throughout the world,” but also a phenomenon approaching a universal definition of art: “it replaces, if you wish, what other literary schools called Symbolism, Romanticism.”²⁰ Duchamp's recourse to eroticism as a meta-“ism” aims to displace the “retinal” obsession of “pictorial modernism,” the purportedly “common factor” behind the otherwise disparate array of modernist art movements, the “isms.” To avoid the retinal circumscription that he outlined in his 1961 Philadelphia talk, Duchamp advocates the alternative of running together “ideas and their visual presentation” in a “hybrid form,” “without being a painter, without being a writer.”²¹ Contrary to popular belief, this hybrid formulation denies not only the painterly reduction to

a “retinal sensibility,” but also the propensity to elevate the conceptual or theoretical over the sensible.²² Duchamp claims that he wanted to redress the dominant retinal fixation within modernist painting primarily because he believed it *restricted* the scope of what is considered to constitute aesthetic pleasure.

Duchamp’s incongruously flippant, yet astute gestures aim to force a re-evaluation of the satisfaction supposedly offered by art in the aftermath of modernism. He was intrigued by the provocative, even disturbing quandary, of aesthetic pleasure and his ambition was to draw out such aspects through the seemingly inert qualities of the readymade and the stalling power of aesthetic indifference. The whole point of the readymades was to find an object capable of stalling traditional aesthetic evaluation. The readymades are actually difficult to achieve precisely because their aim is to withstand being evaluated either as beautiful or ugly, good or bad. And the problem, of course, as Duchamp laments, is that, even in the case of the most banal or indifferent readymade object, sooner or later, “you begin to like it or to hate it.”²³ In fact, he estimated that it took only fifteen days before one opted either way. Indifference is a rare capacity, aesthetically speaking. It is, however, tantalizingly provocative because it heralds a precarious suspension of traditional aesthetic evaluation. There are in fact very few “pure” readymades because Duchamp promptly moved on to “assisted” or “aided” readymades. Either way, the stalling capacity of visual indifference does have the “beneficial” appeal of being able to jar the presumption of a direct connectivity between the artist and their hand as well as between the work, its meaning and thus its comprehension.

Similarly, eroticism offers the tantalizing prospect of explaining all creativity, and yet it simultaneously confounds this very possibility. Yes, it amounts to Duchamp’s grand counter-definition to the retinal-obsessed definition of pictorial modernism, but eroticism is also precariously elusive. While eroticism is ubiquitous – “a thing that everyone understands” – Duchamp concedes that it is “constantly hidden,” meaning that it occurs in things that “aren’t necessarily erotic.”²⁴ If we recall that Duchamp’s ambition is to express “the idea” and its visual counterpart, then this amounts to an admission that any accompanying idea is regularly deflected in the case of the visual representation of eroticism. The erotic is pervasive, but its appearance escapes everyone. Thus, he must confess to Cabanne that he has no real definition of eroticism because his more fundamental ur-definition of modernist art tends to elude direct analogies and thus proves too wayward to yield a systematic definition.²⁵ This is one explanation for the deployment of terms such as the delay, stoppage and deferral. Affect and the erotic do not necessarily rendezvous. Take Freud’s example of affect in dreams: the affect in a dream can be highly charged, whereas the ideas or subject-matter that trigger it may appear quite mundane and the reverse case is equally true: “In a dream I may be in a horrible, dangerous and disgusting situation without feeling any fear or repulsion; while at another time, on the contrary, I may be terrified at something harmless and delighted at something childish.”²⁶ The affect

that accompanies the “ideational content” of the dream may possess an incongruous relation, which is also the conclusion Duchamp reaches about eroticism.

What is Aesthetic Satisfaction? The *Large Glass*

While not quite psychoanalytic in approach, Duchamp points out the affinity between eroticism and art only to highlight a circuitous connection between eroticism and satisfaction. By doing this, he seeks to redefine the parameters of aesthetic pleasure. While Duchamp professes his adherence to a ubiquitous creative aspiration: “a kind of narcissism, this self-sufficiency, a kind of onanism,” he also pokes fun at it – particularly because it is validated by presuming a subject of knowledge always in command of the affect of an artwork as well as of its implications and meanings. The conceit is to presume that everything operates in a circuit as if to endorse an original starting position as its ideal destination – whether by forming a perfect circle (the artist and the work) or achieving a perfect equivalence (between satisfied reception and the work). This is what it means to liken the creative act to onanism. As Duchamp quips, this is the “egomaniac’s discourse.”²⁷ Yet it is crucial to note that this desire for a narcissistic rendezvous is not a preserve solely of the artist. Such a quest for satisfaction can also be attributed to the art-historical and critical aspirations surrounding art – it may even constitute, as Duchamp wryly hints, a key imperative of modernity, which may explain why his analogies drift way beyond art.

The onanistic impulse is apparent wherever it is presumed that its object is wholly explicable in terms set out by its initial assumptions. Take the example of the sociological analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, which offers a penetrating critique of aesthetic autonomy and disinterestedness. Bourdieu’s critique treats the perceived esotericism of the art world as a “symbolic violence” against all people who feel excluded from it. Such a critique explains the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere in terms of socially circumscribed class roles. The critique decries art because it denies the social, and yet at the same time it cannot foresee any other possibility than an art that is totally determined by its social conditions. This is not to deny Bourdieu’s point that “artworks serve to legitimate given structurings of interest.” It is simply to point out that the sociological investigation readily presumes the verity of its conclusions because it favors the social determination as its all-encompassing explanation of art. Thus, Bourdieu’s sociological debunking of art ultimately upholds a narcissistic critical aspiration. It cannot envisage that anything could escape the parameters of its argument. This is the source of its critical satisfaction and its circularity – or, to give it Duchamp’s emphasis, its narcissistic impulse – which stems from the fact that the premises of the argument tend to anticipate what the analysis will find and prove, what conclusion it will draw as well as what art will be promoted because the art chosen will be viewed as exemplifying its argument. Thus, if there was to be an exemplary artwork for the sociological critique of the aesthetic field then it will be an artwork that takes the same argument as the sociological critique for its content. This proves to be the case when Pierre

Bourdieu chooses Hans Haacke's work as the exemplary art practice for his sociological critique of art because Haacke's practice similarly seeks to expose the "symbolic violence" of the aesthetic field and how artistic autonomy is a sham façade of specific structural social conditions.²⁸

As we have seen, Duchamp's approach also involves pinpointing the limitations of aesthetic autonomy. The difference is that Duchamp's teasing out of onanistic propensities exposes the extent to which aesthetic discourse revolves around circuits of self-satisfaction, self-legitimacy and self-endorsement, whether artistic, critical or sociological. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any other aesthetic discourse than one designed to establish a perfect rendezvous between its presumed validation and the work being considered. Hence, the pertinence of Duchamp's remark that art is all "about our own satisfaction ... our sole and unique use; it's a little like masturbation." Duchamp, however, is concerned to accentuate the *ambivalence* of cultural autonomy – which differentiates his approach from the inertness of the sociological critique – by readily conceding that autonomy depends upon a specific institutional framework. Again this recognition is not his unique insight. As Gyorgy Markus points out, autonomous high cultural practices became designated as "specialized-professional activities" within modernity precisely because they emerge from "the framework of some functionally differentiated network of institutions."²⁹ Duchamp accepts this irony rather blithely, so that when Cabanne asks him how he can accept that all his own work would end up in a museum, given his reticence about their institutional role, he responds: "I accepted because there are practical things in life that one can't stop. I wasn't going to refuse. I could have torn them up or broken them; that would have been an idiotic gesture."³⁰ The air of resigned pragmatism is misleading. It would be idiotic because Duchamp readily acknowledges the paradox that modernist aesthetic autonomy depends upon specific institutional structures. (We need only recall that Duchamp regarded his propositions about reception, or what we might call after Derrida the "counter-signature," as leaving him in a distinct minority among artists in the late 1950s).³¹

The real challenge is to avoid reinforcing the perennial dichotomy between the sociological and the aesthetic explanation. Instead Duchamp's most valuable insights derive from appreciating how the cultural imperative of autonomy and its institutional framework function together in a necessary, but contradictory alignment. He thereby must renounce any attempt to dismiss institutional considerations because to do so otherwise would deprive his work of the provocative tension he seeks to elicit. He thereby must renounce any attempt to dismiss institutional considerations because to do otherwise would deprive his work of the provocative tension he seeks to elicit. This tension relates to competing imperatives that do not operate in tandem, but rather push in opposing directions simultaneously. This contrary dynamic is a pivotal aspect of the intrigue associated with Duchamp's most famous "delay," the *Large Glass*, which Duchamp refers to as a "transparent cage." It pits the technical drawing

style evident in the *Coffee Mill* (1911) as well as the *Chocolate Grinder* (No.1) of 1913 and (No.2) of 1914, against another of his fascinations, the genre of the nude (which he finally returned to, of course, with *Etant Donnés*). His notes for the *Large Glass* allude to an eroticised organic-mechanical circuitry in which analogies between sexual desire and mechanical-electrical apparatuses (such as the internal combustion engine) become interfused. “This tormented gearing gives birth to the desire-part of the machine. This desire-part – then alters its mechanical state – from which steam passes to the state of internal combustion engine.”³² The result is a glass contraption that is at once highly intricate and ambitious in conception, yet extremely irresolute and vague in its detailed diagrammatic visual realization. This treatment is aptly suited to envisaging the plight of a mediumistic being striving to have satisfaction fulfilled narcissistically. This is the drama of a rendezvous realized as an indecisive reunion, if not a perpetual delay. Duchamp’s idiosyncratic, clipped notes explain the “tormented gearing” of this machinery of desire this way:

This desire motor is the last part of the bachelor machine. Far from being in direct contact with the Bride. the desire motor is separated by an air cooler. (or water).

This cooler. (graphically) to express the fact that the bride, instead of being merely an asensual icicle, warmly rejects. (not chastely) the bachelors’ brusque offer this cooler will be in transparent glass. Several plates of glass one above the other.,

In spite of this cooler. there is no discontinuity between the bach. machine and the Bride. But the connections. will be. electrical. and will thus express the stripping: an alternating process. Short circuit if necessary – ³³

The bachelor machine is “fat lubricious,” whereas the bride, “an apotheosis of virginity,” possesses “ignorant desire, blank desire (with a touch of malice).” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 39) The chocolate grinder reappears in the *Large Glass* as the rotating mechanism that has hooked up eight malic moulds as though hung out to dry on some kind of primitive treadmill mechanism. These malic moulds are a sad foretaste of narcissism having to face up to itself; they hang limply, as Duchamp seeks to explain, “as if enveloped, alongside their regrets, by a mirror reflecting back to them their own complexity to the point of their being hallucinated rather onanistically.” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 51) The terms of this description can be confused if taken too literally. The references to the bride and the bachelor machines, electrical circuitry, the internal combustion engine, and onanistic hallucinations heighten an ever-proliferating array of metonymic substitutions, from mechanical-electrical apparatuses to the psychic apparatus, from machinery to genitalia to prosaic objects in a seemingly endless circuit. The process initiates an insatiable, yet forlorn drive, for reference.³⁴ As Duchamp blithely remarks, “there is no question of symbolizing by a grandiose painting this happy goal – the bride’s desire.” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 42) Painting can only capture “an inventory of the elements of this blossoming.”

This ambivalent explication of modernist cultural imperatives continues to “blossom” when probing the suggestiveness of Duchamp’s aesthetic terminology. While “onanism” features prominently, the term does not simply mean masturbation, but also coitus interruptus, implying disruption. The book of Genesis (38: 7-10) explains that the wrath of God fell upon Onan because he practiced coitus interruptus by spilling “his seed on the ground.”³⁵ Onanism could thereby be regarded as both fortifying the narcissistic presumption and frustrating it. To return to the earlier example of *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, the equivocal result of the display of an ordinary snow shovel is to hint at a productive capacity that is undermined by the same instrument meant to maximize a productive potential.³⁶ The very act of using the shovel advances, to Duchamp’s mind, the potential for breaking one’s arm. In turn, the reference to the arm and its breaking alludes vaguely to onanism in so far as a productive orientation is disrupted.³⁷ Oddly enough, Duchamp’s wry treatment and the stern Biblical tale both forecast an ominous outcome that follows from this thwarting of “productivity” – with Duchamp it is a broken arm and according to the Biblical account death is the penalty for Onan’s violation of the doctrine that declares that sperm has one sole, all-encapsulating purpose in procreating life. With *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, Duchamp suspends a prosaic implement, the snow shovel, in a limbo state indicating its passage or traverse into the cultural arena where it is similarly devoid of any productive goal – a transit that parallels Onan’s deferral of his “seed” from biological productivity. The state of suspension is not uncommon within Duchamp’s oeuvre: literally, it occurs with the *Hat Rack* (1917), *Paris Air* (1919), *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942), even the *Bicycle Wheel* of 1913 as well as the suspended malic moulds contained within the *Large Glass*.

Narcissism, Duchamp’s other favoured term, proves equally complex and confounding. In its pathological form, narcissism indicates not a harmonious rendezvous or a glorious sense of self-sufficiency, but an-aggressive demeanour constantly stalked by threat. Derived from the Greek, *nark* (numbness), it is characterized by an inability to relate to others: that is, to love, to maintain “any genuine interest in the ideas of others,” to tolerate the demands of others in general. The narcissistic “cocoon” of “omnipotent self-sufficiency” and overvalued autonomy is however perennially threatened due to the perceived failure to have “one’s needs for mirroring and idealizing gratified.”³⁸ Yet, this failure of mirroring, and thus to have the narcissistic ideal gratified, is pivotal to the classic story of Narcissus, in which misrecognition plays the central role in its tale of calamity. Narcissus does not, at first, realize whose reflection he has become infatuated with; he believes he has fallen in love with his ideal, assuming it to be someone else. As Ovid relates the tale, this misrecognition is inextricably linked to cursed states. Echo, a talkative nymph before she lost her bodily form, found herself captivated by Narcissus’ beauty, like many others before (male and female alike).³⁹ When Narcissus shuns Echo she is mortified and curses Narcissus so that he too will feel the pain of rejection. He is thus condemned to experience what it is like to “be unable to gain his loved

one.”(85)⁴⁰ As a newborn child, a prophetic seer was asked whether Narcissus would live a long life, but his answer was, “Yes, if he does not come to know himself.”(83) Misrecognition is thereby central to Narcissus’ delight, being both his ideal and his source of ultimate satisfaction – that is, in not knowing the reflection in the water was his own: “He did not know what he was looking at, but was fired by the sight, and excited by the very illusion that deceived his eyes. Poor foolish boy, why vainly grasp at the fleeting image that eludes you?”(85). His curse is the realization that the reflection he is engrossed with is his own. Echo and Narcissus are victims to the phantoms of the sensuous in which phenomenological appearance proves illusory as far as satisfaction is concerned. Narcissus, like Echo, is condemned to wither in a shadow realm of false hope and confused or thwarted identification. Narcissus is haunted by a captivating proximity to his desire that is all the more unreachable for being so close; the object of his desire being simply a mere reflection, which “in itself it is nothing.”(85) As Narcissus laments, he is brought to the very cusp of an ideal, “what I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor.”(86)

Narcissism is thereby marked by its inability to stabilize or to fulfil desire because it is fundamentally non-relational. Would this mean art approaches a pathological condition? To some extent this is precisely what Duchamp means by referring to the “egomaniac’s discourse,” yet his fascination with this circuitry was aimed at revealing how every seemingly self-enclosed system of validation produces its own resistances. The key thing about the “egomaniac’s discourse” – at least, aesthetically speaking – is that it fails. Narcissism highlights this quandary aptly – even though it is a dynamic caught up in the desire to complete a circuit, to be self-identifying, even self-referring, and thus replete, the ultimate source of one’s own meaning. The malic moulds of the *Large Glass* are thus quarantined to reflect on their desperate desire once isolated and rendered futile, while, by contrast, the bride is described as possessing a reservoir of “love gasoline,” the basis of her “timid power,” which fuels a motor with “quite feeble cylinders.” Sparks fly, explosions occur. This is a very unstable mechanism, forever on the brink, perennially at the risk of overflowing with the turbulent energy that seems to always over-exert its frail supporting mechanism – and it is clear that Duchamp views the aesthetic process with its various competing desires as a mechanism of this kind. Yet, this artwork, the *Large Glass*, this “delay,” is not entirely consumed by a process of deferment and thwarting for it does seek to suggest a blossoming of desire. The bride’s “timid-power is a sort of automobile, love gasoline,” Duchamp asserts, which, when it is “distributed to the quite feeble cylinders, within reach of the sparks of her constant life, is used for the blossoming of this virgin who has reached the goal of her desire.” The bride appears to feed off the frantic desire of the bachelor machine, while always evading it. This is a strange consummation that elicits desire, wantonly triggers it, but only in order to further agitate an unstable electro-mechanical force field of desire. Yet this is what the work cannot symbolize – “this happy goal – the bride’s desire.” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 42) The *Large Glass* only

captures “an inventory ... of this blossoming,” a blossoming which Duchamp equates with the image of a motor car scaling a slope in low gear: “the car wants more and more to reach the top, and while slowly accelerating, as if exhausted by hope, the motor of the car turns faster and faster, until it roars triumphantly.” (Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 42-43)

The *Large Glass* cannot capture the fraught dynamism that it aims to depict. While *Etant Donnés* seems excruciatingly explicit, the *Large Glass* fails to deliver what it seeks to show. The stalling power of aesthetic indifference, rather than simply implying an anti-aesthetic impulse, aims to accentuate the ambiguous or apprehensive features of key aesthetic tenets, that is, accentuating that which escapes the discourse of the egomaniac and cannot enclose itself in a circuit of ideal, pure identification. Duchamp thus accentuates the apprehensive aspects of art through a consideration of aesthetic affect as a complex *circuit of displacement-intensification*. What is fascinating in regard to this expressed concern is that Kant depicted a similar dynamic of acceleration and harnessing in his delineation of the aesthetic idea. The aesthetic idea, as outlined by Kant, is said to prompt much thought, but without any thought being able to determine it adequately. Its significance relates to the fact that it possesses accelerating momentum, which stems from its capacity to animate or quicken [*beleben*] the mind. This is the impetus that sparks momentum in our mental powers, a seemingly purposive momentum, but one that “sustains itself on its own and even strengthens the powers for such play.”⁴¹ To this extent, Kant’s outline is very reminiscent of Duchamp’s desiring mechanisms, which are fuelled by a similar momentum and also sustain themselves of their own accord. Duchamp can be regarded as a keen adherent of the proposition of the aesthetic idea and furthermore the *Large Glass* mimics its peculiar structure. It clearly suggests the intensification side of the dynamic Duchamp seeks to capture or convey.

Kant suggests that the process of acceleration and of enlivening prompted by an aesthetic idea needs to be checked in order to become coherent and intelligible, and to avoid slipping into nonsense. Duchamp, on the other hand, emphasizes a dynamic of *displacement-intensification* suggesting an accelerating momentum that threatens to overwhelm its system, thus raising the prospect, even anxiety, of whether the aesthetic idea offers any cohering equilibrium.⁴² This half-grasped insight allows for Duchamp’s splendid evocation of modernist aesthetic-cultural activity as a bizarre circuitry of misaligned desires that must always persist in a circuit of active tension. It is not too far-fetched to assert that Duchamp’s wry evocation of this complex system implicated what he most savoured in the modernist cultural ambition just as readily as that which he found most trite about it.

Genius is the central preoccupation of the discussion where Kant gives his exposition of the aesthetic idea. In Duchamp’s hands, genius becomes expressed as a conundrum, simultaneously an inexhaustible figure and one

of obsolescence, because in presenting an idea as a rule for others to emulate, or even forming an impasse, the precedent will inevitably be surmounted and surpassed – though crucially it will not achieve the surmounting of the aesthetic idea as such. For who can fulfil the aesthetic idea, who captures or captivates it, who can hold all its possibilities when no concept is equivalent to it or finally determines it? No one. Not any one human, not even a genius; it is a kind of cultural machinery of fascination and of compulsion. Genius is both an endpoint of this system and – by making a rule – also a moment of redundancy. As a redundant figure, the genius is tied to that rule and its eventual obsolescence, which is even starker if there is an attempt to refute one's own rule and instead seek other possibilities, indeed to proliferate possibilities, so as to strive vainly to be ahead of the game in another spiral of frantic escalation of innovation – just like the frantic illusory acceleration conveyed by the *Large Glass*. An aesthetic idea is never fully obsolete for a genuine aesthetic idea is impossible to consume or exhaust. It thwarts such a desire; there can be no artwork that fully embodies “art,” that captures it once and for all and says this is all that can be achieved as far as the possibilities of art are concerned. The aesthetic idea endures frustratingly, evading all efforts to determine it conceptually, that is, to explain it definitively or to encompass it adequately once and for all. It triggers further frantic desire. Critical reception is therefore also bound to a form of obsolescence because, on the one hand, it must seek to be precise and exhaustive in order to explain the work fully, it must seek to exhaust the potential of the work, to consume it totally, but, on the other hand, this is the critical redundancy of even the best, most probing and innovative of analysis. The most inventive and creative analysis will only propel it further because, if a genuine aesthetic idea, then it ought to prove capable of triggering further analysis in the wake of the most exhaustive explanation, so that its resistance is its enticement, which exhausts the best efforts to grasp it.

Yet, if aesthetic inquiry is to prove as deceptively beguiling and provocative as Duchamp presumes, then reception cannot be presumed supreme either – despite the emphasis Duchamp gives it in the interest of disturbing narcissistic attitudes about artistic authorship. Such a qualification of reception is found in Duchamp's schematic history of modernism. Duchamp's 1961 Philadelphia lecture credits Courbet and Manet with the modernist “liberation” of art. He places Courbet's austere realism at the center of the modernist challenge – “Realism is at the heart of the liberation of the artist as an individual” – and this is because it produced a work “to which the viewer or collector” must adapt, “sometimes with difficulty.”⁴³ The artist's “independence” therefore initiates a schism: modern artists freely pursue whatever subject matter they may chose and they may do so in a style, genre or interpretation without reference to prevailing academic or traditional requirements or even satisfied reception. The only limitation is that of finding a market for such works, which may mean finding as few as one or two willing collectors. The implication, however, is that a general audience for art no longer necessarily knows what to expect from an

artwork, nor necessarily how to identify with it. It is the nature of modernist difficulty to upset (at least momentarily) the purported fulfillment that art should offer in informing us “about our own satisfaction” or to exhibit some understanding or image of how we think “about ourselves.” This thwarting of traditional satisfactions required of art permits modernism, the “liberation” of art from traditional imperatives, though not from the necessity of reception. Using the example of Courbet, Duchamp reveals that the audience – or reception – does not follow a narcissistic rendezvous either. Delays and detours are not only inevitable, but also pivotal, especially in regard to satisfied outcomes, whether it is delays and detours in productivity (the imperative of modernity) or in aesthetic pleasure. For Duchamp, the aesthetic idea, in the wake of modernism, suggests a frantic circuitry of desire that is not readily consumed or satisfied. Modernist difficulty accentuates what was always already difficult about the aesthetic idea, but its legacy for contemporary art is to raise the question of who will be willing to risk this potential thwarting of the egomaniac’s satisfaction required of art?

Going All the Way – With an Oddly Evasive Enticement

The suggestion that *Etant Donnés* dumbfounded the receptive audience that was warming to Duchamp’s practice in the wake of pop, minimalism and conceptual art might well be correct. If it was the case, then Duchamp found a way to escape the attention of reception – all the while he was producing works that focused on this very phenomenon, aesthetic reception, which he felt was inescapable. Duchamp, like Courbet before him, poses difficulties. Satisfaction is not immediate, but delayed, so who will wait around to see if the rendezvous is ever achieved? *Etant Donnés* seems so explicit that it appears to satisfy the (critical) urge for reference. Yet, if we think of Duchamp thwarting his readymade reception, then perhaps *Etant Donnés* is more like the “bride” of the *Large Glass*, which provokes heated energy and an uncontainable desire that threatens to collapse the very mechanism that sustains it. Without reception and its thwarting, without the onanistic urge for reference and its thwarting, no energy would be triggered at all. Modern art depicts modernity thrown up against its most ideal desires, the urge for self-reference combined with productive outcomes – but delayed, even rendered unsustainable – for which no great pleasure will be taken.

The pose of aesthete-like indifference conceals the acuity of Duchamp’s scrutiny of certain key aesthetic investments. He pursued certain aesthetic-artistic presumptions as if to the letter, sometimes to a hyperbolic degree, frequently with ironic inversions. Duchamp advised against a simple reversal of dominant assumptions, which he felt marred the challenge of Dada: “I wished to show man the limited place of his reason, but Dada wanted to substitute unreason. The substitution was not a great improvement. By adding ‘un’ they thought they had changed a great deal, but they had not.”⁴⁴ A better tactic would be to expose the most presumptuous ambitions at their most tenuous underpinnings. This is what Duchamp sought to achieve in relation to modernism and its blind spots, but in the process he also helped to highlight how modernism

challenges certain aesthetic presumptions about satisfaction, whether libidinal or conceptual. This requires a meticulous approach because Duchamp often aims to expose the fragility of aesthetic discourses at the point where they had solidified into cultural absolutes.

For Kant, the aesthetic idea is provocative because it is a form of idea, a particularly unique path of thought, which eludes the conventional path of assigning concepts to anchor and determine its thinking. He discovers a different satisfaction in it: the potential to quicken the mind, prompted by the chance to offer a proliferating range of possibilities for an idea that is not easily determined. Yet Kant felt that this provocative potential for quickening also required checks and balances. Duchamp does not suggest anything to the contrary. In fact, he accentuates the necessary contrariness of this dynamic; in Duchamp's practice it becomes a system driven both by the impetus for acceleration and an impetus for stoppages, delays and deferrals. Unlike Kant, however, Duchamp envisages a more unstable mechanism or system. Modernist difficulty constantly challenges its equilibrium and thus constantly poses the danger of overrunning its timid mechanism. Onanism and narcissism may be among its most vital triggers, yet simultaneously they initiate a contrary dynamic, revealing its most confounding impulses.

The crucial feature of Duchamp's preferred analogies is that they refer to processes that strive to become absolute, but fail, and this failure proves very informative about the peculiar dynamics of modern aesthetic production. His approach is all the more provocative because he believed that certain critical-cultural ideals – the circuit and the rendezvous – constituted perennially elusive, yet nonetheless enticing goals. Duchamp wished to show that aesthetic inquiry involved an odd circuitry of desire – containing these deluded models, but also propelled by them. He himself was a firm, but thoroughly ambivalent, adherent of these models within the context of modernism. The question posed by Duchamp, in the wake of the aesthetic idea, might run along the lines, can art produce any pleasure from the jarring of our own satisfaction and of our privileged ways of thinking about ourselves?

Rather than amounting to a preoccupation with loss, this circuitous fascination as well as its odd machinery of displacement and enticement reveals an apprehensive approach to aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction. Visual indifference evades the usual parameters of aesthetic experience, such as the formal composure of the beautiful or the expansiveness of the sublime. Rather than basking in an endgame strategy, the foil of indifference enabled Duchamp to explore the more provocatively disconcerting or *apprehensive* features of aesthetic *pleasure*. The erotic economy of art that he delineates does not eschew biographical, personal, historical and social explications of art – in fact, it accentuates them – but it expresses them through triggers such as stoppages, delays and complex circuits. It is important to reiterate that Duchamp did not rebuke aesthetic

ambition. Instead the provocation of indifference enabled him to consider aesthetic affect as a complex circuit of displacement-intensification. It lead him to suggest that aesthetic “pleasure” might offer a different enticement than the onanistic satisfaction of pleasure in identification or the satisfaction that derives from verifying how we think about ourselves.

1. Marcel Duchamp, “Where do we go from here?” lecture noted “Philadelphia, 1960.” The title is in English, but Duchamp’s lecture is in French: “Par ‘retinien’ j’entende que la délectation esthétique depend Presque exclusivement de l’impression sur le rétine sans faire appel à aucune interpretation auxiliaire.” Cited in Kornelia von Berswordt-Wallrabe ed., *Marcel Duchamp—Respirateur* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje-Cantz Verlag/ Staatliches Museum Schwerin, 1999), 194-5.
2. Not all this generation were sanguine about Duchamp’s influence. See Robert Smithson’s interesting, but erratic, critical portrait of Duchamp in his 1973 interview: Moira Roth, “An Interview with Robert Smithson (1973),” in *Robert Smithson*, exhibition catalogue, (Los Angeles, Berkeley, London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/University of California Press, 2004), 82-86, 94.
3. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 499.
4. Ian Burn, “Is art history any use to artists?” (1985), *Dialogue: Writings in Art History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991).
5. Marcel Duchamp, “I Live the Life of a Waiter,” in Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo, 1979), 100.
6. Here I refer to the comment of Gyorgy Markus: “...it is only under conditions of modernity that the ways people live and act in the world, and also the manner they understand this world, are conceived by them as constituting a form of culture, that is, as not being simply natural, or God-ordained, but as something man-made and re-makable which conforms with equally humanly created and changeable standards and ends. Cultural modernity is a culture which knows itself as culture and as one among many.” Gyorgy Markus, “A Society of Culture: the Constitution of Modernity,” in Gillian Robinson and John Rundell eds., *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 15-16.
7. Marcel Duchamp, cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1996), 125. There are two versions. *Chocolate Grinder, No.2* of the following year, 1914, moves further from a pure painting and becomes more like a diagram from mechanical engineering. As Juan Antonio Ramirez notes, the thread added to the drums of the second version lends an impression of “absolute precision.” Juan Antonio Ramirez, *Duchamp: Love and Death, Even* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 89.
8. Duchamp, “A Window onto Something Else,” in Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 49. Cabanne’s interviews were conducted in 1966 and they were published in early 1967 in French and translated into English in 1971. A comment in “The Green Box”—most likely the comment that Cabanne has in mind—clearly associates the readymade with a rendezvous, although Duchamp also suggests that “all kinds of delays” mediate between the readymade and this ideal rendezvous: “by planning for a moment to come (on such a day, such a date such a minute), ‘to inscribe a readymade’—The readymade can later be looked for.— (with all kinds of delays) The important thing then is just this matter of timing, this snapshot effect, like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It is a kind of rendezvous.” (Emphases and syntax from the original text). Duchamp, “The Green Box,” (1934), trans. George Heard Hamilton, in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 32.
9. Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” (1957), in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 138.
10. Refer Duchamp, “The 1914 Box,” trans. Cleve Gray, in *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 23 (Emphases are Duchamp’s).
11. Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” *Essential Writings*, 138.
12. Duchamp, “The Green Box,” *Essential Writings*, 26.
13. Duchamp, “A Window onto Something Else,” in Cabanne, 48.
14. Duchamp, “A Window onto Something Else,” 38.
15. Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” *Essential Writings*, 139.
16. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Glasgow: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1980), 77.
17. See Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000), 17.
18. Duchamp, “The Creative Act,” *Essential Writings*, 139-40.
19. Ramirez, 88-9.
20. Duchamp, “I Like Breathing Better than Working,” in Cabanne, 88.
21. “Marcel Duchamp Speaks,” BBC, ca. October 1959. Cited in *Essential Writings*, 40.
22. For an exploration of the more conceptually tidy or philosophical account of the implications of the readymades, see John Brough, “Who’s Afraid of Marcel Duchamp?” in Daniel O. Dahlstrom ed., *Philosophy and Art: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, Vol 23 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Of America Press, 1991), 119-142. Thierry de Duve criticizes many of these philosophical approaches, particularly George Dickie’s institutional explanation, in *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, c.1996). My position differs from both de Duve and the philosophers in acknowledging that Duchamp stakes a different claim for modernism, from say Greenberg, in accentuating the apprehensive dimensions to aesthetic inquiry and modern artistic practice.
23. Duchamp, “A Window onto Something Else,” in Cabanne, 48.
24. Duchamp, “I Like Breathing Better than Working,” in Cabanne, 88.
25. It is interesting to compare Duchamp’s assessment of the erotic with the following comment from Foucault on sexuality: “...since Christianity, Western civilization has not stopped saying, ‘To know who you are, know what sexuality is about. Sex has always been the center where our ‘truth’ of the human subject has been tied up along with the development of our

- species. Confession ... was a way of placing sexuality at the heart of existence and of connecting salvation to the mastery of sexuality's obscure movements." Refer Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 138. While the two Frenchmen may appear to take opposing stances, it is possible to suggest that Duchamp might have concurred with Foucault except to say that he was sanguine about the circumscription of sexuality within reproductive-species discourse and more content to explore "sexuality's obscure movements" and to highlight its incapacity to exert mastery over them.
26. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams: The Penguin Freud Library*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1990), vol. 4: 595. Freud counters the assumption that affect and ideational content constitute an "indissoluble organic unity," by suggesting instead that they "may be merely soldered together." (597).
 27. Duchamp, *Essential Writings*, 142. It may explain why dictators, such as Hitler and Stalin, are drawn to aesthetic metaphors in defining their political ambition.
 28. Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995). This assessment of Bourdieu is indebted to Thomas Osborne; see his *Aspects of Enlightenment: Social Theory and the Ethics of Truth* (London: UCL Press, 1988), 107-8. Osborne argues (against Bourdieu) for "a modified version of the notion of disinterestedness" and "that we abandon the interpretation of aesthetic practices exclusively in terms of ideology or equivalent notions such as the very idea of a *critique* of art." (107).
 29. See Markus, "A Society of Culture," 25.
 30. Duchamp, "I Like Breathing Better than Working," in Cabanne, 71.
 31. In his 1957 talk, Duchamp states: "I know this statement will not meet with the approval of many artists who refuse this mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act—yet, art history has consistently decided upon the virtues of a work of art through considerations completely divorced from the rationalized explanations of the artist." Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *Essential Writings*, 139. Almost a decade later, he repeats the same claim to Cabanne and insists, "Naturally, no artist accepts this interpretation." Duchamp, "I Like Breathing Better than Working," in Cabanne, 70. This may well be a self-serving explanation on Duchamp's part, in order to highlight his presence, but it was a conspicuous issue in Duchamp's oeuvre—notably in works dealing with circulation and exchange value explicitly, such as *Tzanck Check*, December 3 (1919) and *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924).
 32. Duchamp, "The Green Box," *Essential Writings*, 39.
 33. *Ibid.* (Syntax and style are Duchamp's). The following references to the *Large Glass* from this text appear in brackets.
 34. Refer Catherine Liu, *Copying Machines: Taking Notes for the Automaton* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 36-7.
 35. Onan was to marry his brother's widow, Tamar, according to the practice of levirate marriage. Genesis, 8:9: Onan, "knowing that the children should not be his, when he went in to his brother's wife, spilled his seed upon the ground, lest children should be born in his brother's name." 8:10: "And therefore the Lord slew him, because he did a detestable thing."
 36. Ramirez notes that while "it is nothing more than a simple utensil for clearing snow," he also suggests that it "must have surprised him since such shovels are unknown in Paris." Thus Duchamp's quote of 1916: "As an artist I consider the shovel the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." Refer Ramirez, 37-9; and Schwarz, 636. Both Ramirez and Schwarz advance sexual readings of the work.
 37. It is this (re-)productive emphasis that Foucault argues circumscribes sexuality as "the truth of the human subject" tied to "the development of our species."
 38. Glen O. Gabbard, "Personal Disorders: Narcissistic," Chapter 16, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry in Clinical Practice* (Washington, D.C. and London: American Psychiatric Press, 1994).
 39. Because Echo detained Juno, with "an endless flow of talk," and thus prevented the goddess from catching Jupiter, who was cavorting with the nymphs on the mountainside, she was cursed to perpetually repeat the ends of phrases. Clearly, in Duchamp's terms, Echo could not be a modernist. Refer Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes, (London: Penguin, 1955), 83. The following references to Ovid appear in the text.
 40. Echo does not take the rejection well: "Thus scorned, she concealed herself in the woods, hiding her shamed face in the shelter of the leaves, and ever since that day, she dwells in lonely caves." (84)
 41. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §49, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 181-2.
 42. Kant may raise the question of conceptual inadequacy as crucial to the delineation of the aesthetic idea, but he also finds it necessary that this momentum be suspended or thwarted, and thus wishes to privilege the overcoming of its suspension in a higher resolution of "lasting" and "durable" ideas. In the section immediately following the discussion of genius, Kant warns that the quickening of cognitive capacities associated with aesthetic ideas must be railed in: "In order [for a work] to be beautiful, it is not strictly necessary that [it] be rich and original in ideas, but it is necessary that the imagination in its freedom be commensurate with the lawfulness of the understanding. For if the imagination is left in lawless freedom, all its riches [in ideas] produce nothing but nonsense, and it is judgment that adapts the imagination to the understanding. Kant, *ibid.*, §50, 188.
 43. Duchamp, "Where do we go from here?" *Marcel Duchamp—Respirateur*, 195. Of course, by emphasizing Courbet's importance for modernism, Duchamp is aiming to articulate a non-retinal future for art, one in which future artists will resist having their work reduced to the "oversimplified... 'representative or non-representative' dilemma." For this reason, Arturo Schwarz is apt to point out the affinities with certain of Courbet's works in *Etant Donnés*; see Schwarz, 236-251. It is also worth noting, however, that Duchamp disparaged Courbet for initiating the fixation with the retinal in modern painting, but his contention here is to show that abstraction is not the primary trajectory of the avant-garde. Thus, he directly challenges what he believed to be the orthodoxy throughout most of his life, retinal or pictorial modernism. By contrast, Greenberg sought to reduce all Duchamp's aesthetic thinking to a concern with difficulty. For Greenberg, the emphasis upon difficulty meant the reduction of avant-garde practice to a preoccupation with the startling or shocking. See Greenberg, "Counter-Avant-Garde," *Art International*, 15 (May 1971), 16-17. This is perhaps even a deliberate simplification and it avoids considering how Duchamp deals with fundamental (i.e., core) aesthetic issues.
 44. Duchamp, cited in *Marcel Duchamp—Respirateur*, 98.

ALLEN, W.R.
(Jim)
- catalogues

2

on loop. plane mixed with loops,



interpenetration of
planar activity,



2
WORKS

THE EXHIBITION MAY
TUESDAY 22nd

MONDAY JULY 20th 3rd
BARRY LEIT GALLERIES
4 VICTORIA ST WEST AUCKLAND 1

environmental structures

...volumes of unique sensibility by
matter, space, light and movement,
pliability, malleability and softness
not dominate space."

1. Space Plane. 2. "Thine own hands" Poem environment
to Hone Tuwhare. 3. Articulation for dance. 4. Three
dimensions. 5. Water.
Credits : P.V.C. Fabrication Harris Walker Plastics.

Barry Leit

ALLEN, W.R.
(Jim)

- Biography, Articles

26th July, 1960.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

WILLIAM BRUNNER ALLEN

I have known Mr. Allen for three years, both in relation to his work as post primary art teacher with the Education Department, and also as a sculptor.

In both contexts his work has impressed me very much. In an administrative art specialist I have admired Mr. Allen's liberal attitude and his open-minded approach to his subject. I have been surprised at what he is arranging exhibitions of post primary art work when his practical and theoretical approach to education has been admirable.

As a sculptor, he combines considerable technical proficiency with an imagination and range expanding that of most sculptors working in this country.

Mr. Allen has a pleasant personality and a high sense of personal integrity. I am sure he would bring to the post for which he is applying all those qualities and variations of experience necessary for its

F.A. BERRY, M.A.
DIRECTOR

1965

1951

1968

THEMIE BECKER

ALLEN, W.R.
(Jim)

- Photographs

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Artist's projects



Installation view
Jim Allen *O-AR Part II*
Auckland Art Gallery
November 1975

ROCHE, Peter v BUIS, Linda
Performance Documentation
1979 - 1983 1985/1986

1.
Sequel to 'Get the fuck out, Got to get out.' performed on 26th July 1979.

Firstly, before the performance, a few alterations were made to the piece as it had been planned. The system whereby the microphone feedback was to be used as a means of establishing and/or re-establishing role, identity, prestige, etc. was abandoned... primarily because I discovered that to be able to control to any large extent the predictability of feedback the volume had to be too great. The idea being not to drive spectators from the room because of their being incapable of withstanding an extremely loud barrage of noise, but to tease, coax, cajole, proposition, confuse; and fuse their roles with my own. A decision was made the morning of the performance, when making assessment of and adjustment to the piece, to provide myself with two alternatives within the overall structure of the piece... they might be called props, one being a bucket of water into which I might place my head and therefore being unable to breath... as it turned out it also became, funnily enough, a way of refreshing myself, recuperating from a prolonged period of screaming. The other provision was a razor blade which I carried in my pocket... this could be used for inscribing lines on the skin of my left forearm, thereby drawing blood... blood and water... the shirt sleeve which had been rolled up above the elbow... out of like a hotdog in the gut... but not so like the opposite of this... (not) very intended as a means of provocation and resolution aimed at either myself or the form of work... out of the... .. attempt to locate tip... ..

From request; the following book, have been made available for reference under the name

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PETER ROCHE

Photographs

③

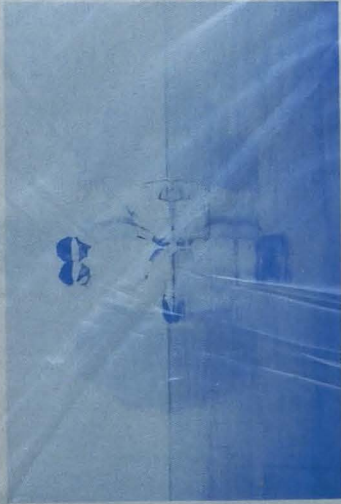


Peter ROCHE

Catalogues

1985 → 

Peter Roche



EXHIBITION

A documentation of six performances

by

ROCHE/BUIS

PERFORMANCE

Wednesday 17th August, 8.30pm

Preface: Monday 6th August, 5.30pm
Exhibition closes: Friday, 19th August, 8pm
Hours: Tuesday/Thursday 11-6, Friday 11-8

RKS ART

41 Victoria Street West, PO Box 5775, Auckland 1, New Zealand, Telephone: 733-183

ROCHE, Peter & BUIS, Linda
Performance Documentation
1979 - 1983 1985, 1986

1.
Sequel to 'Get the fuck out, dot to get out.' performed on 26th July 1976.



OH SHIT NO

OH SHIT NO

Jan 9pm.
Buis

at the Barry Hall game.
by Peter Roche / Linda Buis.
at 8pm.



Fig. 1
Jim Allen installing
O-AR Part I 1975
St. Paul Street Gallery,
Auckland University of
Technology (AUT), 2007
Collection of Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
Photo: Jennifer French

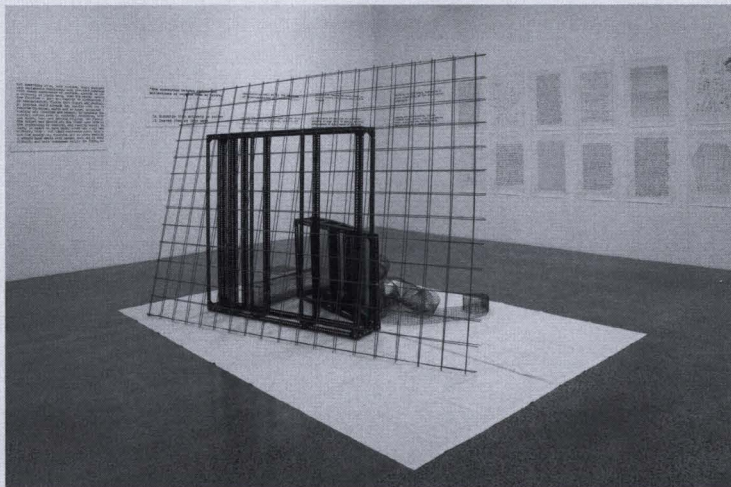


Fig. 2
Jim Allen
O-AR Part I 1975
Installation view
St. Paul Street Gallery,
Auckland University of
Technology (AUT), 2007
Collection of Auckland
Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
Photo: Jennifer French



Fig.3
 Jim Allen
O-AR Part I 1975
 Image from proof sheet
 Barry Lett Galleries,
 Auckland

By August 2005, all that materially remained of Jim Allen's 1975 installation *O-AR Part I* was a large pile of manuka sticks and several rolls of degraded Photostat paper. Acquired for the Auckland Art Gallery by the outgoing Curator of Contemporary Art Robert Leonard, the work, in effect, did not physically "exist" anymore and needed to be completely reconstructed (Figs. 1 and 2), with only a small folder of source material including photographic negatives and proof sheets and the post-exhibition catalogue *O-AR: Jim Allen: Recent Work* as a guide.¹ The acquisition presented the Auckland Art Gallery with questions of a kind raised by many of the temporary installation works of the period. What is a museum to do when "temporary" or "ephemeral" works of art acquire sufficient historical importance that they are compelled to acquire and preserve them for the future?

Originally exhibited by Barry Lett Galleries in 1975, *O-AR Part I* occupied the entirety of its 8 by 8 metre gallery (Fig.3). Photostats of enlarged typewritten text fragments were pinned to the wall. The texts were drawn from a variety of sources including the writings of school children Allen had taught and

books he was reading. The work also included diverse graphs and diagrams (including wind factor specifications for Allen's sculpture commissioned for the 1974 Commonwealth Games) and a selection of his own children's drawings. The floor was covered with two large calico drop cloths; upon one lay a stack of manuka sticks, on the other, an arrangement of shop-bought, purpose-designed grids of plastic and metal mesh commonly used in concrete foundations and garden enclosures.

As a collection of apparently random objects and texts, *O-AR Part I* didn't appear to make much sense. Allen described the work as "...a mess. It was an open situation."² The artist's intention was to promote cognitive awareness and encourage open interpretation by viewers – their role became crucial in the creation of meaning. This sentiment belies Allen's relatively conservative, craft-based training at the School of Fine Art in Canterbury and the Royal College of Art in London in the 1940s. It was during a sabbatical to Britain, Europe, the United States and Mexico in 1968 that Allen experienced new approaches to sculpture first hand, subsequently aban-

these compulsions from the other direction and question myself as to the reason why these things being here - because I wanted them or planned them, that they are just expressions of the compulsion. Having decided to put them in it became a real question as to how, and that forced me into making a decision to establish a standpoint as to relationship to these pieces. Which may not be of great moment to anybody else but certainly raised the question to me of the artist's relation to the showing of his work publicly, and perhaps that's not such a personal argument after all. They are an anti-form gesture and the bringing forward of the kind of question which that raises.

B.B. I know my First Year group were extremely worried about it. They saw Billy's show first and then yours. With Billy they almost walked past it until their attention was drawn to certain things. With this one the information load was so much that they withdrew as well, ~~the objects~~ ^{in the first instance} ~~became~~ ^{became} something so subliminal that you almost walk over it.

~~J.A. What you're describing is one with a lot of dead situations and necessarily be done.~~
 B.B. Yes, sure, but they were worried that perhaps they couldn't cope with it, hence they were at the school, what's the necessary use in the street going to do with it. I know that is a completely different matter.
 J.A. Yes, it gets around to the same question, and you are to some extent that your work doesn't communicate to the public at large.

J.L. It is interesting that I read that one lot as being quite unstructured and that one lot as being quite structured. The bundle of sticks to me is a structure, the fact that they are all lying in the same direction and that the other one didn't have structure and I just took it as it was offered in that way.

W.C. That's what occurs to me, that when you are talking about the interest in the paper, it's been ^{formed} and so on, you have to forestall that at the point that you recognise the casualness.

J.L. I must admit that I saw it much more formalised than that. I saw it in terms of opposites and once you start setting up that whole scheme, placing things in lines and one thing under another.

B.A. But not as formal in a sense that is generally accepted; they are trimmed unevenly and they seem to be optically spaced.

J.L. To me that fits into a whole line of thinking.....

B.A. But floor pieces, this particular piece to me seems to be very mannered in the sense that the smallest coil of plastic grid has been somewhat beautifully laid out.

J.A. That's not true, it was thrown into that area of the mat, it just happens to form those configurations by its natural springiness.

B.A. Probably, but it appears to be.

J.L. It is interesting that your justification of positioning some things works for you in one way and I can arrive at a different justification.

W.C. Except that you say ^{is} that a whole line of thinking ^{is} one has always got a variety of lines of thinking with work in a situation like this; the point is, where they start cutting out, and for me there is a point where a line of thinking only goes so far and then it has to be twisted around another line or subsidiary. I feel a strong need to set up priorities.

Fig.4
O-AR Jim Allen Recent Work
 1975
 Page from exhibition
 catalogue
 Auckland City Art Gallery

doing traditional techniques and creating what Robert Leonard has described as "New Zealand's first environmental sculptures."³ Utilizing everyday, non-precious materials, his sculptures were not objects, but "situations" inviting the implied or actual participation of the viewer.⁴ Allen observed that "...*O-AR Part I* challenged...the public perception and the commercial gallery system by offering (at that time) a non-marketable work, and flouted convention with unframed, common and transitory objects of little value. The work was as much about confronting the politics, constrictions of ideology and the economics of the art market place, as what it has to offer in itself."⁵

The catalogue that followed *O-AR Part I* was avant-garde, too. It was published in association with the Auckland City Art Gallery's 1975 exhibition of Allen's *O-AR Part II* as part of its Project Programme series.⁶

The catalogue was described by Allen as a "scruffy and unpretentious feedback document"⁷. The text concerning *O-AR Part I* consisted of a typewritten transcript of a discussion between Bruce Barber, Wystan Curnow, Jim Allen, John Lethbridge, David Harre and Billy Apple. The participants were invited to "delete, correct, summarize, add a particular or general comment to your previous statement"⁸; and these handwritten alterations (Fig. 4) were included in the publication. The seemingly "casual" aesthetic of *O-AR: Jim Allen: Recent Work* has been taken up elsewhere; a kinship readily apparent in the work of the et al. collective.⁹ For Allen, the catalogue made a point about the lack of discussion and recognition around recent work when exhibited for the first time.¹⁰ Complementary objects, the work and catalogue both challenged and transgressed the existing gallery culture.

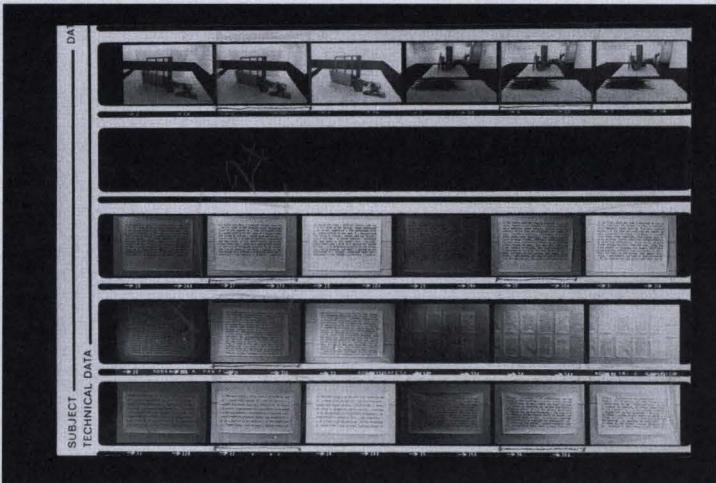


Fig.5
Jim Allen
O-AR Part I 1975
Proof sheet



Fig.6
Untitled
Crayon drawing
Collection of Elwyn
Richardson

Despite Allen's position as a pivotal figure in the development of post-object art in New Zealand, New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Gallery is the only other public institution to hold an example of one of Allen's installations.¹¹ Such works weren't collected at the time, making the entire Auckland Art Gallery project to acquire *O-AR Part I* a case of "art rescue."¹² Given the very nature of the installation, the acquisition of *O-AR Part I* was problematic. While Robert Leonard conceded that the work was, in effect destroyed, he observed that "...as a contemporary art curator, I pressed ahead because I thought we needed to have it to 'tell the story.'¹³ Perhaps this means that the work is acquired not as a physical entity, but as a concept? Regarding *O-AR Part I*, Auckland Art Gallery Curator Mary Kisler observed that the shift within public institutions towards the collecting of ephemeral works left such institutions with two options:

...do you create a new category which takes into account their ephemeral nature and either accept that they will eventually disappear...or do you buy the concept, and accept that it will get reconstructed on occasion but with an inevitable slippage between the first manifestation of the work and its reconstructions?¹⁴

For the majority of people involved in the acquisition, *O-AR Part I* was a miniaturized and inchoate two-dimensional reproduction that only existed in its entirety in photographic form (Fig. 5). These proofs of *O-AR Part I* installed at Barry Lett Galleries were crucial to the regeneration of the work. Reprinted and enlarged from the negatives by Auckland Art Gallery photographer Jennifer French, the images isolated key components and their positions, acting as a blueprint for the re-installation of the work.

Examination of the proofs however, revealed that some of the Photostat panels were missing completely. These missing panels were cross-matched and identified with the original negatives and, in some cases, by original documentation including graph paper and scrawled annotations supplied by Allen and held in the archive of Auckland Art Gallery's E.H. McCormick Research Library.

The original drawings by Allen's children that accompanied the panels were in a poor state, too. It was certain that the felt tip images would continue to fade, a particular concern for the Gallery conservators. Debate concerning "the original" centred on these pictures. For Allen, the use of alternative drawings was not an issue, nor was using reproductions of the drawings as opposed to the originals. In the end, reproductions of children's drawings were used, consisting of a combination of drawings by Jim and Pam Allen's children and a selection reproduced from the collection of Allen's colleague and friend, Elwyn Richardson (Fig. 6).¹⁵

What was to prove the most difficult aspect of *O-AR Part I*'s reconstruction was the sourcing of an appropriate paper upon which to reprint the text panels (to be recreated from the original photographic negatives) and children's drawings. When the work was created, Allen selected an everyday Photostat paper that suited his casual, "pinned to the wall" aesthetic. The original materials were now unavailable, their function rendered obsolete by new technologies. Initially, it was mooted that the existing photo-texts should be restored, rather than replaced. However, the panels were discoloured and ripped. Reprinting was the only option. Problematically, an archivally sound alternative (favoured by the conservators) was aesthetically incompatible. Thick, textured and yellowish, the modern substitute was a far cry from the smooth, matt fax paper of the original. Entering into a public collection, the survival of the work became a pertinent issue. If one was to follow the sentiment of *O-AR Part I* completely, the panels may have been reprinted on cheap, computer facsimile paper. This alternative, too, was considered. An archivally unstable option, the paper's inevitable disintegration meant that *O-AR Part I* would effectively have to be reprinted ad infinitum. Ironically, a prolonged international search resulted in the sourcing of an appropriate

archival and aesthetic alternative from a supplier in Henderson, West Auckland. *O-AR Part I* was professionally reprinted in its entirety and was exhibited at St. Paul Street Gallery (AUT) in January 2007.

O-AR Part I now exists as a contemporary reinterpretation of a work made 30 years ago. Challenging conventional notions of value, authenticity and originality, *O-AR Part I* has re-emerged from a faded, two dimensional fate on archived proof sheets to confront and challenge a new generation of viewers. Jim Allen was a gracious and accommodating figure throughout the reconstruction. This is his response to the discussion that surrounded the work:

The question then becomes does the recreation capture the intent of the original work? As I am the only one that can answer that I say 'yes it does.' The temptation to introduce some refinement or say things differently has been resisted and from my point of view there is not one false note from the original in the final assemblage. That being the case I feel there is no issue in regard to the originality of the physical presence of the work, the message is the same.¹⁶

1. *O-AR: Jim Allen: Recent Work* (Auckland: Auckland City Art Gallery, 1975).
2. Robert Leonard, unpublished acquisition proposal, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 22 August 2005, 4.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, 3
5. Jim Allen, unpublished *O-AR Part I* background notes, 2005/2006. Held in the Jim Allen artist's file, E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.
6. See Wytan Curnow "Jim Allen: OAR Part II", *Auckland City Art Gallery Quarterly*, nos. 62/63 (December 1976): 23-25.
7. Jim Allen, email correspondence with author, 11 November, 2006.
8. "Jim Allen: O-AR Exhibition. Transcript of Gallery Discussion" in *O-AR: Jim Allen: Recent Work*, n.p
9. Jim Allen, email correspondence with author, 11 November, 2006.
10. Ibid. For further discussion of Allen's point see Wytan Curnow's comments in *Action Replay: Post-Script* (Auckland: Artspace, New Plymouth Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, c2002), 45-46.
11. The Govett-Brewster Gallery owns *New Zealand Environment No.5* (1969).
12. Robert Leonard, email correspondence with author, 9 November, 2006.
13. Ibid.
14. Mary Kisler, email correspondence with author, 10 November, 2006.
15. Jim Allen, unpublished *O-AR Part I* background notes. Allen met Elwyn Richardson while working as a field officer with the Art and Craft Branch of the Department of Education during the 1950s. In sole charge of a small primary school in Oruaiti, Northland, Richardson's teaching was based around children's felt experiences, "...personal explorations with and the impact between different disciplines, media, their teaching and the physical environment."
16. Jim Allen, email correspondence with author, 11 November, 2006.

I'll Still Be Here When You're Gone ¹
The Archival Strategy of Malcolm Ross
Matt Plummer



Fig. 1
 Malcolm Ross
Untitled [Scanlan Street]
 1984
 Black and white
 photograph
 Collection of the E.H.
 McCormick Research
 Library, Auckland Art
 Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.

– Walter Benjamin²

My first encounter with the legendary obscurity of Malcolm Ross came shortly after his death in 2003, in the rather unlikely location of rural Taranaki. Researching aspects of conceptual art in New Zealand as part of my post-graduate study at Victoria University, I had travelled to Kaponga to interview Maree Horner and Roger Peters, two key figures in the post-object scene of the 1970s.³ Ross had registered in my research up to that point as a footnote only, his presence in the recorded history of this period limited to his involvement (alongside artists Jim Allen and Don Driver) in the installation of Leon Narbey's *Real Time* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 1970). But after hearing Peters talk about Ross — and particularly his recollections of their time together at the Elam School of Fine Arts — I was immediately intrigued. When he pointed out that Ross, despite destroying much of his art, had deposited a significant body of work in the Auckland Art Gallery Research Library archives, I knew this was a project I had to pursue further. And so it was that I found myself, in mid-2005, leafing through Malcolm Ross's artist's file in the E.H. McCormick Research Library.

Untitled [Scanlan Street] (Fig.1) was one of the first images I encountered. Equal parts gothic and voyeuristic, it depicts a suburban scene from 1980s Auckland in which the quietude of picket fences, trees and shrubbery is interrupted by the figure of a dead body “packaged” for delivery, en route to the morgue. An opportunistic snapshot snatched from behind the shelter of the colonial villa's veranda post, *[Scanlan Street]* captures a moment of danger.⁴ It is image which has become something of a leitmotif for my project; an unlikely, yet rich source of autobiographical information. For despite it not being a self-portrait in any typical sense, the spectral presence of the artist on the other side of the lens seems to radiate from this street scene. It suggests a fascination with the transgressive and the taboo, observed and recorded from a position of secluded secrecy.

Seclusion and secrecy, I have come to realise, were two omnipresent themes in Malcolm Ross' life. A prolific artist and amateur historian, Ross operated at one remove from the art world for the entirety of his career, consciously side-stepping the conventional



avenues for artistic reception. Although he was encouraged to exhibit his work after achieving notoriety as a talented but unconventional student at Elam, he refused to do so — preferring instead to deposit a selection of his self-depictions, historical research, paintings, photographs and sketches in the Auckland Art Gallery archives. He thus entrusted the reception of this work neither to his peers nor to the public, but to posterity.⁵ Such a conscious strategy to delay the reception of his work until after his death is intriguing on many levels, none more so than the question of his motivation for making this rather strange move. Was his decision driven by a desire to maintain a critical distance from the art world and its processes of valorization? Did Ross imagine working in privacy would ensure artistic freedom?

Whatever his motivations, I now believe this decision was in part shaped by the influence of three key figures. Firstly his mother Ruth Ross, a pioneering historian of colonial New Zealand and the first researcher to apply a bicultural approach in her analysis of the Treaty of Waitangi, set an example by focusing more on research than publication.⁶ Her work remains largely unknown, but Ross always believed in the significance of his mother's contribution to New Zealand history, and helped facilitate the deposit of her research at the Auckland Museum Library after her death in 1982. The second figure was Colin McCahon,



Fig. 2 Malcolm Ross
Duchamp Foundation 1980
Black and white
photograph
Collection of the E.H.
McCormick Research
Library, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

Fig. 3 Malcolm Ross
*Untitled [Self-portrait with
Face in Shadow]* undated
Ink on paper
Collection of the E.H.
McCormick Research
Library, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

his teacher, friend and drinking companion, who Ross claimed discouraged him from exhibiting his work in order to maintain his creative integrity, rather ironic (if true) considering McCahon, by the 1970s, was one of New Zealand's most critically and commercially successful artists.⁷ But a further piece in this puzzle is provided by the example of Marcel Duchamp, whose own artistic strategy and idiosyncratic employment of humour, irony and eroticism both intrigued and influenced Ross.

Indeed, if there was a predecessor who pointed to and predicted this tactic of delayed reception, then it was surely Duchamp. Not only did Duchamp work in secret on his final piece, *Étant Donnés*, for 20 years; not only did he ensure, like Ross, that much of his oeuvre would rest in a single repository; he also hinted at the futility of catering to fickle public taste, suggesting that an ongoing currency in history was a more appropriate measure of an art work's success.⁸ For example, at the end of *The Creative Act*, Duchamp writes:

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world... and thus adds his contribution... This becomes even more obvious when *posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists*.⁹ (Emphasis mine)

Duchamp's final comments linger and resonate here on two fronts. On the one hand he highlights the potential for overlooked artists to be rehabilitated by

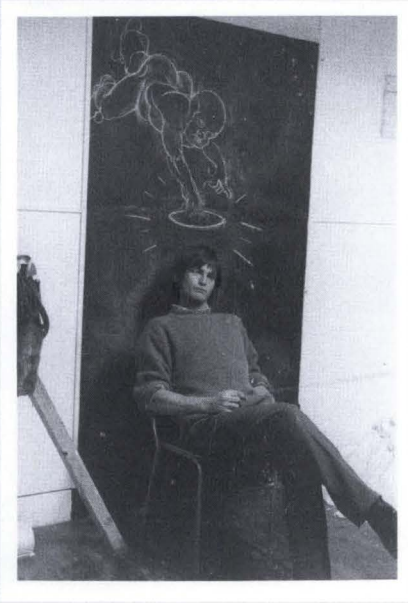


Fig. 4 Malcolm Ross
Untitled [Self-portrait with Halo] 1971
Black and white
photograph
Collection of the E.H.
McCormick Research
Library, Auckland Art
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

posterity, and on the other he points out that the creative act requires an external spectator to complete it. This is certainly true of Ross, for if his strategy is to have any meaning, any historical currency at all, he requires an intermediary to translate and transfer his archival material into art history. How this process functions in relation to Ross's practice, and what challenges the delayed reception of his work poses to an art-historical account of him, are questions in which I, his first posthumous researcher, am inextricably mired.

Looking through the archive, though, it seems to me that these are questions already addressed by Ross. *Duchamp Foundation* (Fig.2) sees the artist literalizing his title, performing a pose roughly approximate to that of Rodin's *The Thinker*. Here, via this double art-historical quotation, Ross seems to be giving a clue to the subsequent researcher — simultaneously emphasizing the importance of Duchamp in his project and facilitating the kind of artistic genealogy which is the domain of traditional art history. But if this is one occasion in which Ross seems to accommodate and encourage a conventional art-historical narrative, he obfuscates it even more forcefully elsewhere.¹⁰

Indeed, Ross's love-hate relationship with art history is symptomatic of an unresolved inner tension which

I have come to realize permeates much of his work. This is clearly highlighted in his habitual archiving, which was bound up in an internal contradiction between his self-destructive tendency (which saw him destroy much of his work), and his compulsion to archive (which saw him preserve a welter of material in various historical repositories).¹¹ Might we not imagine that Ross's sacrificing of a potential artistic career was in part due to this self-destructive impulse, just as his decision to archive stemmed from a contrasting urge to preserve a portion of his creative output?¹²

Ross's inner conflict is caught in a number of self-depictions in the archive. In one, *Untitled [Self-portrait with Face in Shadow]* (Fig.3) the artist presents himself, his face half-covered in rigorously cross-hatched shadow, staring out from the picture plane with a palpable intensity as the archetypal romantic-expressive artist. But in another, *Untitled [Self-portrait with Halo]* (Fig.4), this is spectacularly subverted. It is as if Ross was endlessly negotiating his situation as an artist, playing on and *performing* certain clichés as a life-long predicament.¹³

[Self-portrait with Halo] depicts Ross seated in his Elam studio, leaning against a blackboard on which he has drawn a putti holding a halo. Combining drawing, photography, and Ross's own dead-pan performance, this image is a self-conscious construction which wittily critiques the Renaissance notion of the solitary, divinely-inspired artist-genius, using humour and irony to proleptically undercut any such claims. This photograph positions Ross at the end of a romantic-expressive tradition on the cusp of contemporary art practice, in which more self-reflexive and conceptual motives pertain. Dating from half-way through his honours' year at Elam in 1971 (where he was a significant, if somewhat elusive presence in Jim Allen's sculpture department¹⁴), the



Fig. 5 Shirley Grace
Double Portrait of Tony
Fomison 1989
Black and white
photograph

image locates Ross in the place and time when post-object art flourished in our local context.

But it is interesting to compare Ross's use of the photographic medium with those of his post-object contemporaries. Where they used the camera to document their works, treating the photograph as an index to ephemeral performances, sculptures and situations (thus enabling the images to be overlooked as art objects in their own right), Ross, in consciously setting up the image to be photographed, is operating differently. Although [*Self-portrait with Halo*] stages an action that combines drawing and the artist's performance, it is the photographic recording of these constituent elements that in fact "completes" the work. Here Ross's critical use of photography is signalled by the conspicuous presence of the camera's shutter cord in his lap — an inclusion which has a two-fold effect. Firstly, it explicitly identifies the image as a self-depiction, locating Ross as both portraitist and subject. But secondly, and perhaps more significantly, it highlights his self-reflexive use of the medium, with his knowing reference to the photograph's constructed nature further undercutting any perception that Ross is making an unproblematic claim to his own greatness.¹⁵ In both employing (indeed emphasizing) the self-reflexive nature of photography and performing as a subject within the frame, Ross foreshadows the staged photographs of Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, and on a local front, Margaret Dawson. Is this post-modern representation *avant la lettre* or a more personal signifier of Ross's ambivalence?

But who is to say [*Self-portrait with Halo*] is a "finished" piece? It is important to note that much of Ross's archived work comes in the form of rough sketches and ideas, perhaps suggesting an affinity

with American conceptual artist Sol Le Witt, who claimed that "those [intervening steps] that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product."¹⁶ The majority of the archive is not made up of art at all, but rather Ross's idiosyncratic research on (amongst other things) New Zealand sculptors, Maori culture and local foundry monuments. In this research, much of which is outside the interests of conventional history, Ross shows himself to be a chronicler (to return to my epigraph) uninterested in distinguishing between major and minor events, and his archival strategy certainly seems to place faith in the notion that nothing is lost for history.¹⁷ But is this material relevant at all to an account of the artist based in *art history*?

Perhaps an answer to this question is provided by Peter Brunt's writing on New Zealand painter Tony Fomison. Throughout "Framing Identity", his first essay on Fomison, Brunt suggests that there is a divide between the narrative conventions of the artist's paintings and the adventurous way he lived his life.¹⁸ It is those things external to Fomison's paintings — namely his activities as an ethnographer, his interest in Polynesian culture, indeed the literal inscription of that culture onto his body — that Brunt needs in order to grant Fomison a certain kind of historical currency. This is implied throughout the account, and highlighted towards the end of the essay when Brunt suggests that Shirley Grace's *Double Portrait of Tony Fomison* (1989, Fig.5): "maintains itself, as a single image, in balance with and... *as necessary to the entire body of Fomison's work*. It is the oeuvre's abrupt and surprising displacement."¹⁹ (Emphasis mine)

What interests me here is that Brunt's inclusive approach enables him to utilise an image *outside* Fomison's oeuvre to obtain a more comprehensive

understanding of the artist. I would argue Ross accommodates this *within* his oeuvre, via his archival strategy. Not only does Ross's archive include several photographic self-depictions which operate with the conceptual edge of Grace's *Double Portrait*; but also (and crucially) it incorporates a number of aspects of his life — his work as a historian, his interest in and research on Maori culture, his investigations into ethnography and ornithology — in a way that encourages a holistic view of the artist's life-long project. In short, "Ross" is framed in, and by, the archive. It is a conceptual rather than literal frame in which a consciously constructed *impression* of his artistic identity is presented to, and preserved for, posterity. What's more Ross conserves only his youthful impressions, refusing to comprehensively document his life, reinforcing the notion that the archive serves as a constructive frame where a particular version of the artist is preserved and maintained, unlike Grace's portrait that appears as a summary statement, a photographic valedictory, at the end of Fomison's life.

As an art-historical subject, Malcolm Ross is nothing if not interesting. By pursuing a strategy that took to its logical conclusion an approach hinted at by Duchamp, he occupies a unique niche in New Zealand's art history. Ross's undoubtedly ironic claim that he'll still be here after we're gone is true in a sense, for his consciously constructed artistic impression is preserved via the archive. But whether, regardless of his potential "rehabilitation" by posterity, this manoeuvre can only ever amount to a pyrrhic victory remains a moot point.²⁰ How art history might account for and accommodate such an artist are questions I continue to grapple with. Nevertheless, Ross can be regarded as successful in his archival approach precisely because in facilitating a delayed reception of his work he partially thwarted his self-destructive tendency and created the potential for an art-historical resuscitation. The rest, as they say, is (up to) history ...

1. This title is taken from one of Malcolm Ross's stamp works in the collection of Douglas Wright. The voice that makes this claim is thus his. The apostrophes are my own addition.
2. Walter Benjamin [1940], "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Hannah Arendt (ed) and Harry Zohn (trans), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.
3. The use of the term 'danger' references Benjamin's idea that memories flash up in moments of danger ("Theses on the Philosophy of History", 257), but also seeks to highlight the fact that even though the death has already occurred, Ross's concealed vantage point suggests a lingering threat. For Ross — one of the first people in New

Zealand to be prosecuted for possession of LSD — the presence of the police would not necessarily have been comforting, and the transgressive, voyeuristic act of photographing such a moment entails a threat of its own. Here Ross seems to expose (as David Lynch would subsequently in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*) the gothic underbelly lurking beneath the façade of peaceful suburbia.

4. 'Post-object' is used interchangeably with conceptual art here to encapsulate a range of new approaches to art practice that emerged in New Zealand in the 1960s and 1970s. These were typified by a move away from an investment in the precious and unique art object, and a move towards a conceptual approach to art more closely integrated with 'real life'. See the introduction to *Action Replay: Postscript* (Auckland: Artspace; New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Gallery, 2000), 9-13.
5. Ross's extant work is not limited to the material found in the archive, and a number of his paintings, sketches and drawings are held in private collections. His works remain unknown in the public arena.
6. See R.M. Ross, "Te Tiriti o Waitangi: Texts and Translations," *New Zealand Journal of History* VI, 2 (October 1972), 129-57.
7. This information was conveyed to me by both Douglas Wright and Paul Hartigan. See also Douglas Wright, *Ghost Dance* (Auckland: Penguin, 2004), 190.
8. See, for example, Duchamp's letter to Jean Crotti from 17 August 1952, in which he states his belief that artists who are successful in their own lifetimes are excellent travelling salesmen, reproduced in Francis M. Naumann and Hector Obalk (eds.) *Affect Marcel. : The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 320-22.
9. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act", in Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds.), *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 140.
10. One manifestation of this is the largely achronistic nature of the archive, in which the art-historical conventions of dating, titling and signing work are often eschewed. A historian and researcher himself, this act of omission can not be considered passive or unconscious, but rather, one that deliberately complicates the chronology of a traditional monographic approach.
11. In addition to his archive at the Auckland Art Gallery's E.H. McCormick Research Library, Ross also deposited a range of material at the Alexander Turnbull, the Hocken, and Auckland Museum libraries.
12. Interestingly the tension between a compulsion to document and destroy is highlighted by Derrida as a root cause of 'archive fever' — an affliction which Ross seems to have suffered from. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 10-12, 19.
13. For a more detailed account of those aspects of Ross's life which highlight this negotiation see *Ghost Dance*, 28-41, 122-40, 189-91, 211-14.
14. This information was conveyed to me by Jim Allen himself, and also other people I have interviewed in the course of my research, including Ron Brownson, Paul Hartigan, Maree Horner, Roger Peters and Richard Wolfe.
15. Ross's consistent use of humour also signals a point of departure from the earnestness of much post-object practice. Whilst many post-object artists were vigorously investigating the conceptual implications of Duchamp, Ross displayed an awareness of the importance of humour and eroticism in Duchamp's practice. I am grateful to Ron Brownson for reinforcing this observation in my dialogues with him.
16. Sol le Witt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art : A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 15.
17. This is an approach I wish to adopt also. As a 'chronicler' I am not as interested in making a claim for Ross's importance as I am in helping to facilitate his potential historical rehabilitation. For a further account of Ross's historical interests see *Ghost Dance*, 124-28, 214-23.
18. Peter Brunt, "Framing Identity", in Ian Wedde (ed.), *What Shall We Tell Them?* (Wellington: City Gallery, 1994), 63-75.
19. Brunt, "Framing Identity", 71.
20. After all, the only success Ross can have will be posthumous, but as he himself acknowledged: "...worthiness in art are high risk." Malcolm Ross, "Chris Booth's Nga Tamariki a Tane", *Art New Zealand* 30 (Autumn 1984), 14.

Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
Staff Research, Presentations And
Publications 2006

Ron Brownson
(Senior Curator, New Zealand & Pacific art)

Lectures on Michael Smither at City Gallery, Wellington, Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Govett Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth to accompany the touring exhibition, *Michael Smither The Wonder Years*.
Lecture on the photography collection of the Auckland Art Gallery at Gus Fisher Gallery and served as one of the judges for the Auckland Festival of Photography, June 2006.
Lecture on Colin McCahon's *On Building Bridges* at Auckland Art Gallery for *Towards Auckland: Colin McCahon the Gallery Years*, November 2006.
Lecture on contemporary Jewish artists in New Zealand for the Auckland Hebrew community, November, 2006.
Lecture on Arabi textiles of Turkestan for the Auckland Institute Costume and Textile section, Massey University, Wellington.
Researched and prepared an audio-visual history of artist projects at Auckland Art Gallery for *54321 Auckland Artist Projects* web-based publication, October 2006:
<http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz/research/digitalresources/artistprojects.asp>

Natasha Conland
(Curator, Contemporary art)

The Art of Ping Pong Country Christchurch: SOFA, Arts Centre, 2006.
Venice Document: et al.: the fundamental practice Wellington: Creative New Zealand, 2006.
The Walters Prize 2006: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2 September - 19 November 2006 Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2006.
Don't Misbehave! SCAPE 2006 Biennial of Art in Public Space Christchurch: Art & Industry Biennial Trust, 2006.
"Don't Misbehave: An Interview with the Curators of the Scape 2006 Biennial"
Bulletin of the Christchurch Art Gallery no.146, September-December 2006.
Lecture on the works in *The Walters Prize* Auckland Art Gallery, October 2006.
"Dispatch: Curator Natasha Conland at Busan Biennale" *Art News (NZ)* 26, no.4, 2006.
Lecture in *Just Painting*, New Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery, November 2006.

Jane Davidson
(Assistant Curator)

Masters of the Bitten Line: Etching in the Age of Rembrandt, exhibition catalogue, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2006.
"Masters of the Bitten Line: Etching in the Age of Rembrandt", *World of Antiques and Art* 71, August 2006-February 2007 and *Gallery News* March-June 2006.
Lecture on *Masters of the Bitten Line*, Auckland Art Gallery, April 2006.
Lecture on "The Gallery's Other Rembrandts" Auckland Art Gallery, July 2006.
With John McIver, Gallery Photographer, *Biting the Line: Etching in the 17th Century* and *Le Combat a la barriere (Combat at the Barrier) by Jacques Callot*, interactive computer programmes for *Masters of the Bitten Line*.
Frances Hodgkins: A Private Viewing by Joanne Drayton book review in

NZ House and Garden, 2006.
Edited and contributed to Hamish Keith, *Towards Auckland: Colin McCahon the Gallery Years*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2006.
"Vale Una Platts (1908-2005) and Betty Curnow (1911-2005)", *Gallery News*, November 2005-February 2006.
"Happy Birthday to New: Michel Tuffery *Mata Mata*", *Gallery News*, November 2005-February 2006.
"Peter Madden *Necropolopolis: New Acquisitions*", *Gallery News*, November 2005-February 2006.
"Pacific Prints: New Acquisitions", *Gallery News*, March-June 2006.
"Tony Cragg *Clear Glass Stack 1999*", *Gallery News*, March-June 2006.
Lecture on McCahon's time at the Gallery for *Towards Auckland: Colin McCahon the Gallery Years*, December 2006.

Catherine Hammond
(Research Librarian)

Review of "Small Libraries in New Zealand" by Margaret Jenner, for *Architecture New Zealand*, Mar/Apr 2006; no.2: p.102.
"From White Elephant to White Knight: ephemera files in the E.H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki", paper presented at the ARLIS/ANZ biennial conference, Canberra, 20-23 September, 2006. Paper also published in the *ARLIS/ANZ Journal*, December 2006.
Publication of the Auckland Art Gallery's exhibition catalogues from 1950s and 1960s on the Gallery's website, July 2006, digitised with the assistance of an ARLIS/ANZ Online Grant <http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz/research/digitalresources/catalogue.asp>
Managing Editor, *Reading Room: a journal of art and culture*. Peer-reviewed journal of the E.H. McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Sarah Hillary
(Principal Conservator)

"A Lively Parrot: Frances Hodgkins's Wings over Water", co-author with Joyce Townsend, Tate Papers, Spring 2006, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06spring/>
"Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif" interactive publication for the *Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif* exhibition.
"A Painter's Paradise: the materials and techniques of Colin McCahon", conference poster at *Modern Paints Uncovered* conference, Tate Modern, 16-19 May 2006.
"A Painter's Paradise: the materials and techniques of Colin McCahon" *The Journal of New Zealand Art History*, Vol. 27, 2006.
"Introduction to Painting Conservation", Anthropology 340 lecture, University of Auckland, 2 March 2006.
"Painting Conservation", Anthropology 340 lecture, University of Auckland, 7 March 2006.
"In Conversation", lecture with Iain Buchanan in the 'Frances Hodgkins: Leitmotif' exhibition, 12 March 2006.
"Frances Hodgkins: a closer look at the materials and methods of

her painting", lecture for the Friends of the Gallery, 7 June 2006.
 "Mixing it up: the materials and techniques of Frances Hodgkins", public lecture at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 3 September 2006.
 "A Painter's Life and Mixed Media", lecture with Gordon Brown in the exhibition 'Towards Auckland: Colin McCahon the Gallery Years', 5 November 2006.

Mary Kisler (Mackelvie Curator, International art)

"Did Dan Brown kill da Vinci" public debate arguing for the negative in association with *The Da Vinci Machines* at Auckland Museum February, 2006.

Tale to Tell – Victorian Narrative Paintings from the collection of Auckland Art Gallery. Touring exhibition catalogue, Waikato Museum of Art and History.

Monthly interviews on National Radio with Kim Hill, talking about historic and contemporary national and international art.

Articles for Auckland Art Gallery *Gallery News* on *Art & the 60s from Tate Britain*, November 2005-February 2006 and March-June 2006;

"Good things do come to those who wait..." about the restoration of the Mackelvie Trust's *St Sebastian* by Guido Reni, March-June 06;

"Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif" November 2005-February 2006.

"Leitmotif Frances Hodgkins", *Bulletin of the Christchurch Art Gallery* no.147, December 2006-February 2007.

"Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif" interactive publication for the *Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif* exhibition.

"Carpentry and Collage: The Role of the Hardware Shop in Contemporary Practice" lecture for *Art & the 60s from Tate Britain* July 2006.

Lecture in *A Tale to Tell*, Waikato Museum of Art and History, July 2006.

Gallery talk for *Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, August 2006. "Divining beauty - mimesis and authenticity in Auckland's *St Sebastian* by Guido Reni". Lecture delivered to post-graduate group at Victoria University, Wellington, August 2006.

Lecture in the exhibition *Framing the Past*, November 2006.

Ngahiraka Mason (Indigenous Curator, Maori art)

Leading From the Edge 2005 Public Galleries Summit. Presented a paper in New Protocols: Dialogues Across Cultures session. Published 2006 by Museums and Galleries NSW Australia.

2006 *Contemporary Commonwealth* exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Australia. Published 2006. Contributed an essay on Shane Cotton.

Articles for Auckland Art Gallery *Gallery News* on *Sensational: Sight and Sound* and "Shane Cotton's *Te Waiwhariki*", November 2005-February 2006; *Hei Konei Mai: We'll Meet Again* March-June 2006.

Presentation on *The Role of Spirituality in the 21st Century Museum* followed by panel discussion on international trends and models in the museum and gallery sector, held at Gus Fisher Gallery, Auckland, April 2006.

Researched and prepared an audio-visual history of artist projects at Auckland Art Gallery for *54321 Auckland Artist Projects*

web-based publication, October 2006:

<http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz/research/digitalresources/artistprojects.asp>

Caroline McBride (E.H.McCormick Assistant Librarian)

"Curators and their Use of Digital Images", *Art Libraries Journal* vol.31, no.3, 2006, p.25-31.

David Reeves (Senior Registrar)

"Are we there yet? the lifecycle of the Auckland Art Gallery digitisation project" - presentation to AHLAG Auckland Digital Day, University of Auckland, June 2006.

"Stretched to the Limit" - conference report for Journal of the Australian Registrars Committee, Autumn 2006.

Reworked paper also published in *Journal of the Australian Registrars Committee*, Spring, 2006.

"Using Images of Works of Art - Copyright, copying and rights" seminar developed with Susan Brooker, Arts Planner, Auckland City Council; delivered to ACC media staff and contractors, and Auckland Art Gallery staff, September-October 2006.

Ute Strehle (Conservator, Works of art on paper)

"Methods & Materials: A Closer Look at the Work of Frances Hodgkins" presentation to the AICCM/NZPCG Book, Paper and Photographic Symposium, Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, April 2006.

"Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif" interactive publication for the *Frances Hodgkins Leitmotif* exhibition.

Contributors

Mieke Bal is a well-known cultural critic and theorist, and holds the position of Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences Professor (KNAW). She is also Professor of the Theory of Literature in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam. Her many books include *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (University of Toronto Press, 2002), and *A Mieke Bal Reader* (University of Chicago Press, 2006). Mieke Bal is also a video artist.

Christina Barton is Programme Director of Art History at Victoria University of Wellington. She is an art historian, writer and curator with specialist knowledge of contemporary New Zealand art and its critical histories from the 1960s to the present. She has written extensively on aspects of contemporary New Zealand art, including having compiled a substantial history of post-object art in New Zealand from 1969-1979. She is currently working on a major retrospective of the work of New Zealand's leading conceptual artist, Billy Apple.

Serena Bentley is a writer based in Auckland. She completed her Master's thesis on Peter Peryer at the University of Auckland in 2005. She is currently developing an exhibition "The Self Portrait in New Zealand Photography".

Susan Best teaches in the School of Art History and Theory, University of New South Wales. She is currently completing a book titled *Affect and Expression in Late Modern Art: Eva Hesse, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Ana Mendieta and Lygia Clark*. Sections of the research are published in *Angelaki* and forthcoming in *Art History*. The research was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant.

Wystan Curnow is a Professor of English at the University of Auckland. He has published widely on modern and contemporary art and literature, and has curated many exhibitions. His projects include monographic shows on Colin McCahon (1984), Billy Apple (1991), and Max Gimblett (2004) and books on Imants Tillers (1998) and Stephen Bambury (2001). *Modern Colours* is the latest of his four books of poetry.

Jennifer French is a photographer based in Auckland.

Anthony Gardner is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics at the University of New South Wales and teaches modernist and contemporary art at the University of Melbourne. He is a contributing member of the International Editorial Board of *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Arts + Culture*, and was a contributing editor of *Un Magazine*.

Robert Leonard is director of Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art. Before that he was Curator of Contemporary Art at Auckland Art Gallery, where his exhibitions included *Nine Lives*, *Pressing Flesh*, *Everyday Minimal* and *Mixed-Up Childhood*.

Andrew McNamara teaches art history/theory at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane. His research focuses upon twentieth century as well as contemporary art, culture and society. His most recent publication is *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* (Melbourne University Press, 2006) with Ann Stephen and Philip Goad. (<http://www.ausmodernism.ci.qut.edu.au/>)

Marcus Moore is Lecturer in the School of Visual and Material Culture at Massey University, Wellington. He is a PhD candidate in art history at Victoria University of Wellington.

Mike Parr is a leading Australian artist who lives and works in Sydney. He has realized over one thousand works within the context of his *Self Portrait* series, in a range of media that includes performance, installation, sculpture, drawing, drypoint etching and photography.

Matt Plummer is a post-graduate art history student at Victoria University of Wellington. He is currently working towards the completion of his Master of Arts thesis "*Legendary Obscurity*": *The Working Life of Malcolm Ross*.

Charles Reeve is Curator at the Ontario College of Art & Design, Canada, where he also teaches in the faculties of art and liberal studies.



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AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE
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Contributors Mieke Bal, Christina Barton, Serena Bentley, Susan Best, Wystan Curnow, Jennifer French, Anthony Gardner, Andrew McNamara, Marcus Moore, Mike Parr, Matt Plummer and Charles Reeve.

Writing on Billy Apple, Louise Bourgeois, Benvenuto Cellini, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Marcel Duchamp, Adrian Hall, Derek Jarman, On Kawara, Lucy Kimbell, Ron Silliman, Ricky Swallow and more.



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